Politeness Strategies in Twitter Updates of Female English Language Studies Malaysian Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

Twitter is now developing as a rich research site for scholars who studied online interaction, information dissemination and other plethora of subjects. Taking on this new development, this paper aims to contribute to the field of politeness and English language studies in computer-mediated communication (CMC) by showcasing the politeness strategies in Twitter updates and by predicting how the tweets could potentially misfire. A total of 776 tweet updates produced by 9 female undergraduates, active users of Twitter within two months, were documented and open-ended questionnaire responses were collected for in-depth findings. The data were analysed using Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Strategies. The findings show that the participants employed four politeness strategies with positive politeness employed the most, followed by bald-on record, off-record with the least employed being negative politeness. Positive politeness is believed to be used the most because of the nature of CMC which promotes interpersonal communication and expression among its users. Although the participants employed all four politeness strategies, it is important to be aware that misunderstanding could still easily occur due to the absence of other communication cues in virtual 'faceless' communication. Hence, this study showed that the overuse of profanity, ambiguous indirect strategy and failure to comply with the 140-character limits in Twitter are some of the reasons that might cause misfire to happen.

Keywords: politeness strategies; computer-mediated communication (CMC); Twitter status updates; communication misfire, Malaysian Public University

INTRODUCTION

The interest for this study emerged from the discussion of politeness issues in popular social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Dans (2016) listed online offences and urged the community to be 'kind' in social media communication. VitalSmarts survey reported that 88 percent agreed that people are less polite when using social media; 75 percent of the users witness online conflicts and arguments, while one in five users have decreased in-person contact with somebody altogether due to something that they said online (Bennet 2013). It has become the norm for users of this new medium of communication to adopt brevity in writing and directness, which could potentially lead to misfire in the communication process via the social media (Bedard 2014)

This study focusses on the use of politeness strategies in status updates in Twitter, a popular social media service which allows people to share updates, news, and information. In this medium, the update which is referred to as 'tweet' has a limitation of 140 characters only per tweet (Humpreys, Gill, Newbury & Krishnamurthy 2013); hence the challenge of brevity while maintaining politeness in communication. However, despite this limitation, Twitter has 500 million tweets posted daily with 80 percent active users on mobile and an active global user base of over 320 million in 2015 alone (Twitter.com 2015). This means that word limit does not discourage the users as they have found ways to adapt to the need by using short