A Pragmatic Study on Impoliteness in Sina Weibo Comments——from the Perspective of Morality

Xiangying Lu

Northwest Normal University Lanzhou, Gansu 730070

Abstract: This study takes comments on immoral social events in hot topics in Sina Weibo as the data, and collects 200 impolite comments from Comment Page of four Sina Weibo news events. Based on Culpeper's and Bousfield's concepts of impolite strategies and Chinese morality as the theoretical basis, we use a qualitative research method to classify and interpret the impolite comments; what moral expectations are reflected in the impolite comments from a moral perspective. The study found that: comments mainly employed impoliteness strategies such as challenging, insulting, and cursing; some frequently occurring moral expectations were discussed in these comments, such as: being filial to parents and being benevolent. This study reveals the causes of impolite comments based on a moral perspective, and these findings are important for understanding the interrelationship between impoliteness and morality.

Keywords: Comments of online news; Impoliteness strategies; Morality; Moral expectations

1. Introduction

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) refers to multimodal communication conducted via computers, smart phones, and other electronic gadgets. CMC includes communication via online fora such as Sina Weibo, where users browse online news and post comments while also engaging with other users regarding the online news, which is different from the traditional way of news communication.

We can find that people try to avoid using rude or impolite language in face-to-face communication. However, there is a great deal of incivility, impoliteness and face attack in the Internet environment, and this phenomenon has gradually attracted more and more attention of scholars. Taking the impolite comments of social hot events in Sina Weibo as examples, this study tries to classify and explain the impolite comments of news events according to Culpeper's and Boudfield's impoliteness strategies; and tries to explore the moral expectations reflected in the impolite comments from the perspective of morality.

2. Background

2.1 Theoretical Foundation

2.1.1 Culpeper's and Bousfield's Impoliteness Strategies

To answer the first research question, Culpeper's and Bousfield's impoliteness models have significant relevance here.

Culpeper's classification stems mostly from his study on a corpus of army training data and it is later tested in a corpus of disputes that occur in TV series. Culpeper proposed a five-point impoliteness model, according to which, speakers may use any of five strategies that can result in impoliteness: (1) bald on record impoliteness; (2) positive impoliteness; (3) negative impoliteness; (4) sarcasm or mock politeness; and (5) withholding politeness strategies [1].

Bousfield simplified this five-point model to formulate two super-strategies: on-record impoliteness strategies and off-record impoliteness strategies [2]. The latter encompassing sarcasm and withhold politeness. In terms of the output strategies of impoliteness,

Bousfield further investigates and elaborates on four strategies that do not fall under Culpeper's categorization. These strategies are criticism, hinderance/block, enforcing role shift and challenge. What is special about Bousfield's account is that he waives the distinction between positive and negative face attack and upholds the on/off record distinction.

2.1.2 Chinese Morality and Moral Expectations

Morality is a spirit that aims at guiding human behavior and forming the right way of human behavior, which is in essence the unity of moral consciousness and action [3].

In ancient Chinese society of over two thousand years, morality was the core element structuring the whole society. The traditional core values of "Ren (Benevolence), Yi (Justice), Li (Propriety), Zhi (Wisdom) and Xin (Credit)" were the most important principles and core norms of the traditional Chinese moral system. In the subsequent history of succession and development, the concept of morality was combined with the Chinese tradition and the needs of the new times. For example, Sun Yat-sen and Cai Yuanpei proposed the new "eight virtues" of "loyalty, filial piety, benevolence, love, credit, justice, harmony and peace". This is not only an inheritance of the traditional concepts of filial piety, loyalty, benevolence and love, but also an adaptation to the values of "universal love" and "state supremacy" of modern society. Based on the summary of the traditional moral codes, the famous philosopher Mr. Zhang Dai-nian proposed the "nine virtues" of public loyalty, benevolence, sincerity, honesty and shame, courtesy, filial piety, thrift, courage, and integrity as the moral codes of the new era [4].

2.2 Methodology

Sina Weibo is a convenient information dissemination platform. The data in this study are collected from users' comments on news about social events in the hot topics of Sina Weibo during Oct. 2021 and Apr. 2022. The data contains 2 news posts and 200 users' comments that are only a part of all the comments.

The comments selected for this study are drawn from social hot topics in Sina Weibo that breach moral norms. There are three main reasons for this selection: 1) Regarded as Twitter in China, Sina Weibo has its privileged status among Chinese social media. 2) Social topics are used as examples because they involve a wide audience rather than a specific group. In addition, social behaviors that breach moral norms can trigger impolite comments in online news. 3) The reason for choosing the hot topics is that the topics receive a lot of attention and users actively participate in commenting and giving their opinions and views. Therefore, a large amount of corpus can be obtained for free.

