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Analyzing Politeness Strategies in Pakistani Digital Spaces: A Case Study of Localized Foodpanda Customer Reviews

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ABSTRACT

The present qualitative research is an empirical investigation into the pragmatic use of politeness strategies by Pakistani consumers within online review spaces specifically focusing on local service-oriented platform, Foodpanda. The current study is grounded in the notion of Politeness Theory by Brown and Levinson (1987) with special attention paid to their fundamental concept of face-threatening acts (FTAs). Based on their framework, the current study attempts to investigate the use of positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on-record strategy, and off-record indirectness within consumer reviews and complaints written in English, Urdu, and Roman Urdu. Using purposively selected data of about 50 online reviews, the current study applies qualitative discourse analysis for examining the deployment of politeness super strategies according to positive, negative, and mixed sentiments. The results show that the use of positive politeness prevails, constituting about 65% of all reviewed data in all platforms studied. The off-record indirect politeness strategy occurs mostly in code-switched reviews between English and Roman Urdu. Importantly, this dataset reveals how Pakistan-based reviewers use a particular type of hybrid pragmatic register, which mixes the pragmatic conventions of English with the honorifics of Urdu, appeals to collective identity found in Urdu, and the discourses of Islam, thus challenging the assumption of individuality and Universalism associated with Brown and Levinson's model of politeness. There are two main contributions this study makes: a theoretical one – by presenting evidence in favor of cultural calibration of models of politeness; and a practical one – by informing platform localization and customer experience strategies.

Keywords: *Politeness Theory, Brown and Levinson, Face-Threatening Acts, Digital Pragmatics, Pakistani English, Roman Urdu, Online Reviews, Foodpanda*

Introduction

Background of the Study

With the proliferation of service platforms in South Asia, there has been an inherent shift in the way that consumer communication takes place, and this results in the production of a large body of text that not only acts as consumer feedback but also as a source of pragmatic discourse. In the case of Pakistan, service platforms like Foodpanda are well integrated into urban life, especially the city of Lahore, where the

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linguistic environment is influenced by the interaction of three languages: Punjabi, Urdu, and Pakistani English. Through the act of writing reviews, the consumers are actually engaging in various forms of social positioning, identity formation, and relationship management.

The discipline of pragmatics, which is a sub-branch of linguistics, studies the way in which context influences meaning and the ways in which speakers use language to engage in social actions that go beyond the meaning of their utterances. From this perspective, politeness is not merely about being courteous, but is, in fact, an advanced system of strategies for managing each other's social face – the want to be liked, admired and not imposed upon (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The issue of face becomes particularly relevant when it comes to the review community, where participants have to reconcile between complaining, which is face-threatening behavior, and being socially credible as reasonable and polite conversational partner.

Research into politeness in CMC has already revealed that the lack of paralinguistic features in written communication increases the need for using linguistic indicators of politeness (Herring, 1994; Yus, 2011). Recent research into politeness has considered how politeness occurs in online reviews and complaints in the West (Locher, 2010; Graham, 2007); nevertheless, studies on South Asian digital communication, particularly Pakistani CMC, have been scarce. The current study aims to fill the gap in knowledge by exploring how Pakistani customers use politeness strategies in a multilingual digital context including English, Urdu, and Roman Urdu.

Statement of the Problem

Though much has been said on the topic of digital pragmatics in academic literature, little has been done towards investigating the linguistic behaviour of Pakistani consumers in digital review platforms. Politeness Theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) is the most quoted model in pragmatic politeness studies. This theory is based on cross-linguistic data and puts forth universalist propositions concerning the nature of 'face' and face threatening actions. Many scholars operating in collectivist, non-Western settings (Ide, 1989; Watts, 2003; Sifianou, 1992) have challenged these propositions, arguing that 'face work' in collectivist societies is determined by social values that include collectivism, hierarchal deference, and religion, which are overlooked by the initial framework.

More specifically, in the Pakistani setting, phenomena like Urdu-based honorifics, the pragmatic use of religious utterances, and the linguistic diversity of code-switching between English, Urdu, and Roman Urdu add complexity to the issue which cannot be satisfactorily accounted for by any current model. There is, therefore, an urgent need for research aimed at applying the initial theoretical framework to the Pakistani digital consumer review scenario.

