POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN ACADEMIC DIGITAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract

The paper explores the discourse strategies used in academic discourse in the informal setting of a personal web page. The aim is to study a digital variation of academic discourse that blends features of spoken and written academic discourse. It typically provides spontaneous responses using direct ways of expressing ideas. Unlike scholarly discussions at conferences, academic etiquette and diplomatic language are not always maintained and personal attacks and emotive statements occur; participants tend to express their preferences, professional standpoints, ideas and personal attitudes frankly and openly. Expressing criticism and disagreement, the participants may or may not use politeness strategies to mitigate face-threatening responses. Mapping the variety of these strategies, I work with those parts of academic web pages that are devoted to vivid and uncensored discussions of the subject matter. The analysis is theoretically rooted in the conception of interpersonal rhetoric as defined by Leech (1983). The research draws from a corpus of articles and related responses randomly chosen from personal and institutional academic web pages.

Keywords

academic digital discourse, implicating vs. explicating, expressing and taking criticism

1 Introduction

In this paper the academic discourse used in academic personal websites is viewed as digital discourse in the sense of being presented via computer. The academic digital discourse used in web pages is to a certain extent less restricted by the norms and standards of academic writing commonly required in research articles. Complex research on popular and professional science (cf. Hyland 2010) has revealed a variety of important aspects of academic discourse and the need for consistency with the norms of the given scientific community. My assumption is that certain aspects, such as proximity and interpersonality, will slightly differ in the informal setting of academic digital discourse. However, the recognition of scientific value and desire for certain academic prestige also play a role. Online discussion provides alternative voices and the participants themselves often support their professional stance via referencing or directly inviting experts to contribute. The analysis shows that the most characteristic

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feature of academic digital discourse is interpersonality. Here, the conception of interpersonal rhetoric (Leech 1983), which examines the interplay of the main pragmatic principles and their maxims, can be efficiently applied. The analysis of responses to academic papers developing into heated and lively discussions of the subject matter also reminds us that science should remain a communicative activity where ideas are to be discussed rather than presented as finalized pieces of information (cf. Hyland 2010). As for the technical aspects of digital academic discourse, its world-wide and easy accessibility is the most appreciated advancement. Along with traditional academic skills, scholars acquire new (computer-mediated) discourse routines and gain an alternative channel for (more or less) instantaneous intellectual communication. Modern digital (online-discourse) communicative strategies have been examined and their pros and cons have been pointed out (cf. positive and negative aspects used in Facebook communication in Lencho 2011: 38).

In this paper I view academic digital discourse as a hybrid variety which combines features of both written and spoken academic discourse. The distinctive features of spoken academic discourse, namely the use and distribution of a set of discourse markers as related to particular discourse strategies used to express politeness in spoken academic discourse, have been studied in detail by Povolná (2009). Similarly to spoken interaction, in the heat of an argument, critical views are expressed with vigour and strength and as such create face-threatening acts. However, feelings of collegiality often prevail and the professional reliance and impact of the scholars make them reformulate their responses, soften criticism and use various mitigating devices. The findings show that among the most efficient politeness strategies are making comments and conciliatory statements.

2 Theoretical framework of analysis

2.1 Interpersonal rhetoric

In my analysis I take the approach of interpersonal rhetoric as first distinguished from textual rhetoric by Halliday (1973) and later elaborated by Leech (1983). More specifically, this means to consider a hierarchy of pragmatic principles, mainly the Cooperative (CP) and the Politeness principle (PP), which consist of particular maxims (cf. Grice 1975). My aim is to examine, based on the given context of academic digital discourse, the reasons that make the participants either abide by particular conversational and politeness maxims or force them to fail to fulfil the maxims and thus create (conversational) implicatures. In the context of academic digital discourse, I understand a complex of mainly two aspects that

are assumed to be shared by all participants in the debates: the identifiable social setting of the academic community and any relevant background knowledge from the field of science.

