

## POLITENESS IN ONLINE COMMUNICATION: RETAILER-CLIENT INTERACTION

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### Abstract

**Purpose of the study:** The paper aims to unfold politeness in online communication among retailers and clients and debates some ways where cultural values of communication can be taught and thus re-learned.

**Methodology:** The qualitative approach was adopted where discourse analysis method used to review and analyse the updates and comments from Facebook and WhatsApp of conveniently collected data for this study.

**Main Findings:** The study suggest a deterioration of cultural values in communication is at an alarming level among retailers and clients in online communication.

**Applications of this study:** The study will benefit online businesses. Area of studies include business management and communication. Other sub- areas include culture and ethic relations.

**Novelty/Originality of this study:** The study is new to Malaysian business context where multi-racial and multilingual environment play significant roles.

**Keywords:** *Politeness, Online Mediated Communication (OMC), Online Businesses, Malaysia, Multiracial and Multilingual Communication*

### INTRODUCTION

Politeness in communication may be in relation to our face value. Based on past studies, [Hermes \(2016:19\)](#) summarizes the definition of politeness is a “positive face,” a feeling “to feel good” and impoliteness as a “negative face,” “a wish to act unrestrictedly to achieve goals.” [Redmond \(2015:32\)](#) however, has earlier put forth: “the breadth, indirectness, and lack of parsimony (compactness) and conciseness have been identified as weaknesses of face theory.” With this [Hermes \(2016:19\)](#) went on suggesting a working definition where “polite behaviour is generally associated with a desire on the part of the speaker either 1- to make the listener feel good (Lakoff, 1973), heightening the listener’s positive face (Brown & Levinson, 1987), 3-boosting the listener’s negative face.” Impoliteness according to [Hermes \(2016:19\)](#) is therefore: 1- deliberate impoliteness, threatening negative face (Culpeper et al., 2003), 2-unintended and judged as impolite by a listener (Culpeper, 2011), 3- accidental without regard for the listener’s face wants, 4- utterances that usually deemed as polite yet intentions are misunderstood by the listener, or the speaker misapprehends the listener’s face wants, or the felicity conditions of the polite act are not met, which results impoliteness.” [Haugh and Watanabe \(2017:19\)](#) yet proposed that:

“the understanding of how the moral grounds underpinning evaluations of (im)politeness are negotiated in complex social settings which encompasses a complex confluence of norms for evaluation that are simultaneously rooted in the workplace as a community of practice, the varying cultural viewpoints that participants may bring to encounters within many workplaces, and the broader, sometimes competing societal norms that can be invoked by users.”

Thus, impoliteness may exist due to circumstances not the true nature of the speakers or listeners. As [Redmond \(2015:32\)](#) earlier put forth:

“Politeness theory has been criticized for painting people as highly strategic and ignoring impulsiveness, not incorporating people’s consideration of the impact of face-threatening messages to both their own and the other person’s face, and being too culturally biased.”

[Redmond \(2015:3-4\)](#) argued that the concept of face has five facets. Firstly, how we react or project ourselves depends on others. Secondly, we project how we want others to perceive us. Third, situation or context play a role in portrayal of

face. Fourth, face can vary and changes consciousness and by intent. Finally, face is a mirror of behaviours. OMC however, may challenge some of these to some extent as face is hidden.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Politeness is a cultural value which reflects one's cultural intelligence. A well-cultured behaviour is usually associated with parental or environmental exposure. It is an acquired nature. Assessing face-to-face politeness and non-face-to-face interaction demands wider explorations as both are deemed to have different levels of pragmatic understanding. [Brennan and Ohaeri \(1999\)](#) suggested the OMC is de-personalised and has less responsibility, therefore it is less polite. F2F conversation utilizes more words, hedges, and adopts more "explicit and implicit acknowledgments discourse markers and rely on syntactic or intonational means to frame an utterance" ([Brennan & Ohaeri, 1999:6](#)) rather than just typed punctuations or question marks.

Smileys and emoticons in OMC are assumed to form a new language where they may assist to express emotions yet using shortcuts are questionable ([Shortis, 2001](#)). Emphasis is indicated with different font sizes, pauses are suggested with prosodic functions, pseudo-prosodic features create illusion of a spoken text, bullet points portray sentence boundary marking although these may create grammatically confusing and ambiguous relationship in communication ([Shortis, 2001](#)).