Significance of the Study

The current research constitutes a double contribution both to pragmatics and applied linguistics. From the theoretical point of view, it provides empirical support drawn from a non-Western, multilingual context, which confirms some universalist claims and adds complexity to those made in the framework of Brown & Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. Therefore, it contributes to the ongoing academic

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discussion about the cultural adaptations which should be made before using Politeness Theory outside its original contexts. It is shown that the face management in the Pakistani digital environment depends on such factors as collectivism, religious norms of speech and hierarchy, which were not explicitly considered in the original theory.

From the applied perspective, the results of the research have practical value for platform developers, consumer experience specialists and intercultural communication professionals interested in the communicative norms of the Pakistani digital consumers. Since the research highlights the peculiarities of the hybrid register (English pragmatic norms together with honorifics, religious elements and code-switching), which the Pakistani online reviews use, it will contribute to the practice of platform adaptation and consumer communication. Moreover, the current research opens up the new direction in the emerging South Asian digital pragmatics.

Research Questions

The current study will be based on the following research questions:

Which politeness strategies, as described by Brown and Levinson (1987), are most frequently used in online service reviews of Pakistanis on websites such as Foodpanda?

What impact do the cultural and sociolinguistic characteristics of Pakistan – especially those related to the discourse conventions of Lahori communities – have on these politeness strategies?

How does the multilingual character of Pakistani internet discourse, involving the switching of languages like English, Urdu, and Roman Urdu, influence politeness?

Research Objectives

To answer the above research questions, this study intends to:

Categorize the various politeness strategies used by Pakistani customers in public reviews posted on Foodpanda through the Politeness Theory of Brown and Levinson (1987).

Evaluate the culturally unique linguistic practices – such as honorific address, religion, and group identity references – which play a mediating role in politeness practices by Pakistani online consumers.

Investigate the pragmatic roles of code-switching from English, Urdu, and Roman Urdu in consumer reviews, especially in relation to the illocutionary shifts and relational positioning that code-switching conveys.

Explore the relevance of the universalist Politeness Theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) within the South Asian context and for a multilingual and digitally mediated communication situation.

Literature Review

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

Politeness Theory, as formulated by Brown & Levinson (1987), continues to remain the most dominant and extensively referred-to theory of pragmatic politeness in the literature. Starting with Goffman's (1967) idea of face, they theorize that every rational being has two basic face wants – the positive face want to be liked, approved,

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and understood and the negative face want to be autonomous and not imposed upon. An utterance threatening the face want of either the hearer or the speaker is called a face-threatening act (FTA). In order to reduce the effects of an FTA, speakers have the option of choosing from various strategies – bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and withholding.

Brown & Levinson's (1987) claim is that the choice of strategy used is a function of three sociological variables – the social distance (D) between the interactants, the relative power (P) of the hearer over the speaker, and the absolute ranking (R) of the FTA itself. The interesting aspect of this model is that, although based on cross-linguistic data (English, Tamil, and Tzeltal), it claims universality – which has been challenged on cultural lines (Watts, 2003; Ide, 1989).

Critiques and Cultural Adaptations of the Model

An abundant number of literature pieces have contradicted Brown and Levinson's universalistic approach. In particular, Ide (1989) showed that Japanese uses socially constructed politeness in terms of the concept of wakimae (discernment) whereby speakers follow pre-set norms rather than make strategic choices. Furthermore, the scholars researching South Asian linguistics claim that the concept of face in Pakistani and Indian societies is perceived from the perspective of collective identity and not individual one (Sifianou, 1992; Wierzbicka, 1991). In such cases, the face threats can be as effective if they are targeted at families or groups as those targeting individuals and the appeals to the collective identity can serve as positive politeness strategies.

The case of Pakistani English, in particular, is well-known for the development of the new pragmatic variant with the use of Urdu-based discourse markers, preference to elaborate honorifics ("respected sir,""dear brother") and culturally conditioned religious expressions ("InshAllah,""MashAllah") as hedges and face-savers. The following features will prove to be distinctive of Pakistani online reviews.

