



A Pragmatic Study of Online Offence in Discussion Board

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Abstract. This study attempts to explore the online offence through the analysis of its linguistic devices and the revelation of its pragmatic features. Enlightened by the theory of (im) politeness, the present study firstly attempts to define online offence and identify the participation framework in online discussion boards. Then it discusses the various ways of achieving online offence and its intensification. Finally, it reveals pragmatic features of online offence. The study finds that: (1) online offence is mainly achieved by assertive derogating, directive compelling, commissive warning, and expressive swearing; (2) online offence can be intensified by modifiers and para-linguistic devices; (3) online offence is more explicitly expressed, more aggressive and sequential. It hopes this study can shed some light on impoliteness study under the context of impoliteness.

Keywords: Online offence · Linguistic realization · Pragmatic features

1 Introduction

Due to the increasing impact of computer mediated communication (CMC) on interaction, lately, impoliteness in online environment gains more and more attention [1, 7, 10, 13, 16]. It seems researchers have reached an agreement that CMC promotes impoliteness because of its medium-specific context. Offence is greatly explored in impoliteness studies [2–5, 11]. In general, previous studies regard offence either as a face-threatening act or a breach of communicative principles. The former point of view suggests that offence is an intentional face-damaging behavior that performed by the speaker to attack the addressee through the expression of communicative intention, causing harms and hurt on addressee. The latter one focuses more on evaluation of appropriateness of the behavior, that is, offence has to be conceptualized in terms of participants' evaluation in interaction [7, 17]. Under the influence of the latter view, the theory of relational work and rapport management start to play essential roles in accounting for daily offence. The present study attempts to explore the linguistic realization of online offence and reveal its pragmatic features.

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2 Online Context and Offence

2.1 Online Influential Factors

Several medium factors are intimately related to offence in online interaction, which have been discussed in recent studies. First, anonymity is one of the most influential factors contributing to online offensive behavior. The “decreased social inhibition” in CMC [14] offers an ideal environment for intensely antagonistic behaviour to flourish, with some participants evidently feeling licensed to behave towards their opponents with a degree of heightened aggression that they would generally avoid in FTF interaction [8]. Secondly, physical remoteness leads to lack of social cues in asynchronous online interaction, making contribution to the increasing of online offence. In online interaction, people are relatively unconcerned with making a good appearance with lack of social context cues, thus, their behavior becomes more extreme, more impulsive, and less socially differentiated. Thirdly, in online discussion boards, communication is asynchronous, which disinhibits people in giving response to others. The property of asynchronicity enables participants to engage in multi-party dialogue to an extent that is not physically possible in face-to-face communication. Impoliteness is also fanned by the ever-changing and unstable nature of the audience in online environments. As the construction of a message is shaped by the specific audience to which it is addressed, the unspecificity and the anonymity of the audience can inhibit the use of politeness [6].

2.2 The Notion of Online Offence

As to the notion of online offence, there are even less studies giving clear definition to it. At the very beginning, online offence is conceptualized as an uninhibited verbal behavior that shows antagonism to others. Then it is termed as flaming in a lot of studies [1, 9]. Latter, some studies reveal that trolling is very similar to online offence, which is designed to humiliate its opponent and damage his or her face. Although there is no consensus among researchers about what online offence is, the proposition that online offence is a face-attacking act utilized by interlocutors to construct or deconstruct interpersonal relationship is generally accepted.

In view of the complex participation structure of online interaction, online offence needs to be conceptualized from following aspects. Firstly, to whom the offence is directed is the first step for us to unravel the complicated interpersonal relationship. Secondly, face attacking is dynamically achieved in offence giving and taking process. Thirdly, synonymous concepts as flaming, insulting etc. need to be distinguished from the online offence since they bear different features.