[Kujath \(2011:78\)](#) advocated, to examine the OMC is to also study "the quality of their interpersonal relationships." This suggests that outer relationship may also determine or affect the level of politeness and acceptance or even the need for hedges in any online communications. Written messages are "space bound, static and permanent" ([Kujath, 2011:17](#)). "Time lag between production and reception" occurs yet enable "rereading, close analysis" which encourages "development of careful organization and compact expression" with complex structure ([Crystal, 2011:18](#)). Abbreviation use may also be a reason for lack of politeness among online users. [Crystal \(2011:4\)](#) reported in his study finding an average abbreviation usage of "about 3 per message."

The audience of the online communication may also affect the language used. [Samoriski \(2002:273\)](#) suggested adults, children and "people who assert a right to be free of government restriction" may pose possible differentiation in indecency and obscenity of language used. It is the responsibility of the adults to protect the children from contents written by the third group ([Samoriski, 2002](#)). Therefore, self-regulation is important to ensure online communication content is appropriate and well-mannered. It has to be voluntary yet introduction of guideline may greatly be an assistant ([Samoriski, 2002](#)).

## Assessing Online Linguistics

Forensic linguistics is usually prominent in studies related to online linguistic. It is commonly "concerned to identify patterns of criminal interaction" ([Crystal, 2011](#)). Yet to explore online linguistic patterns, the anonymity of demographic background, legal hurdles in obtaining data and broader relevance with detailed description of the data are required ([Crystal, 2011](#)). These are among the issues in conducting forensic linguistics.

## METHODOLOGY

Suggestions for online study include hypothesis testing, punctuation use analysis, spam language analysis, online translation devises, localization in communications, taxonomy and semantic targeting. This is an exploratory study of how politeness in retailer-client online communication is observed. As a pilot study, a discourse between one retailer and one client is analysed. Codes to assess predictions are adopted from [Crystal \(2011\)](#). Many online retailers expect their potential clients to sympathise with the hectic occupation of an online retailer. Yet these potential clients demand immediate attention. This imbalanced equation leads to probable communication disintegration. This sets the research problem.

The research question that steers this study is what are the main communication violations that have caused distraught in retailer-client communications? The research objective is thus to induce the main communication violations that disrupt retailer-client communications strategies.

The term 'retailer-client communication' adopted in this study refers to the retailer-client OMC through Facebook comment functions or WhatsApp. These may either be in-group communication or individual communication between retailer and client. Here, conversations between retailers and clients are explored. The second term is 'output' which

refers to internet technology-based communication. It is “neutral from linguistic theoretical point of view” ([Crystal, 2011:10](#)).

Convenient samplings of online retail dealings in a WhatsApp application communication between a potential client and a retailer were collected. These communications are documented into pdf form to enable analysis. The case study focuses within the hire-purchase communication only. Discourses are mostly in Malay language and between Malays. Demographic backgrounds such as social economic, education or social identity are disregarded to the present study due to such information being unavailable.

The data are from asynchronous chat groups. The delayed time of response may post a certain restrain to the flow of conversation. [Crystal \(2001:12\)](#) defined chat group communication to possess features such as “global, local, restricted or non-restricted and moderated or uncontrolled.”

Commonly, the coding for each communication strategy are data directed. Coding labelling is made and the relationships between each communication strategy are unfolded. [Crystal \(2011\)](#) also noted several legal constraints in assessing online materials; therefore, the anonymous status of such interactions is maintained in the present study. To conduct this internet/online study, some steps were adapted from [Crystal \(2011:15, 151-162\)](#) including:

1. distinguish familiar words of spoken and written language of the users by determining their features and characteristics;
2. notify non-linguistic ideologies of the participants;
3. identify factors interfering with conversational rhythms including emoticons;
4. notify small packets of conversations which are often received in delays and broken sequences thus disrupting speaker-receiver collaborations;
5. voice recorded items require clarity in speech recognitions such as accents, voice quality, speech rate and proper names;
6. acknowledge distinctive written forms, emoticons and neologisms.