Politeness in Digital Discourse

Use of politeness theory in CMC and digital discourse has proved to be a fruitful venture since the 1990s. The early literature (Herring, 1994; Yus, 2011) has observed that lack of nonverbal elements in textual communication increases dependence on the use of explicit markers of linguistic politeness. The recent researches by Locher (2010) and Graham (2007) have explored the use of politeness in reviews and complaint forums where the reviewers use hedging, complimenting and appeal for solidarity in order to construct their credibility and positioning in relation to the concerned service provider as well as other readers. In Western cultures, research done on Yelp, TripAdvisor, and Google Reviews shows that negative reviews always contain more sophisticated use of politeness than positive ones because the act of criticism itself is always face-threatening.

Nevertheless, literature in South Asian digital discourse – especially the one concerning Pakistani CMC – still lacks behind considerably. This research thus fulfills an important void in the field by applying Brown and Levinson's framework in conjunction with pragmatic
knowledge of local culture to analyze a corpus of reviews which are normally

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written in code-mixed form of English, Urdu, and Roman Urdu.

Theoretical Framework

The main theoretical framework of this research is Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, implemented in its four superstrategies for the management of FTA. This study utilizes the idea of the im/politeness continuum (Culpeper, 2011) in the light of the strategic use of what he describes as "mock politeness," or irony as a form of complaint. Moreover, facework in collectivist cultures (Ting-Toomey, 1988) is used to analyze culturally specific solidarity strategies, especially the ones that make use of religious references.

On the level of semantics and pragmatics, the study locates itself at the intersection of two complementary analytical frameworks. Semantic analysis helps one comprehend the propositional meaning of the review utterance – what the reviewer actually says about the service. Pragmatics analysis explains the illocutionary force of that utterance, that is, whether it is a complaint, a warning, a compliment or an indirect request for compensation. Two-level analysis of this kind is especially useful when dealing with Roman Urdu review text, where change in script, vocabulary and honorific register indicates the change in illocutionary force of the utterance.

Data Collection

The data set used for this study includes around 50 reviews generated by users from three online platforms - Foodpanda Pakistan (food delivery). Specifically, the focus is made on reviews posted by Lahore residents. The source of data included in-app review sections (if they were publicly available), Google Play and Apple App Store listing of each platform, and publicly available restaurant-level review sections of Foodpanda. As all the data is public and deidentified, there is no need in any ethical approval involving human subjects, yet all the personal identifiers (usernames, profile pictures) were excluded from the examples used in the paper.

Reviews were sampled through purposive sampling in order to have variety in three aspects - language of reviews (English, Urdu script, Roman Urdu), sentiment polarity (positive, negative, mixed), and type of service (food delivery). The final dataset is biased towards negative and mixed reviews due to their greater linguistic complexity.

Analytical Method

This research is based on a qualitative discourse analysis approach that is guided by the politeness strategies of Brown and Levinson (1987). In order to analyze the data, each review was divided into speech act segments, and each speech act segment was categorized into FTA (Face Threatening Act). These FTAs were categorized according to the mitigation strategy used either: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. Furthermore, the sub-strategies that fall under each of these four types were identified as well. For instance, under the umbrella of positive politeness, the sub-strategies of compliments, expression of solidarity, use of in-group identity, and reasons/explanations were included.

Roman Urdu and Urdu reviews were transliterated and translated into English by the author himself, who is a bilingual person proficient in both English and Urdu languages. In fact, he is well versed in Roman Urdu conventions. Special care has

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been taken in translating honorifics, discourse markers, and pragmatic expressions which do not have any exact equivalent in English.

Findings and Discussion

Positive Politeness Strategies

Positive politeness strategies were observed the most in the corpus, accounting for about 65% of the reviews in the corpus. Sub-strategies which featured prominently were: (i) use of honorifics for addressing; (ii) appeal to shared identity and common values; and (iii) use of religion-related terms as hedges.

Use of honorifics was particularly common even in reviews meant for complaints against the service provider. The service providers were often addressed as "dear Foodpanda team,""honorable management," or "bhai sahab" in Roman Urdu, meaning respected brother.