3 Data Collection and Participation Framework

3.1 Data Collection

The data collected in this study is from Baidu Tieba, which is the largest Chinese asynchronous communicating community. Baidu Tieba is a publicly accessible and searchable message board system where specific boards (called “bar”) can be freely created

by a registered user under a specific title. Once the bar is created, it will be indexed by Baidu and the contents within these boards become easily searchable. Users can choose whether to make a post on the board anonymously. If the user is registered, his username will be shown as the author. If the user is not registered, he can browse the forum but cannot post or make comment. Participants in Baidu Tieba are typically strangers with diverse backgrounds as regards age, occupation, gender and so forth. Members interact with others about whom almost nothing is known beyond the shared interest in a topic. Posters and readers do not need to be online at the same time to write and receive messages, thus, there is typically a time lag between the production and reception of a message. Both authors' posts and readers' comments are stored in archives which can be accessed from a sidebar on the main page of the specific boards. On the main page of the each board, we find different threads based on one common theme.

For the study, 188 stretches of excerpted interactions are selected from the largest Chinese asynchronous communicating community Baidu Tieba, which are naturally occurring data featured by sequential turns. Participants in Baidu Tieba are typically strangers with diverse backgrounds as regards age, occupation, gender and so forth, who know nothing about each other except for the shared interest in a topic. The data of the present study focus on public topics concerning social problems such as environment or medical health, which exclude those controversial ones easily leading to interpersonal conflicts.

3.2 Participants Identification

Participants identifying is the most essential part for the whole analysis and clarifying different participants in the data is the first step to carry out the pragmatic account for online offence. Meanwhile, the complexity of discussion boards makes the roles of interlocutors more complicated and dynamic, which have to be subdivided according to specific activities. As far as the current study concerned, offence initiator, offence taker, collaborator(s) of offence initiator and collaborator(s) of offence taker are major four types of participants. In data selection phase, the interrelated participants have been chosen on the basis of their comments and counter reply. As stated earlier, if an individual's comment has no relation with the previous or the following interaction, he or she will be regarded as irrelevant participant in this study. Identification of original two interlocutors is grounded on the judgment that the interaction between the two parties is oppositional in terms of their propositions, attitudes, stances, opinions and so on. The exchange turns should at least consist of two which reflect mild or strong conflict between two interlocutors. Therefore, two parties who firstly disagree or even attack each other in exchanging their opinions are most important participants to be identified, among which one of them is the offence initiator who sows the dragon's teeth. However, this does not mean that previous interlocutors do not relate to these two parties, and the specific relations have to be figured out through close interactional analysis. In other words, offence initiator may not always be the first or the second participant, sometimes he will be the third or the fourth one.

In order to simplify the process of identifying different parties, different levels of communication have been marked off, and the following figure indicates the whole process. (See "Fig. 1").

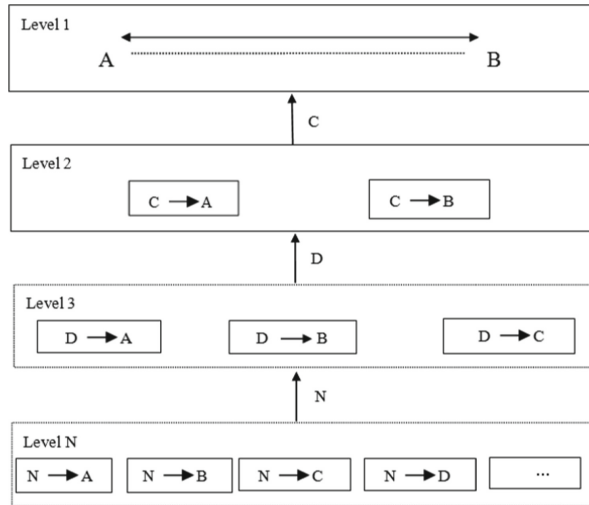


Fig. 1. Offences in different interactional levels.