In testing hypotheses, [Crystal \(2011: 153-154\)](#) suggested the procedures below which are adapted to this study, particularly codes 2-6:

1. Find a log of instant messaging or chat room exchange
2. Describe the patterns of turn-taking
3. Rate degree of misunderstanding
4. Identify techniques of interactions ; sense of discourse organizations
5. Identify semantic and grammatical strategies: Map semantic threads and grammatical features such as ellipsis or anaphora
6. Notify how exchanges reflect face-to-face conversations: evidences of clauses.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The introduction of the conversation disregards general greetings suggesting a ripple in code 4 where the normal sense of discourse organization is disrupted. This is improved in the second introduction where salaam was given. Unfortunately, this greeting was not reciprocated indicating that the initial offense may be significant to the retailer. Polite address such as ‘tuan’ is then adopted. These are seen in Figure 1.

It is not without hurdles to communicate “effectively and clearly on the internet” and anonymity can lead to changes in “familiar communication satisfaction,” creating differences in how we write and read messages and may be “ambiguous, misleading, or offensive” ([Crystal, 2011:7](#)). [Ernisa \(2013\)](#) found that apologies in short messages services (SMS) among Malay native speakers differ between high risk (formal recipients) and low risk (informal recipient). This shows that non-F2F discourse can be influenced by the status of the speakers.

In Figure 2, a violation of semantic acquisition is committed where semantical understanding relies on interpersonal relationship, similar to [Kujath’s \(2011\)](#) findings. The retailer mentioned that money must be banked-in to ensure the product availability yet then suggested that no money transfer is required to view the product. The client then highlighted the confusion. Code 3 suggested that the misunderstanding is to be rated. [Mak and Lee \(2015\)](#) agreed to this finding that swearing and ridicule do occur in non-F2F communication. [Om Prakash and Rajesh Kumar \(2017\)](#) too concluded that

sociolinguistic theoretical construct has to be reviewed due to structural changes in communication. Thus, future study shall develop a scale of such internet communication misunderstanding.



Figure 1: Greetings



Figure 2: Code 3

Figure 3 shows a delay in time of response possibly due to poor internet reception. However, the client has taken offence, and common turn-taking conversation method (Code 2) has been disrupted. [Crystal \(2011\)](#) supported this finding. The retailer also re-posted earlier messages which was not necessary and had forsaken the requested details. Code 5 is suggested here and potential dispute is predicted.

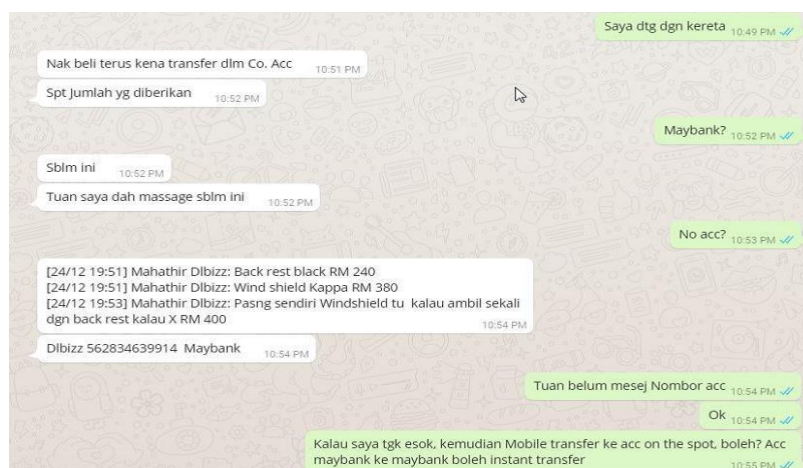


Figure 3: Codes 2 and 5



Figure 4 shows how semantic and pragmatic in conversation are neglected. It also shows the expectation of the retailer upon the client when he accused the client to be ignorant of basic online marketing operating procedure. Assumptions lead to accusation and thus politeness is foreseen to collapse. [Arendholz \(2013\)](#) certified such failure in CMC is bound to promote rude behaviour.

