A Study of Pragmatic Identity Construction of Merchant Response Behaviors in Online Business Context

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Abstract: Facing customers' complaints and negative reviews in business, merchants often construct a positive business image through specific discourse choices. This study uses the hotel's responses to customers' negative reviews in Zhixing App as a corpus to explore various identities constructed by different responses. The study finds that merchants use different speech acts to reply, which are reflected in the opening, middle and closing moves. In the beginning and closing moves, the hotel establishes a specific relationship identity with customers through the speech acts of greeting, thanking and so on, and in the middle moves, the hotel constructs different positive identities through explaining, promising, stating and so on. This study intends to provide insight into the choice of appropriate speech acts for merchants to construct appropriate identities in their responses to achieve the desired communicative goals.

Keywords: Online negative-review response; Identity construction; Business context

Introduction

In e-commerce platforms, consumers' online reviews are generally divided into two categories: positive and negative reviews, where bad reviews can affect the sales of the item and the purchase desire of potential buyers, and negative e-word-of-mouth can damage the reputation of the service provider and may have a serious impact on its business[1]. As a way to remedy service failures, online responses provide merchants with the opportunity to redeem their image as merchants and construct a positive identity. In this paper, the author uses the hotel's response to a poor customer review in the Zhixing App as a corpus to explore which response behaviors merchants use to construct specific identities in online business contexts.

1. Research background

Identity is the actual embodiment, use, or even fiction of a specific social identity in the context of linguistic communication, and is the identity of self, other, and other that language users choose, either consciously or unconsciously, in the context. [2] Chen argued that topics and corresponding topic features reflect specific discourse identity types, and on the basis of previous studies, categorized discourse practice types into code-selection, corpora-selection, discourse content, and speech acts, among which speech acts are an important type of discourse practice for communicators to construct identity.

Merchant response behavior refers to a merchant's response to a user's online review, especially a negative review, [3] thus compensating for a failed service or reinforcing existing satisfaction, etc. [4] Negative reviews reflect customers' dissatisfaction or poor online shopping experience, and if merchants do not respond to negative reviews, potential consumers can only infer product and service quality through negative reviews, which undoubtedly puts merchants in a passive situation and can adversely affect merchants' image, reputation, and potential customers' purchase intention. Most studies of merchant response behavior in linguistics have used move analysis, [5] a top-down approach to genre analysis of textual discourse structure.

2. Methodology

This study randomly selects the responses to poor customer reviews from 17 five-star hotels in the Zhixing app as the corpus. This study selects the responses of the merchants to negative reviews, collects a total of 100 corpus, with a total of 19869 words, and builds its own small text corpus for analysis.

The bottom-up qualitative approach was used to analyze moves, and it was found that hotels would use different speech acts such as greeting, thanking and apologizing to respond and build multiple positive identities.

Therefore, this paper will attempt to answer the following two questions.

(1) What are the response behaviors the hotels use in the different moves?

(2) What are the identities constructed by the hotel through each of these replies?

3. Merchants' response behaviors to negative reviews

3.1 Opening and closing moves

At the beginning of the reply move, the merchant will usually greet the customer with a greeting, followed by a thank you to express their appreciation for the review or for visiting the hotel. At the end of the opening move, the merchant replies with an apology such as sorry, regret, etc., to express his or her regret for the negative experience.

In the closing move of the response, the hotel thanks the customer again, and the repetition of the thanks allows the customer to feel that his or her review was noticed and valued by the hotel. Next, the hotel sends an invitation to the customer, which means that it sincerely hopes that the customer will continue to choose to stay at this hotel next time, and will use speech act such as welcoming. Finally, the hotel often uses speech acts such as wishing the customer well in life.

3.2 Middle moves

In the middle moves, when the hotel explicitly acknowledges the content of the review, they usually explain why the problem occurred, and promise to correct or improve. The first response is the speech act of explaining. Next, the hotel will make a promise to the customer, often using the speech act of promising. When a hotel does not accept a negative review from a customer, the hotel will express disagreement with the content of the customer's negative review in its response, often emphasizing its merits, offering suggestions, challenging the customer's review, and assigning blame to the customer. First, the speech act of promising is used to emphasize other strengths of the hotel as well as its purpose and mission. Second, the hotel may also respond by suggesting or recommending services or amenities that the customer was unaware of during their stay as a way to deny the content of the negative review. Finally, the hotel uses speech act of rebutting to challenge the review by placing blame on the customer, clearly stating the inauthenticity of the review, and providing reasons to argue against it.