As illustrated above, interaction between A and B is standing at the top of this figure, and generally there are three kinds of situations. Normally A posts the first message targeting at no specific individuals, which will be attacked or supported by other participants. Firstly, if B performs offence in the second and following posts, he takes the role of offence initiator and A is the offence taker. Secondly, if A targets at B's second or following posts, A plays the role of offence initiator and B is the offence taker. Thirdly, A and B give their comments without targeting at each other, and in this situation, their specific roles have to be identified through the second level of interaction. In this figure, bidirectional arrow between A and B indicates that either A or B will be the offence taker and dotted line indicates that A and B are not targeting at each other. All unidirectional arrows show that the participant being pointed is the offence taker.

4 Various Types of Online Offence

The author categorizes the linguistic realizations of online offence by combining the categorization of speech acts and impoliteness strategies. The advantages of combining the two are lying in following two aspects. First, the categorization of speech acts is easier to be identified by adding illocutionary verbs. Secondly, while the speech act theory can avoid the shortcoming of overlapping, it does not touch anything about impoliteness. Therefore, the classification based on impoliteness strategies can be used for reference. After the close examination on the chosen data, the author has classified the linguistic realizations of online offence into following four groups. It is admitted that there will be different kinds of linguistic realizations in a complete section of interaction, and the following classification are carried based on the single offensive turn and its corresponding replying turn rather than a stretch of interaction.

4.1 Assertive Derogating

Assertion is a statement to say something that one strongly believes. Normally, the verb “believe” can be inserted into the statement. Derogating is an impoliteness strategy to make the interlocutor to be inferior to be in disrepute, capability, intelligence, appearance etc. Therefore, assertive derogating is a statement to show that one firmly believes that his opponent is inferior in some respects, such as his ability, knowledge, outlooks etc. In online interaction, assertive derogating refers to that the offender will state, express and describe the negative aspects of addressee by manifesting his confirmation through the sentence pattern “I (believe) you that...”. The following examples will illustrate the above point.

Example 1: 你是垃圾

[You are a jerk]

Example 2: 你连内容都不知道, 有点可笑

[You don't know the information, it seems a little funny.]

Example 3: 没有逻辑, 你领导都会觉得智商低

[Your leader will think you have a low IQ since you make no sense.]

In example 1, the offender believes that the offended is a jerk and he makes people feel sick. In example 2, the offender shows his doubts to the understanding ability of the offended and he believes that the offended is little funny to view point without enough knowledge acquired. In the last example, the offender also expresses his contempt to the offended by claiming that he believes that the offended makes no sense and has a very low IQ. Evidently, all examples here illustrate how the offender confirms his negative belief towards the offended through the way of assertive derogating.

4.2 Directive Compelling

In interaction, each individual enjoys a freedom of joining or withdrawing a conversation without any imposition given by others. In other words, any forcing or driving others into or out of a communicative activity is offensive in one way or another. Participants do not like to be directed or ordered by others, especially in equal social positions. The speech act of directive is the way for the speaker to show the way by conducting or leading and cause some imposition on the hearer. To be specific, when the speaker uses directive, he intends to utter his wish of directing others to do or not to do something. Normally, the illocutionary verb “order”, “require” etc. can be inserted into a statement to show one's strong wish of performing a conduct. Compelling is regarded as a kind of impolite strategy to make people have a particular feeling or attitude in communication, which is often adopted by the speaker to force the hearer to do or accept something. In the present study, the directive compelling refers to the offender expresses his/her malicious wish of compelling the address to do or accept something through the sentence pattern “I want you to...”.

In the following examples, the offender exhibits his wish of making the offended to do something by the way of directive compelling. The example 4 demonstrates the offender's wish of stopping the offended to view the point, which is an obvious deprivation of one's rights to speak. In 01 the offender uses the utterance "I want you do not talk sheer nonsense" to compel the offended to stop talking on one hand, and to make sever criticism towards him on the other. In example 5, the offender utters the order of driving the offended away by openly expresses "get away". Since the offensiveness involved in previous turn and the following counter-reply is also face-attacking. The example 6 illustrates the commonly found directive compelling that convey malicious wishes in online discussion boards. "I wish you die" is very offensive since it is a curse to appeal to magic power to harm others. The vicious wanting expressed by the offender in these two examples will make the recipient feel hurting and angry and take vengeance on the offender. It can be seen from the following examples that online offence expressed through directive is often manifested overtly without any mitigation.