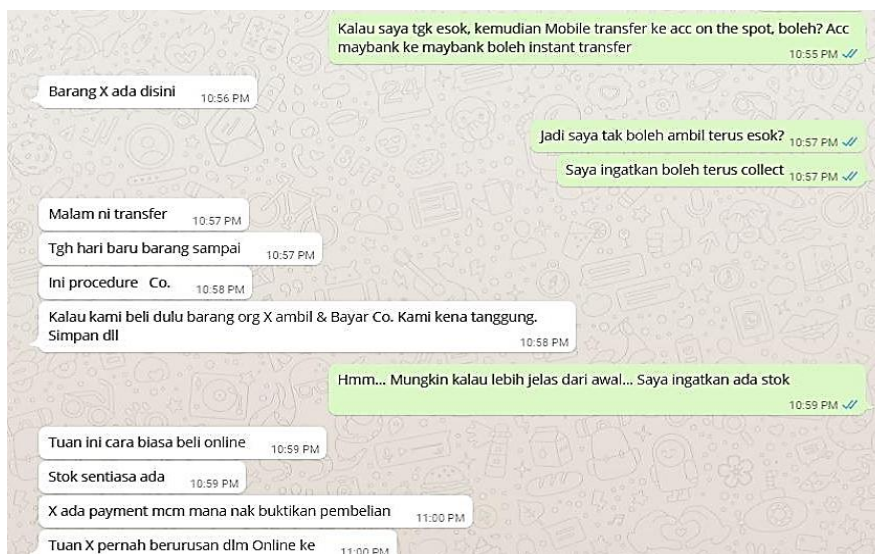


Figure 4: Expectation

In Figure 5, Code 6 may be problematic. Face-to-face conversations are not reflected thus explanation is deemed vital although unnecessary to the client. This further aggravates the frustration in communication. Evidences show the client necessitating a justification to the retailer's unwarranted explanation. This is common in many WhatsApp retailer-client conversations. The conversation ended with an expression of anxiety over a late purchase agreement and impatience over demand for explanation. This may effortlessly lead to another discontentment on the client. Social strata (as seen in [Ernisa \(2013\)](#)) may lead to another stratum in business roles of retailer and purchaser where the retailer demands a higher strand. The final use of good greeting Assalamualaikum (may peace be upon you) may be judged as a brusque final respond as opposed to bidding well greetings.

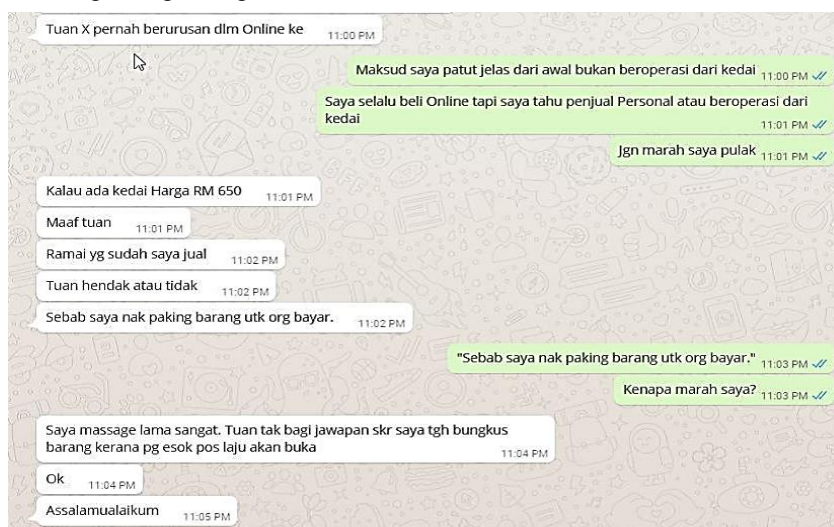


Figure 5: Code 6

In a wider exploration of the data, more information was induced. These findings are presented in Table 1. [Om Prakash and Rajesh Kumar's \(2017\)](#) argument supports most of the findings below. Output 1-5 has politeness values. Code 2 is shown in the form of appreciation remarks and promise in Output 1 and 3. Code 2 in form of appreciations and promises encourages the discourse in a polite and respectful manner. Output 2 which has code 4 tend to cushion the commentary made by suggesting commonality of one's' actions. This too further enable polite interaction to take place even without initial personal acquaintance.