This strategy works pragmatically to mitigate the FTA of criticism by presenting the speaker as a respectful and reasonable speaker. This matches with Brown & Levinson's sub-strategy of "noticing" and "attending to" the hearer's positive face wants; but this strategy takes its local flavor from Urdu honorific conventions, which do not exist in the Western discourse online.

Religious expressions served as a very effective category of positive politeness markers within the corpus under analysis. Religious expressions like ―InshAllah improve karein‖ (Please improve, God willing) or ―Allah aap ko reward dega‖ (May God reward you) were quite common in feedback situations, where they helped to soften imperatives and complaints by turning them into good wishes or community solidarity statements. This is a culture-specific interpretation of Brown and Levinson's sub-strategy of gift giving or concern.

Negative Politeness Strategies

Sub-strategies of negative politeness concerned with the listener's need for independence and avoidance of being imposed upon were most common in reviews where users demanded a refund, replacement, or change in service. The most common negative politeness sub-strategies were identified as hedging, reduction of imposition, and impersonalizing the FTA through systemic attribution of blame, not personal.

Modal verbs ("could,""might,""would"), as well as hedging adverbs ("perhaps","maybe") were extremely common in English-language reviews when expressing a complaint proposition: "The delivery might have been handled a little differently" or "I think there could be some room for improvement in terms of driver communication". In Roman Urdu reviews, the use of pragmatic particle "shayad"(perhaps), together with the use of subjunctive verb forms fulfilled the role of hedging. Such techniques help express a criticism while leaving open ways out for the service provider, in keeping with the negative politeness sub-strategy described by Brown and Levinson as conventional indirectness.

Impersonalization was achieved using the impersonal language structures such as the use of passive voice ("The order was canceled without notification") and nominalization ("There was a failure in delivery coordination") so as to not point any

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finger at those who were supposed to be blamed. This is line with the sub-strategy of impersonalizing and depersonalizing the FTA; this tactic helps both the reviewer and the service provider save face.

Bald On-Record Strategies and Expressive Impoliteness

Explicit FTAs, on the other hand, were less frequent (occurring in roughly 18 percent of all reviews) and very situationally determined. Such FTAs were found in the responses of those consumers who have experienced repetitive failures and delays in getting their refund and where, in the course of previous conversations, the consumer may have tried out positive and indirect FTAs already. Examples like "Total fraud. koi order na kro" and "Driver ne phone hi nahi uthaya" (The driver simply did not answer his phone) are explicit FTAs in which the need for clarity is seen to take precedence over saving face, in keeping with the view of Brown & Levinson that explicit FTAs are used when clarity is essential.

One such important subcategory is, as Culpeper (2011) calls it, "expressive impoliteness"

— an utterance which carries a face threatening act that is intended on purpose in order to warn and reprimand. This technique has been adopted by some of the reviews in the dataset: "Excellent service — assuming you like waiting three hours for cold food" and "Amazing – I have had my rider cancel four times and now Foodpanda says it is my fault! Five stars!". The irony involved in the use of positive evaluation ("excellent," "amazing," "five stars") highlights the contrast between expectations and reality while showing off the reviewer's linguistic skills.

Off-Record Strategies and Multilingual Indirectness

Strategies of off record communication, i.e. when the propositional meaning is left implicit and open to interpretation, occurred in about 22% of the corpus and was especially frequent in reviews where code-switching was involved. An important feature in these strategies was the use of Urdu and Roman Urdu proverbs, rhetorical questions, and narrative series implying disapproval without stating it directly. For example, one reviewer stated, "Pehlay aata

nahi tha, ab bhi nahi aata" (It didn't come before, it still doesn't come now), a paratactic narrative implying the systematic failure of a system through its repetition and contrast across time periods without saying "the service is bad."

Code switching in itself can be used as a pragmatic resource in some cases of review writing. The alternation between English and Roman Urdu, for instance, indicated a transition in the illocutionary force of the utterance, such that the former was used for making formally sounding propositions of complaints, while the latter was used for emotionally laden statements, or ones which expressed in-group solidarity. The observation coincides with what Myers-Scotton suggests in her Markedness Model (1993).