2.2 Saying and implicating: Cooperation and politeness

The theory of conversational implicature was first presented by H. P. Grice in *Logic and Conversation* (1975). Since then, it has become the default theory of implicature in pragmatics. Conversational implicature is convention-based: it must be capable of being worked out on the basis that all interlocutors can recognize the conventional meaning of the words used, they understand that the CP and its maxims are respected; they share the same context and other items of background knowledge. All these aspects are assumed by both parties – the initiator of the discussion (the author of the article displayed) and the respondents (blog discussion participants). In my analysis, I want to view the failures to fulfil the maxims (i.e. violating, flouting, opting out, clashing, etc.) as providing conversational cues informing participants that irrational and illogical statements are better understood within a conventional framework. Analysing responses which aim at expressing agreement and disagreement, I focus on a set of implicatures created by participants, where their aim is to decide between being cooperative (direct and frank) and polite (indirect and diplomatic). As the analysis points out, the PP is a necessary complement of the CP; however, the impulse of collaboration in academic digital discourse often supresses the tact maxim when expressing ironic remarks, one can appear as acting too obviously polite for the occasion, which means that the PP actually overrules the CP (cf. Miššíková 2012: 151). Thus in a hierarchy of pragmatic principles, the Irony principle takes its place alongside the CP and the PP. However, it is regarded as parasitic on these two because its function can be explained only within the complexity of the cooperation and politeness (cf. Leech 1983: 142).

2.3 Politeness discourse strategies in academic digital discourse

Academic online discussions provide interesting language material which can be seen as a parallel to spoken professional slang, an informal register displaying a variety of stylistic and pragmatic aspects. In this paper, I focus on the study of the *pragmatic force* of an utterance (cf. Leech 1983: 17) which combines both the *illocutionary* (i.e. illocutionary and social goals) and the *rhetoric force* (i.e. the adherence to rhetorical principles). More specifically, the analysis will point out which rhetorical principles the respondents prefer to use (i.e. to what extent

do they choose being truthful, polite, ironic, etc. in their comments). The focus of my analysis is to classify a variety of (politeness) discourse strategies used by the respondents, paying attention mainly to mitigating devices whose purpose is to melt down face-threatening acts or critical comments. In academic digital discourse politeness (such as showing professional appreciation, formulating criticism via asking questions, providing suggestions, giving references, etc.) enhance the natural flow and dynamism of turn-taking in online debates. In the course of academic debates, the strategic use of language is rather observable. In the heat of an argument, the cooperative and polite exchange of ideas often develops into a more direct persuasive form of communication. As pointed out by Dontcheva-Navratilova (2012: 81), unlike propaganda and manipulation, which have acquired negative connotations, persuasive interaction provides interlocutors with the choice to believe and act as they please; it enables them to either accept or refuse the arguments provided by the persuader. Together with cooperation and politeness, the option of choice is vital to democracy and the autonomy of academia, and it also responds to those who condemn computer-mediated communication as anonymous and thus irresponsible, uncontrolled and manipulative.

3 Data description

3.1 General characteristics

The corpus comprises a total of 15 articles and 566 related responses retrieved from randomly chosen personal and institutional academic web pages. The length of the language material retrieved is about 75,000 words. In my analysis, I focus primarily on the responses to the articles, not the articles themselves. I want to examine these responses from the point of view of the discourse strategies used to mitigate potential face-threatening comments. I will also consider conversational implicatures created mainly by violating conversational maxims. The following is the list of the surveyed web pages:

1) A web page called *Paulitics* run by Paul, an MA graduate in media studies, political theory and international politics from the University of Ottawa, ON, Canada. The blogs and related responses (8 blogs with 62 comments) come from the period between 2006 and 2009. The homepage link: http://paulitics.wordpress.com/. The samples taken from this corpus are marked as PWP.

2) A web page called *The University Blog* run by Martin, all used blogs and related responses (5 blogs with 11 + 337 comments) were displayed in June 2012. The homepage link: http://theuniversityblog.co.uk/. The samples taken from this corpus are marked as TUB.
3) An official web page of *The Richard Dawkins Foundation*, the blog introduces an article in two parts, both parts and related responses (1 blog with 80 comments) displayed in June 2012. The homepage link: http://richarddawkins.net/. The samples taken from this corpus are marked as RDF.
4) A web page called *The Science Blog.* The blog is added to the corpus because it cross-refers the blog from the above stated web page of *Evolution News and Views* (1 blog with 76 comments). The homepage link: http://scienceblogs.com/. The samples taken from this corpus are marked as TSB.