Example 4

01 不要再胡说八道了

02 到底是谁在胡说?有依据吗?

01 I want you do not talk sheer nonsense.

02 Who is making bullshit? Do you have evidence?

Example 5

01 快点滚,有多远滚多远

02 去你的,傻缺

01 Get away! As far as you can.

02 Go away, idiot!

Example 6

01 怎么还不去死呢?你去死吧

02 你才该死,你爷爷我长寿着呢

01 Why not go to die? I wish you die.

02 You should deserve it. As you grandfather, I have a long way to go.

4.3 Commissive Warning

The utterance like "I promise to pay you the money" is commissives [15], which is the surface structure realization of "I promise you + I will pay you the money". Here we can see "I" is the deep structure subject of "pay". Similarly, "I promise you to finish the work next Monday" is the surface structure realization of "I promise you + I will the work next Monday". However, in the sentence "I order you to finish the work next Monday", "I" is not the subject of the verb "finish". Notice that directives and commissive are quite different in their deep sentence structure though their surface structures are very similar. A warning is an advance notice of something that will happen, often something unpleasant. Normally warning will arouse negative feelings of the recipients, which is often avoided in personal communication. Therefore, commissive warning means that the offender shows his future action by warning which is unfavourable to the addressee's interests through the sentence pattern "I promise you I will...".

Example 7

01 懒得理你 不屑和你辩论

02 我爱理你啊

01 I will disregard you and not argue with you anymore

02 I'd like to?

Example 8

01, 想给你一个大巴子

02 你也好不到哪儿去

01 ..., I'd like to slap you.

02 You are as bad as me.

Example 9

01 信不信我断了你的根?

02 有种你来啊

01 Do you believe that I will break your penis?

02 Bring it on if you got penis

The above examples illustrate how the offender gives commissive warnings to the offended. In example 7, the offender's commissive warning can be interpreted as "I promise you I will disregard you and not argue with you anymore". The future action to ignore the recipient took by the offender makes the recipient feel annoyed and gives the offended tit for tat. The example 8 shows the offender's promise to slap the addressee by the utterance 01. In fact, the offensive turn in this example is realized by two ways of linguistic realizations, the former part of the utterance is assertive derogating and the latter part is commissive warning. Here the utterance is taken as commissive warning because of the reply of the recipient is aiming more at the latter part of the utterance. The commissive warning in example 9 is expressed through a question and can be understood as "I promise you I will break your penis". Of course in online environment, one cannot really achieve the perlocutionary effect of the utterance, but the face attacking and the relationship distancing can be realized. From the above analysis we can see that the commissive warning can indicate the offender's future action that will not happen in most occasions because of the physical constraints; however, it will achieve the interpersonal effects that the offender wants in ad hoc context.

4.4 Expressive Swearing

Expressives, as a kind of speech act, can be used to indicate the speaker's emotional state of gratitude, apologizing, exciting etc., which characteristically require a gerundive transformation of the verb in the lower node [15]. However, Searl does not consider the situation of impoliteness when he makes the taxonomy of illocutionary acts. A majority of impoliteness study reveals that offence is featured by the fact that it is emotionally driven and the evaluative beliefs may be associated with likes or dislikes ([4]: 59). In this case, expressive can be characterized by its negative emotion venting towards the recipients in online offence. Swearing is considered to be vulgar and offensive since it is closely related to one's angry emotion venting. In the present study, expressives are limited to those situations where the offender expressing their anger towards the offended and their emotional affiliating members or taking pleasure in their misfortune.

Therefore, expressive swearing refers the offender declares his psychological experiences of dissatisfaction, anger, indignation, irritation or gloating through insulting or cursing on one's emotional affiliating members, particular one's families. This category is intimately related to one's emotional state and is characterized by its extensive usage of profane and taboo language. In fact, this category cannot be represented by a unified sentence pattern and basically equals to "I feel angry (happy) since the person you like..."