65%

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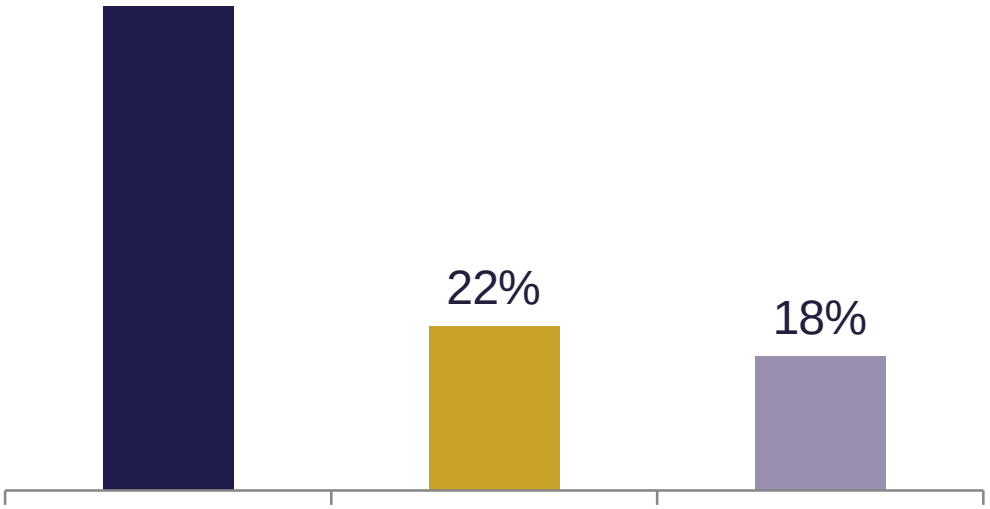

Cultural Mediation and the Limits of Universalism

Consistently across the corpus were found examples of politeness which challenge the universalism of Brown and Levinson's theory. First, the frequency of address honorifics used even to faceless corporations indicates that Pakistani reviewers bring to the realm of online communication the relationship-based principles of politeness from face-to-face interaction, in which the "company" becomes an interlocutor worthy of the same respect as an older acquaintance would be. Second, the use of idiomatic expressions related to religion as hedges
highlights the aspect of collective face – the collective identity of Muslim ummah – which cannot be explained within the individualistic model of Brown and Levinson. Third, the high number of references to family solidarity ("bhai","yaar") in reviews expressing complaints show that politeness in this case is based on collectivist solidarity ideal and not individualistic one, as in the original theory.

Conclusion

The current study shows that the digital platform users in Pakistan employ an advanced set of politeness strategies that are generally in line with those outlined by Brown & Levinson (1987), although they have specific features influenced by local cultural pragmatics, religious norms of discourse, and multilingualism of the Lahori urban community. The predominant strategy used is positive politeness, which is embodied in the use of honorifics, group references, and religion-related speech acts. Negative politeness is achieved through hedging and impersonalizing. Bald on-record and expressive impoliteness are employed when users face a great degree of frustration, and off-record strategies, sometimes facilitated by code-switching, allow reviewers to express criticism in an indirect and deniable way. Two primary contributions can be made by the research to the current literature on the matter. Firstly, from the point of view of pragmatics theory, the work demonstrates that the universalistic approach developed by Brown and Levinson needs to be culturally calibrated when applied to South Asian digital environment, as the notion of face and

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methods of negotiation of face are influenced by collectivist, religious and hierarchical social values underlined insufficiently by the original theory. Secondly, from the point of view of applied linguistics, the results of the study give practical information about communicative expectations of Pakistani digital consumers.

The scope of future research needs to be expanded on the same topic but using an extended corpus and possibly applying corpus linguistic techniques in order to determine how often and where the different politeness strategies are used. Comparative research looking at politeness in reviews written by people living in other Pakistani cities such as Karachi, Islamabad, or Peshawar would provide information about the regional variation in the use of politeness strategies in the digital discourse of Pakistan. Lastly, research that combines the current analysis with interviews would resolve the current methodological problem of discourse analysis.

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