The length of the articles ranges from 1,000 to 2,000 words, whereas the average number of responses ranges from dix to 22. There is one article promoting the web page via advertising a product which received 337 responses. These responses were excluded from the analysis as prompted by commercial and advertising aspects and not as authentic responses to academic work. Thus the final number of analysed responses is 229.

3.2 Framework of discourse

There is a general model of outlining the discourse of web pages and their blog sections. An article typically displaying a catchy headline and thought-provoking content invites comments from page visitors. In this respect, the web pages I examined indicate certain differences as for the type, length and scientific accuracy of responses. In general, the respondents tend to present their comments in the form of more or less elaborated explanations and structured analyses. Depending on their personal opinions and theoretical stances, they express encouragement or critical comments that may accumulate into a heated dispute. In particular, younger scholars use their homepages to elicit opinions on their work in the informal setting of a personal web page. Examining the discourse strategies used in public forums helps to identify the strategies speakers use to deal with disagreement and critique. The sample material enables us to review the scope of decency and vulgarity in academic digital discourse as two extremes on one axis. As a result of my analysis I want to point out at those strategies that enhance professional collegiality and as such contribute towards socializing in an academic setting.

4 Analysis and commentary

In this paper I take an explanatory approach to discourse analysis from the researcher's point of view; the approach can be characterized as descriptive and interpretative. I examine the collected language material from the point of view of demonstrating tendencies to soften a critical approach by using politeness strategies. The findings illustrate certain differences in the use of politeness strategies in academic discourse: in comparison to the more formal setting of scientific conferences, where no direct accusations occur, open attacks and animosities are part and parcel of academic discussions developed on web pages or blog sites. However, the concept of politeness is palpable and present all through the exchange of ideas; all observed strategies seem to develop from the pragmatic notion of face as introduced by Brown and Levinson (1996). The analysis of the responses shows diverse levels of formality and awareness of academic writing conventions. In the following section discourse strategies are divided into two groups. The first group discusses the strategies related to taking critical stance and the second group illustrates the ways of dealing with criticism.

4.1 Taking critical stance

Maintaining harmonious and smooth social relations in the face of the necessity to convey critique and disagreement is the main purpose of politeness. Expressing critical comments in an acceptable way requires using specific negative politeness strategies. As pointed out by Brown and Levinson (1996: 129) "negative politeness is the heart of respect behavior." We can assume that academic discourse will maintain an adequate amount of tact and civility even in the informal setting of academic web pages. In the following section, negative politeness discourse strategies are reviewed, emphasizing the need for respectful behavior in academic digital discourse.

a) Preparing the ground for criticism

Respondents may provide a broader introduction to their comments and before expressing criticism they give statements about the broader context of the research, tell a story, name similar examples, etc. Such elaborate opening frames reduce the number of direct accusing acts in critical comments but at the same time are perceivable as violations of the relevance maxim because other participants can view them as too distracting or off the point. The PP overrules the CP here: extensive opening frames (below in italics) enable the respondent

to state opinions that are in direct contrast and at the same time avoid direct accusations of the author of the main article. The following example illustrates this strategy:

(1) *Miller, who declined to be interviewed or have her real name published, was so flustered that she didn't show the DVD for the rest of the day because she felt responsible for putting the student in that emotional state*… (Opening frame)
It wasn't (Disagreement – direct accusing act 1) the teacher that was responsible for …; **it is squarely** (Disagreement – direct accusing act 2) the responsibility of the... [RDE]

Similarly:

(2) *I have some sympathy for those children condemned to ignorance by their parents, but really, in those circumstances*… (Opening frame)
I don't see (Disagreement – direct accusing act 1) that the entire onus can be placed on ... Pupils, parents and the wider community **need to** (Disagreement – direct accusing act 2) ... [RDE]

b) Disagreement by asking questions

To disagree or contradict the speaker is not considered polite and therefore asking questions can be seen as a face-saving act. The face of the opponent is not directly confronted as the questions seem polite on the surface and do not represent direct accusations. Moreover, the strategy of asking questions is rooted in the positive politeness strategy of showing interest and empathy and saves the opponent's wants efficiently:

(3) Is there a difference? [RDE]
What is the purpose of education? [RDE]
You are suggesting Gary Lunn's support will collapse down to 27% from last time (42%?) largely because Elizabeth May runs in SGI? Have you looked at her positions? [PWP]

In the informal setting, lexical items (hedges and intensifiers marked in bold italics) are used, which accentuate the issue and in this way create face-threatening acts (FTAs). The following examples show that the illocutionary force of the discourse is strong:

(4) Why do you always insist on those ***silly*** titles? (FTA) Did you ***actually*** turn this paper in as part of your graduate work with that title or did you change the title for your blog? [PWP]

(5) What ***the hell*** did she think a university was for, if not to encourage her to think in new and unfamiliar ways, going beyond what she was exposed to when living with her ridiculous family? [RDE]

c) Indirect attacks

Generally speaking, potential attacks in academia are rather indirect. In academic digital discourse indirect attacks are expressed by purposeful choice of lexis (i.e. the intensifiers and hedges as highlighted below in bold italics) and specific sentence structuring present potential FTAs. The respondents clearly disagree but seem to respect negative politeness strategies and reduce the intimidating effects on the speaker by belittling their own capacities and making their responses indirect. Rhetorical devices used, such as sentence parallelism and pseudo-cleft sentences (highlighted in bold), are typical of the spoken interaction.

(6) **I don't *even* know** what that means, **but I *do* know** that you ***just*** mugged, beat and brutalized the English language there. [PWP]

(7) **I do not** find it ***particularly*** baffling **or *at all*** surprising. **What is** surprising to me **is that *apparently*** lying in ***such a*** bold and deliberate fashion has no consequences. [TSB]

d) Criticism by making suggestions

One of the most common politeness strategies used in academic discourse in general is to show empathy and reflexivity. Making suggestions enables one to indirectly criticize or correct the speaker (politeness structures marked in italics). In academic digital discourse, the use of emotionally marked lexis and intensifiers (marked in bold italics) creates potential FTAs.

(8) *Paul.* This is *a bit* off-topic, but *you might like* the… [PWP]
There is always another option here that hasn't been looked at… [TSB]
If you could point to the …, *it would be much appreciated*. Having searched for …, *it seems* that you were… [TSB]
Instead of informing me about Brown ***entertain me*** with something I don't ***already*** know about Chomsky. [PWP]

e) Expressing criticism by making inquiries is typically used to represent indirect and thus polite ways (the CP maxims, hedges and politeness discourse markers below are in italics) of correcting the speaker. The positive politeness strategies of claiming common ground and showing interest enhance the smooth interaction and fulfil social goals of communication:

(9) Are you saying that this *somehow* shouldn't count? [PWP]
The *only* responsible way of calculating the matter is to do… Furthermore, in taking the raw vote totals as you are doing, you risk discounting that… *In my opinion*, this makes such raw calculations *not entirely* useful. [PWP]

(10) *Please* review the links above and explain how … *Also* explain how… *Please* explain how … *Please* explain how … and explain all the ... *Please* explain how your use of the term... *I hope* I have shown *to your satisfaction* that the … *is not always*... [TSB]

f) Inviting comments which show strong/weak points is another polite and acceptable way of presenting criticism in academic discourse. If being polite means to be a considerate conversational partner, is it important to follow basic rules of the CP as a part of the PP:

(11) *Would* you say that…? [PWP]
(12) *Although* it's *far less* scientific than what you presented, *I think*, *I think* we can add in a pity factor that sees … to give the growing number of ….
I think I'd do that if the … and … were ... [PWP]

g) Softening criticism

Similarly, both the CP and the PP and their maxims are applied to soften critical comments. The structures of linguistic politeness (in italics) are efficiently used:

(13) Also, *not to* knock your calculations…. [PWP]
With all due respect, *Paul*, but there are …. [PWP]
I could go on, but *you get* the point.… [PWP]
I'm not critiquing the conclusion *per se*... You *seem* to suggest... [PWP]
Paul: *actually*, I read your analysis *quite* carefully, but *I think* you aren't *quite* understanding *a few* of my points, or *perhaps* I didn't explain them well enough. *Let me* address your latest comments. [PWP]

4.2 Dealing with criticism

Once the criticism has been presented, the author of the discussed article has to cope with the critique in some way. He can use various strategies to save or communicate his face wants. Disagreements can either get resolved or remain unresolved. The corpus shows that in academic digital discourse open conflicts seldom get resolved. On the other hand, scholarly grounded critique is welcome and article authors use various discourse strategies (DSs) to resolve disagreements. The most common DSs include showing agreement, apologizing before counterattacking, taking rationalized stands, repeating ideas and cross referencing, and accepting criticism. The following section provides examples of the strategies used to resolve disagreement.

4.2.1 Resolving disagreement

The easiest way to resolve a confrontation is to agree with the critique. Complete agreement restores the harmony of communication:

(14) *I think* this is a fair point. [TSB]
That's a *great point* Martin, *I also* heard about … [TSB]

The initial or partial agreement usually functions as a prerequisite to further clarifications:

(15) Yep. But as you know... [TSB]
It's true that .., but he didn't …. [TSB]
I fully agree with this. This is a huge problem with…. I don't think … [PWP]
Interesting analysis, but I think it is …, and honestly, as a …. I don't think... [PWP]
Surely, there are ... but… I was neither disruptive nor insulting. [TSB]

An efficient and common politeness strategy in academic debates is to show empathy and respect before producing potential face threats:

(16) *Paul*, I'm taking your reasoning seriously, but *I think* you have to... [PWP]
So *I'm going to have to say* that your statement there *really* needs *some* serious support because from where I'm standing, it's not tenable. [PWP]

Considerate authors of the reviewed articles prefer to provide additional explanations and try to rationalize their attitudes:

(17) That's why I gave the full citation of the article so that you can … [PWP]
I *can* see that *some* people are having a difficult time understanding this, *so let's* spell this out as clearly as I can: If you think my math is intended to… , I *can only* tell you that: 1) I'm not... And 2) you are welcome to go over my math and see if I've made an error. *It's possible* I made a mistake, but I used this exact same methodology in predicting… [PWP]

In academic digital discourse it is common and technically easy to return to some responses or parts of the discussed articles and even copy the passage in question. The respondents also refer to other pieces of research and provide references to their own projects and academic work.

(18) To reiterate *my key point*: you've made some basic false assumptions because you believe that… [PWP]

Sometimes the act of saving one's face wants requires simply dismissing the criticism as being trivial and inadequate. This strategy produces responses that are acceptable only in the informal setting of academic digital discourse. Their illocutionary strength, openness and directness create face threats to the addressee and are perceived as impolite.

(19) *I don't believe for one second* that 80,000 votes will be cast in this riding. This is, incidentally, why I wrote… [PWP]
As for the last paragraph of your comment, *I don't even know* what that means or what you're getting at, *so I won't* attempt a reply. [PWP]
Unfortunately this last sentence is *entirely* inaccurate. Now, keeping in mind the... [PWP]

The PP maxims of tact, generosity, approbation and modesty participate fully in accepting criticism. Often a promise to render inaccuracies is involved.

(20) Hi Greg, Thanks for your reply. First off, in your reply, *you did* make a very important point. Yes, *I did* forget to take into account the … *I'll* be updating this ... [PWP]

4.2.2 Unresolved disagreement

Unlike scholarly debates in formal settings, such as scientific conferences, in academic digital discourse conflicts can remain unresolved. Direct criticism and accusations typically occur, especially when no valid academic reason for the criticism is perceived. The (social, psychological and physical) setting in academic digital discourse constrains the scope of politeness and all participants simply have to respect this reality. In the following comments, the conflicts are not resolved because the respondents willingly disrespect all strategies aimed at avoiding FTAs. The PP is overruled by the CP where the urge to tell the truth is stronger than the desire to claim collegiality and save the opponent's face. Examples of unresolved conflicts in academic digital discourse are plentiful. As highlighted in italics in the examples below, direct attacks make use of stylistically marked, emotionally coloured and vulgar words.