**Table 1:** Data of retailer-customer interaction politeness

Outputs	Codes	Features	Examples	Politeness
1	2	appreciative	Tq Dewa Was teknik ni belum buat lagi	+
2	4	cushioned commentary	Biasanya sangkut tu berkarat dalam gear	+
3	2	promise	Nanti saya print screen kalau ada lagi	+
4	6	address	Cuba abang cari Vulcan forum	+
5	6		Tak pernah bang	+
6	6		Cuba dulu bro (5x)	+/-
7	6		Haha dah 2 botol beli benda ni Bro	+/-
8	6		Professional Bro X blh agak2	+/-
9	6		Professional .....please bro (3x)	-
10	5	sexism	Bkn quality Nora Danish tau	-
11	4	apologetic	Maaf ter emosi lak	+
12	4	suggestion	Cuba dulu	+
13	4		Kalau bukan ini problem dia..masalah lebih mahal mungkin	+/-
14	3	mocking	Haha dah 2 botol beli benda ni Bro Professional Bro X blh agak2	-
15	3	sign of irritation	Masih buat uji kaji lagi apa barang spray dlm dunia dia X buat	-
16	3	cynicism	Ini jawapan paling tepat sekali	-
17	3	watering down a concern	Masalah gier tu mudah jer	-
18	3	anger	WTH (2x)	-
19	3		Professional .....please bro	-
20	3		Don't assume that I am guessing bro	-
21	3		Stupid people go for mechanic...	-

Output 4 and 5 with code 6 functions in the form of polite addresses to the client. Output 6-8 although still functioning as code 6, the politeness value is questionable based on contextual clues. This is mentioned in [Chen and Ng \(2017b\)](#) as how perceived social strata in OMC influences politeness. Some instances may suggest both politeness and cynicism. In this study, the usage of abbreviation *bro* for 'brother' seems to denote cynicism more as opposed to *abang* or *bang* which is 'brother' in Malay. Output 9 is a cynicism yet an effort is made to adhere to politeness, although the level of sincerity is questionable. [Rosner, Winter and Kramer \(2016\)](#) supported this as one impoliteness shall lead to dispute.

Sexism does appear as in output 10 where code 5 is given. Product quality or description is labelled based on gender characteristics is unethical therefore marked as sexism. Output 11 is also code 5 and being apologetic is seen as a form of politeness here. Suggestions were made and code 4 is seen in output 12 and 13.

Politeness has been adhered to until signs of irritation and watering down one's concerns begin to emerge. These are apparent in output 14 to 21 where code 3 is assigned. [Mak and Lee \(2015:122\)](#) implied that this is an indication of "power and identity" retaliation. Mocking a remark or even watering down one's concern can easily irritate and act as a catalyst to failure to adhere to politeness in interaction. The application of such communication traits generates anger as seen in output 18 to 21. This is similar to [Chen and Ng's \(2017a\)](#) findings. Surprisingly, long comments were made and English language was used. [Rapp, Beitelspacher, Dhruv and Hughes \(2013\)](#) mentioned: "social media use positively contributes to brand performance, retailer performance, and consumer-retailer loyalty. Also, the effect of supplier social media usage on retailer social media usage and in turn on customer social media usage is moderated by brand reputation and service ambidexterity."

Surprisingly, when long comments were made, the English language was used as a response to these. Perhaps a change to second language would water down impoliteness. This, however, demands further study.

## CONCLUSION

Expectation is high in retailer-client communication yet is often let down by impoliteness. However, impoliteness may have taken place as a result of the absence of F2F communication. In this case, the client is not aware of the challenges faced by the retailer. On the other hand, the retailer has to avoid any unwarranted emotional expressions.

This exploratory study shows how uncomplicated meaning can collapse in a non-F2F communication. Firstly, turn-taking was disrupted. Then, misunderstanding occurs and this is yet to be rated. Thirdly, the techniques of interactions are deemed at an alarming rate as often leading to misunderstanding and potential collapse. Then, the sense of discourse organizations is breached even at an initial stage. Lastly, semantic strategies are interrupted.

In conclusion, a more detailed study with more discourses shall be carried out to unfold the strength of this exploratory study. To date, more linguistic forensic investigations are adopted on OMC (Maras, 2012). Therefore, the understanding of non-F2F linguistic violations shall assist in overcoming these disturbing medium of communication and assist better in legal matters.

## LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

This study is an exploratory study of a single OMC tread. Thus, findings cannot be generalized. Yet, it enables a wider study to be further carried out with a much more extensive and comprehensive study.

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