Example 9

01 好啊!祝愿全家得癌!

02 你说话也实在是够恶毒够刻薄的了!

01 Very well! Wish your family get the cancer!

02 How malicious you are in uttering these words!

In the example, the offender does not attack the recipient directly, instead, he makes insults or cursing on the recipients' families or supported individuals. The example 9 demonstrates that the offender makes malicious cursing to the recipient's family, which is totally unbearable for the addressee. Since one's family members are emotionally precious to one's life, it is a vicious attack to curse one's family die. Notice that all linguistic realizations of online offence are intimately relating to one's emotion venting, however, the expressive swearing focuses on those emotions expressed towards the recipients' emotional affiliating individuals, which might be more offensive than those direct ones towards the offended in some circumstances.

5 Intensification of Offensiveness in Online Offence

In online discussion, phonological and body language features cannot be easily acquired, thus, the author's analysis mainly focuses on linguistic aspects. Here intensity is the key notion, which is defined as "the strength or degree of emphasis with which a source states his attitudinal position towards a topic" [12]. It seems the quality of language indicates the attitude of the speaker, and "impoliteness is very much about signaling behaviors that are attitudinally extreme or understanding them to be so" [4]. "The intensity of an impoliteness formula plays a key role in determining how offensive it is perceived to be" [4]. In general, intensity is closely related to one's emotional venting. A more intensified ways of doing offence indicates a much stronger negative emotion, and thus exerts more offensive effect. In CMC, the marked negative behaviour can be signaled and reinforced in a number of ways pertinent to online communication, e.g., spelling, punctuation and emoticons [8]. The means of intensifying offensiveness in this study have been detected as following.

5.1 Modifiers

Example 10

..... 你的逻辑相当可以

... Your logic is quite good.

Example 11

..... 大哥,你太有才了.

Table 1. Adverbs used as Modifiers

真	Truly, indeed	你说得真有道理 🤔 What you say is <i>indeed</i> reasonable 🤔
根本	at all	根本什么都不懂 You know nothing <i>at all</i>
居然, 竟然	unexpectedly	居然还有五毛在这里洗地 There's a <i>Wumao</i> washing the floor <i>unexpectedly</i>
非常, 太, 十分	very	太可笑了 <i>Very</i> funny
特别	especially	你特别傻 You're <i>especially</i> foolish
果然	really	果然来了个五毛 A <i>Wumao</i> <i>really</i> comes here
简直	simply	简直不可理喻 You're <i>simply</i> out of reason
总是	always	总是这样鼠目寸光 You're <i>always</i> short-sighted
仍然	still	仍然揪住死理不放 You <i>still</i> keep banging your head towards the wall
如此	so	如此高的智商 🧠 <i>So</i> talented 🧠
极其	extremely	你的心肠极其恶毒 You're <i>extremely</i> vicious

... Big brother, you're so talented.

Illocutionary force of an utterance can be strengthened or reduced through the use of adverbs. In the above two example, adverbs “quite” and “so” intensify the tone of irony in an effective way, indicating the attitude of speakers is extremely hostile. The following table list adverbs used as modifiers to intensify offensiveness of conventionalized impolite formulae in the author's data. (See “Table 1”).

Except for adverbs, demonstrative pronoun can also be taken to strengthen the offensiveness in online offence.

Example 12

拜拜, 你这个自以为是

Bye, you're so self-righteous.












Example 13

你这种人少点, 的确有好处。

It's really good to have fewer people like you.