(21) *This annoys me*. It's no part of a … to address … nor to make ... Ignorance should be challenged where it's genuine. Where it's faked … it deserves no more response than: *"Get out of my classroom!"* [RDE]
This is so boring that I'm going to let it go after I reiterate *my original constructive* feedback for you. [PWP]
I don't think you've taken the time to read through my argument in good faith. [PWP]
What a hell and *what a dysfunctional* nation-state. [RDE]
Wtf is this shit?! [TSB]

Typically, conflicts and disagreements are indicated by straightforward violations of particular maxims of both universal pragmatic principles. In academic digital discourse the urgency of heated arguments brings along direct attacks accompanied by critical even offensive comments. The speaker puts his face wants first and supresses the use of discursive cooperative and politeness strategies, while aiming at boosting the pragmatic force of his utterance by a range of rhetorical strategies (being repetitive, ironic, sarcastic, exaggerating, etc.) that violate or flout both universal pragmatic principles. In this final subsection, I will briefly discuss irony and sarcasm to illustrate the point emphasizing that these responses are noninformative at the level of what is said but highly informative at the level of what is implicated.

4.2.3 Irony

In the following responses the speakers provided ironic remarks in a sense that what they say is obviously too polite for the occasion. Particular conversational

implicatures can be inferred, such as competitiveness and animosity between the scholars (capitals used as in the original text, emphasis by italics mine):

(22) *Oops, what am I saying*, *I forgot* who I'm talking to. *OF COURSE you're not going to do some research on your own.* [PWP]
I like the part where he says: "They're just people's opinions and some of them are obviously used by political parties or people with political points of view to push." *I wonder how many times CBC has had people such as this bloke here on. He should talk!* [PWP]
The same *desperate tactics* can be observed…. *It would be quite interesting to investigate the neurophysiology of the ideologue mind.* [TSB]

Some responses are made even more sharply and wittily, representing a variety of irony known as sarcasm. The examples show that their point is to highlight annoyance with a situation. Flouting namely the CP maxims of manner and quantity as well as the PP maxims of tact and approbation, sarcasm implies refusal of particular academic methods and dislikes of one's attitudes:

(23) *Maybe* Dr. … isn't dishonest. Maybe he's just *functionally illiterate*. Reading his blog, I get the feeling *he has a lot of trouble understanding his opponents' arguments*. [TSB]
In addition to neurosurgery at …, Dr. … *also* once taught a course in… *wait for it*… medical ethics. [TSB]
Wow. Population genetics is simply the mathematical formulation of evolutionary theory. So apparently understanding of evolution is not even used when attempting to understand evolution. [TSB]
What is wrong with you people? You just don't get it!! Lying in the interest of spreading god's greater truth is ADMIRABLE! … are two of *the most ADMIRABLE humans on the planet!* [TSB]

5 Conclusion

In digital academic discourse a range of discourse strategies is used to maintain smooth interaction and collaboration. The data show that in presenting critical comments the maxims of the CP and the PP are respected and particular positive politeness strategies are used to resolve conflicts and disagreements. Even in the informal setting of web pages in academic digital discourse the typical participant of a scholarly debate chooses expressions that minimally belittle the status of

their opponent and explores strategies aimed at avoiding FTAs. In the heat of an argument, the participants may create potential face threats by disagreeing, making critical comments or even attacking their opponent. A few strategies are used to mitigate face-threatening responses, such as expressing critique by asking questions, making suggestions and inquiries, providing references to similar projects, etc. Dealing with criticism includes resolving conflicts by means of various politeness strategies, such as accepting critical comments, showing partial or initial agreement, apologizing before counterattacking, etc. Unlike formal academic discourse, in academic digital discourse unsolved conflicts, such as direct attacks, occur. At the same time, additional positive or negative attitudes were communicated via implicatures; under the influence of emotions speakers provided ironic or sarcastic statements and used figurative language and exaggerations. Together with obscurity and ambiguity, these rhetorical strategies bluntly violate or flout the CP and the PP maxims.

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