3. Impoliteness Strategies in Sina Weibo Comments

3.1 Challenging

Challenge is defined by Bousfield as "ask hearer a challenging question, question hearer's position, stance, beliefs, assumed power, rights, obligations, ethics, etc. [2]"

【#A study-abroad student verbal abused her father for lacking of living expenses#】

[C1: Why don't you work by yourself? Are you a useless person?]

In this news event, the student argued with her father over the 10,000 yuan living expenses and verbally abused him. For example, in example (C1), the user questioned the student: as a college student who has been 23 years old, why didn't she earn her own living expenses by doing a part-time job, but still ask her father for living expenses like a useless person.

3.2 Insulting

Another impoliteness strategy mentioned by Culpeper is "call the other names", which means to use derogatory nominations [1].

【#A postpartum care center in X City was accused of bad treatment to babies #】

[C2: Can such immoral things still be employed? …. The country should have laws in this respect to deal with such immoral thing.]

In comment (C2), comparing "people" to "things" means using derogatory nomination to belittle the caregivers at the postpartum care. The use of "immoral things" insults the caregivers lacking of morality, because they treat babies in despicable ways and have immoral behaviors in an attempt to stop babies crying.

3.3 Cursing

According to the meaning of cursing in Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary, "cursing" refers to "expressions that may have a supernatural power to make something unpleasant happen".

【#A postpartum care center in X City was accused of bad treatment to babies #】

[C3: The employees of a postpartum care center in this video. When you are old and can not move I wish you could have such treatment.]

In (C3), the user curses the caregiver who hits the baby in the video. He curses that the caregiver can also be beaten by others when she becomes incapacitated in her old age. The user prays for the supernatural powers so that the person who they hate, the caregiver in the video, will get the punishment. Such curses have an effect on the negative face of the hearer and thus realizing impoliteness.

4. Moral expectations

4.1 Filial Piety

As a part of the child-parent relationship, filial piety is a central concept in Confucianism. It contains important ideas about how children should treat their parents.

【#A study-abroad student verbal abused her father for lacking of living expenses#】

[C4: She still didn't understand what she had done incorrectly. It's not that she should do less incorrect things, but that she should be filial to her parents...]

It would appear that the comment (C4) is based on the same assumption/ justification: this student did wrong because she not only disobeyed his father but also insulted him, which has not shown filial piety in Chinese traditional culture. For this user, such moral concerns create a set of expectations (e.g. the descendants are expected to show filial piety to their superiors), the unfulfillment of which can potentially result in impolite and aggressive comments.

4.2 Benevolence

Among the many virtues that Confucius and his disciples advocated, the most important one is benevolence (ren). Benevolence (ren) means being kind to others.

【#A postpartum care center in X City was accused of bad treatment to babies #】

[C5: My God, (if you) don't have the love and patience, don't do this kind of work. It's so heartless to treat a newborn baby like this.]

Apparently, the comment (C5) expresses a view: this kind of impatient and unkind behavior of the caregiver is unprofessional and immoral, which is against benevolence. In this context, this wrongdoing in online news seem to have triggered the members' considerations of morality in the society. It reflects the fact that the object of people's accusations has a set of moral expectations, such as to do this job with patience and benevolence. In fact, the metapragmatic comments under investigation are pretty much like a window into the connection between moral principles and such corresponding reactions as leaving impolite comments [5].

5. Conclusion

The present study mainly pays attention to impoliteness in comments of Sina Weibo from the perspective of morality, using qualitative analysis to explore the impoliteness strategies and the moral expectants that the impolite comments can reflect. It is necessary to understand the interrelationship between the impoliteness and the morality.

Firstly, the study shows the impoliteness strategies according to Culpeper (1996) and Bousfield (2008), in addition, the collected data was classified by reading related literature. There are three dominant impoliteness strategies employed including challenging, insulting, and cursing. Secondly, the study examines the moral expectations that reflect in impolite comments. According to Confucius' moral values, we can see that the moral expectations recurring from the users' comments are mainly having filial piety and being benevolent.

References:

[1] Culpeper J.. (1996). Towards an anatomy of impoliteness. Journal of Pragmatics [J], 3, 349-67.

[2] Bousfield, D.. (2008). Impoliteness in Interaction [M]. Philadelphia: John Benjamin's Publishing, 93-95.

[3] Liu Shuhong. The inspiration of Confucian morality to the moral education of college students [J]. Education Modernization, 2019,6(74): 257-258.

[4] Zhang Dai-nian. An attempt to discuss the construction of moral norms in the new era [J]. Morality and Civilization, 1992(03): 2-4.

[5] Fairclough, N.. (2016). "Metapragmatics, Hidden Assumptions, and Moral Economy." In Pragmemes and Theories of Language Use, ed. by Keith Allan, Alessandro Capone, and Istvan Kecskes, 191–208. Springer: Switzerland.