4. The identity constructed by the merchant in the response behavior

4.1 Opening and closing moves: the relational identity construction

After analyzing the corpus, it was found that the hotel used different speech acts in the opening and closing moves to construct two kinds of relational identities with the customers: the identity of family and friends and the identity of the servant- VIP relationship, respectively.

Example 1: Distinguished guests, ning hao!

When replying to negative reviews, hotel merchants usually choose to use pleasantries or honorific "you" and "hello" at the beginning of the opening move to give consumers a sense of respect and intimacy (e.g., Example 1), and use words such as "good luck" and "best wishes" at the closing move to express their good wishes to customers and bring the relationship between customers and hotels closer.

Example 2: Thank you for staying at ...... hotel and giving your review

Servant- VIP relationship identity means that the hotel places itself in a lower service status when responding to customers, treats customers as service recipients with higher status, and constructs the relationship with customers mainly through speech acts such as thanking, apologizing, and welcoming. In Example 2, the hotel uses the speech act of thanking to show that it recognizes the problems and suggestions made by the customer and constructs a typical service-guest relationship identity.

4.2 Middle moves: the positive identity construction

According to the analysis of the corpus, it is found that the hotel constructs four positive merchant identities by implementing different speech act response strategies, which will be described below with examples.

4.2.1 Expert practitioners

An expert, i.e., a person who has specialized in a particular discipline or knowledge or is good at a particular skill. In their responses, hotels often construct their identity as expert practitioners through the speech act of suggesting.

Example 3: A few days ago, due to high winds, ... had a short-term cliff-type cooling, considering the low evening temperature, many guests also feedback will be cold, the hotel temporarily shut down the cold air and try to self-generated heat (non-municipal

heating) intermittently provide warm air.

In Example 3, the hotel explained the real reason to the customer through objective and fair, non-rigid language when explaining the content of the customer's negative reviews. Hotel explained the specific reasons to the customer through explaining speech act, constructing a positive identity of professional authority with the intention of redeeming the hotel's image.

4.2.2 Responsibilities undertaker

Responsibility means to undertake the task that should be undertaken, to complete the mission that should be accomplished, and to do the job that should be done.

Example 4: In the event of such an incident, we are deeply aware of the stakes and will be more stringent and rigorous in our subsequent services.

In example 4, the customer gave the hotel a negative review because the hotel's poor service and poor room hygiene gave the customer a negative stay experience. The hotel promises to improve its service in the future and to hold itself to a stricter and more rigorous standard. Thus, by making a promise to the customer, the hotel constructs a positive identity as a responsible undertaker.

4.2.3 Mission practitioner

Star-brand hotels have their own mission and goals. According to the corpus analysis, hotels also respond to negative customer reviews by "emphasizing the practice or mission", thus denying the problems mentioned by customers. Therefore, the hotel constructs a positive identity as a mission practitioner by stating speech act.

Example 5: To provide every guest with caring and thorough service is our tireless goal.

In Example 5, the hotel performs a stating speech act to explain the hotel's consistent goals and objectives to the customer and to express disagreement with the customer's negative review. Here, the hotel constructs a positive identity as a mission practitioner through the speech act.

4.2.4 Rights defender

As consumers, we have to defend our consumer rights and interests, and similarly, hotels will defend their rights and interests based on facts, despite the complaints of customer reviews. The analysis of the corpus reveals that the hotel constructs a positive identity as a rights defender mainly through rebuttal speech acts.

Example 7: After investigation, we met your free late check-out rights at 14:00, and then again free late for one hour, but your check-out time is close to 16:00, in order not to affect other guests' check-in, and also to ensure the hotel's due rights and interests, so we charge you half-night fee.

In Example 7, the customer is dissatisfied with the hotel's half-night room charge, and the hotel clearly affirms in its reply that after satisfying the customer's right to check out before 14:00, it again delayed the room for the customer for one hour free of charge, but the customer still did not check out within the specified time and even delayed it until around 16:00, so the hotel charged the customer for the half-night room in order to ensure the hotel's right. Here, the hotel constructs the identity as a rights defender by refuting speech act.

5. Conclusion

This paper found that merchants use different speech acts to respond. The opening and the closing moves construct specific relationship identities with customers by implementing five speech acts: greeting, thanking, apologizing, welcoming, and wishing: family and friend relationship identity and service provider- VIP relationship identity; in the middle move constructs the hotel's own positive business identity by implementing five speech acts: explaining, promising, stating, suggesting and rebutting: expert practitioner, responsibilities undertaker, mission practitioner and rights defender. This study provides some guidance for merchants responding to negative online reviews.

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