

Impoliteness on Twitter by Malaysians

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates impoliteness on Twitter in the context of Malaysian users. The objectives of the study are to examine the impoliteness strategies and triggers of impoliteness found in tweet replies on tweets on issues related to COVID-19. The data consist of 440 tweet replies on COVID-19, posted from May 2020 to May 2021 which contain elements of impoliteness. The study uses Culpeper's (2005) impoliteness model and Culpeper's (2011) framework for examining impoliteness triggers. The findings show that four types of impoliteness strategies are used in the tweet replies: bald-on record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, and sarcasm or mock impoliteness. The most dominant type of impoliteness strategy is positive impoliteness, while bald-on record impoliteness is the least employed impoliteness strategy. Pointed criticism is found to be the most often occurring impoliteness trigger in the study, followed by insult, negative expressive, and challenging or unpalatable question and/or presupposition. The findings suggest culture and the communication platform may play a role in the use of impoliteness strategies and impoliteness triggers in the tweets.

Keywords: impoliteness, Malaysian, Twitter

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INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of technology, the social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram has become an increasingly popular interaction mode (Alias & Yahaya, 2019). Moreover, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic at the end of 2019, these communication platforms are even more important with restricted people movement as a measure to curb the infection rates. In these platforms, interactants can exchange and discuss information and opinions on any topic, anywhere, and at anytime (Alias & Yahaya, 2019). Nonetheless, owing to the high cases of deaths and infection rates, as well as the disruption to the people's normal routine due to COVID-19, this has caused much anxiety, fear, confusion and anger among people. This results in frequent heated remarks, including impolite comments in social media, consequently leading to possible social tension and disharmony (Colaco et al., 2021).

Impoliteness has been defined in a variety of ways. Culpeper (1996) defined impoliteness as the use of strategies that attack face and cause "social disruption" (p. 350). Culpeper (2010) later revised this to emphasise that impoliteness is culturally-specific, while Bousfield (2008) stated that impoliteness has been intentionally performed and that the hearer must also be able to understand that the speaker is being offensive. However, Culpeper (2011) pointed out that impoliteness is not always conventionalised, and hence, the hearer may perceive an utterance or behaviour as impolite although it is not intended as such. This study adopts Culpeper's (2011) definition of impoliteness in which it "is a negative attitude towards specific behaviors occurring in specific contexts" (p. 23), and hence, perception of impoliteness is contextual and hearer-focused.

Although there have been past studies on impoliteness, these are still relatively scant compared to research on politeness (Culpeper, 2010; Rabab'ah & Alali, 2020). With regards to research on impoliteness strategies in the southeast Asian context, the findings from such studies revealed that some modification to Culpeper's (1996, 2005) impoliteness strategies may be necessary due to contextual differences. For example, Erza and Hamzah (2018) investigated impoliteness among haters on Instagram comments of Indonesian male-female entertainers and found that the positive impoliteness was the most used impoliteness strategy. This finding differs from Krishnan's (2018) findings in his study on impoliteness in the Malaysian news website, Malaysiakini, comments section. His study looked at impoliteness only in the Malay language, and discovered that indirect impoliteness and sarcasm were most often used in the comments, and that users in this platform were more uninhibited in expressing their feelings although these were targeted at the government and the Prime Minister.