Example 12 can be translated into “you're so self-righteous”, and there is no demonstrative pronoun in this translation. However, in Chinese expression we often use demonstrative pronoun “this” after a personal pronoun to emphasize, which is very special. In

Table 2. Emoticons of negative affect

Emoticons	connotation	Function	Act intensified
	laughing	Laugh at others	Sneering
	funny	Scorn at others	sneering
	happy	Show one's happiness	sneering
	angry	Show one's anger	Insulting
	contempt	Show one's contempt	insulting
	weak	Show one's contempt	Questioning
	spray	Show one's anger	insulting
	proud	Being proud of oneself	Cursing
	spit	Feel disgusted	Insulting
	snakey	Indicating unfriendliness	Questioning
	unhappy	Show one's unhappiness	Compelling
	doubting	Challenging others	Questioning
	shut up	Require others to shut up	Compelling

example 13, there is no “this type” used to modify the pronoun “you” in English version, however, in Chinese, “this type” can express the negative attitude of the speaker and intensify the meaning of offence.

5.2 Para-Linguistic Devices

5.2.1 Emoticons

No doubt emoticons are effective in intensifying the offensiveness of conventionalized impoliteness formulae in online interaction with few accesses to para-linguistic devices. The author has discussed in earlier part, emoticons alone can be regarded as the way of doing offence, but their combining to comments is generally taken as the intensifier. A specific emoticon can be used independently or combined with other emoticons, and generally the same emoticon used repeatedly will definitely strengthen the offensiveness of conventionalized impoliteness formulae. In the author's data, emoticons of negative affect are summarized in the following “Table 2”.

5.2.2 Punctuations

Except for wide usage of emoticons, punctuation is another way to intensify the offensiveness original statement. In formal written language, the same punctuation in a sentence is seldom used in a repeated way since it contradicts with the requirements of standard Chinese writing system. However, in online interaction, punctuations are used in a less restricted way to facilitate the emotion venting. After analyzing the data, the author found two ways of using punctuation to intensify the offensiveness of conventionalized impoliteness formulae: repetition of the same punctuation and simultaneous occurrence of several different punctuations. Example 14 illustrates that three question

marks have been used as intensifier to strengthen tone of insulting. In example 15, the question and exclamatory marks together can intensify the force of criticizing, making the offensiveness stronger. In general, question mark, exclamatory mark and full stop are often used repeatedly in the author's data, and the most common combination is the question mark with exclamatory mark.

Example 14

你是智障的同胞你能好到哪里去???

You are the fellow of a mentally retarded person. How can you be normal? ? ?

Example 15

你怎能如此毫无人性?!

How can you be so inhuman?!

6 Pragmatic Features of Online Offence

The features of online offence can be summarized into following three aspects.

First of all, the intention of online offence is more explicitly expressed. Different from incidental and accidental offence, online offence is often conducted in a way to cause harm on the recipient with a purpose. More importantly, since the anonymity in online communication plays an essential role, participants tend to make their offensive intention overt without any mitigation needed in face to face interaction. In this case, the offender will perform the action of offence in a direct way to convey his intention overly.

Second, the attacking of online offence is more aggressive. Compared with the offence in reality, online offence is more violent because participants are free from taking the responsibility of their utterances. That is, no matter how aggressive they are, they take no risk of getting physical attacking that possibly happen in face to face communication. In this case, taboos, profane language that seldom used in face to face interaction are easy to be found in online context.

Third, the performance of online offence is sequential. In online interaction, the action of offence is often conducted through more than two turns that seldom occurs in face to face communication. In face to face interaction, participants attempt to avoid continuous attacking on others in order to reduce negative influence on mutual relationship. However, online communicative context provides participants enough time and space to design their utterance to attack others in a series of turns without considering the broken relationship. In this case, the offender will make sequential attacks as long as the time and space allow.

7 Conclusion

This study pays attention to the online offence in polylogue which will enrich the pragmatic research in impoliteness field. In conclusion, this study finds that: (1) online offence is mainly achieved by assertive derogating, directive compelling, commissive warning, and expressive swearing; (2) online offence can be intensified by modifiers and para-linguistic devices; (3) online offence is more explicitly expressed, more aggressive and sequential. The present study helps us to further understand why online offence will

exert negative influence on interpersonal relationship. More importantly, it may give a new look at impoliteness theory that has been utilized as theoretical foundation by many previous studies.

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