GENDER AND POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN FACEBOOK'S CONVERSATIONS AMONG STUDENTS IN UITM KELANTAN

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ABSTRACT
This study consists of three main purposes which are to investigate the language features that are commonly deployed by UiTM Kelantan students for conveying politeness, to identify the similarities of politeness strategies in Facebook's wall posts written by male and female students and also to identify the differences of politeness strategies in Facebook's wall posts written by both female and male students. This study combines both the qualitative and quantitative designs. Samples of this study were 100 male and female students of various Diploma courses in UiTM Kelantan. 100 wall posts from the selected participants' Facebook were collected. Later, the data were analysed by using triangulation technique. The result of this study revealed that gender is not the only factor which affects the application of politeness strategies. In computer mediated communication (CMC), people choose to apply different patterns of language and strategies of politeness based on the context of their conversations.

Keyword: language, gender, politeness strategies, computer mediated communication (CMC)

1. Introduction

Life as a human being is inseparable from communication. One of the most effective ways to communicate is certainly through language and of course in order to ensure the effectiveness of the communication, both speakers and hearers are expected to be polite to each other. Being polite does not merely involve the understanding of language, but factors like social and cultural values of the community are needed to take into account as well. As far as the topic is concerned, many agree that language and gender has always been an interesting issue discussed by many scholars. A great number of previous researchers namely Tanen (1990), Coates (1993) and Hirschman (1994) discussed the differences in language use that occur in male and female speech; the issue of politeness strategies applied by both genders particularly in face-to-face interaction. Lakoff (1975) states that women use more politeness strategies than men because the way they were brought up is different. Women are known for their less assertive ways of talking by using tag questions, empty adjectives, hedges as well as indirect statements compare to men who are trained to speak in active voice or “rough talk”.

In relation to this matter, Facebook is seen to be one of the medium of communication among teenagers today in Malaysia and this phenomenon is believed to remain for as the number of Facebook users increasing every day. Facebook is not only been treated as a tool of communication yet, it helps teens to share their thoughts and opinions within their circle. Today, most university students have seen to make use of Facebook as the intermediary tool for them to spread words to their circle as well as their lecturers using the wall post in Facebook. It is believed to be the latest and most popular social networking site among Malaysian and particularly the Universiti Teknologi Mara Kelantan campus (UiTM) students; both female and male students. Thus, this study is conducted to determine the relationships between gender, and politeness features in Facebook conversations and it includes a better understanding of both male and female UiTM students’ pattern of language. This study might be useful for the other researcher from the other disciplines to conduct research related to the social and psychological development of teenagers based on the students’ Facebook wall posts.
1.2 Aims of the research

The aims of this research are to investigate:

1. The language features that are commonly deployed by both female and male students of UiTM for conveying politeness.
2. The similarities in politeness strategies in Facebook’s wall posts written by female and male students and
3. The differences in politeness strategies in Facebook’s wall posts written by female and male students of UiTM Kelantan campus.

1.3 Research questions

1. What are the language features that are commonly deployed by both female and male students of UiTM Kelantan campus for conveying politeness in Facebook conversations?
2. What are the similarities in politeness strategies in Facebook’s wall posts written by female and male students? And
3. What are the differences in politeness strategies in Facebook’s wall posts written by female and male students of UiTM Kelantan campus?

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study is a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. 100 students from various Diploma courses in UiTM Kelantan aged 18 to 24 are selected to be the participants of the study. These students were chosen as they are the members of selected groups in Facebook namely; AD118 (4B) MACHE, Pauh-pauhku (BM1121E), CS110 Group C <3, BM112 UiTM MACHANG (Intake Disember 2010) and CS110 GROUP A-G 2011.

2.3 Instrumentation

The researcher collected open-ended emerging data to develop themes for the data. In this case, the researcher aimed to investigate the language patterns and the role of gender in relation to politeness strategies in Facebook communication. In order to obtain insights into the role of gender in politeness strategies, the researcher assumed the role of a passive observer during the interactions process among the participants as she is also one of the members in these selected groups. As a passive observer, the researcher did not participate in any of the selected conversations, but she visited the selected groups’ Facebook page and observed the language patterns and the role of gender in relation to politeness strategies in their communication.

2.4 Data collection

The collected data, i.e. the conversations during the observation were subjected to a close textual analysis that examined grammatical structures and semantic patterns. This process enabled the researcher to have a clearer view on the language patterns and the politeness strategies applied by UiTM Kelantan students of different genders on Facebook. Later, this data was coded into a table according to Brown’s and Levinson’s (1987) politeness categories to obtain clearer and deeper understandings on language patterns and how politeness strategies applied by these teenagers in their Facebook conversations.

2.5 Data analyses

The collected data was analyzed following these procedures: data translation and data coding and categorizing. As most of the collected data was written in Bahasa Melayu namely in the standard form of Malay Language or Bahasa Baku, the data was translated first from Bahasa Melayu into English to ensure the accuracy of the translation process. Then, all transcriptions were checked and proofread by an experienced teacher in Bahasa Melayu from a secondary school in the state of Kelantan. Next, the data was coded and classified according to the categories of politeness by Brown’s and Levinson’s (1987). Additionally, the language patterns from both male and female participants were analysed based on Lakoff’s theory. This process was done in order to identify the similarities and differences that occurred in the conversations of different genders. Tables were created to display the frequency of language patterns and the use of politeness strategies in the Facebook’s conversations of the selected participants. In the process of coding, the transcribed discourse was segmented and labeled according to the Brown’s and Levinson’s (1987) Theory of Politeness Strategies and the Theory of Women’s Language as proposed by Lakoff (1975). Finally, at the last
stage of analyzing, this data was analysed in order to identify the intention of the communicators. The use of coding process was to generate a description of categories of themes for analysis (Creswell, 2003).

3. Findings

3.1 Findings of Quantitative Data Analysis

Tables are shown in this section to provide information on the coded and classified data according to Lakoff’s (1975), Bonvillain’s (2002) and Beeching (2012) patterns of language use. In addition to that, politeness strategies based on Brown’s and Levinson’s (1987) theory will also be analysed.

3.2 Frequency Count on the Language Patterns in Facebook’s Conversations of Selected Participants

The data analysis has identified several language patterns used by both male and female participants in their Facebook conversations. The collected data were categorized based on Lakoff’s (1975), Bonvillain’s (2002) and Beeching’s (2012) theory of language and gender which include: the use of super-polite form of language, frequent apology, avoidance of coarse language, use of tag questions, use of honorific markers and indirect requests.

Analysis shows that out of 50 male participants, only 3 or 6% of them tend to use super-polite form of language in their Facebook’s conversations. 7 or 14% of male participants tend to apologize frequently, 16 of the male participants (32%) avoid using coarse language and use honorific markers in their Facebook’s conversations to show politeness. Only 4 or 8% of male participants use tag questions and another 8 who represent 16% of male participants tend to make requests from their friends indirectly in their Facebook’s conversations.

On the other hand, out of 50 female participants, 17 or 34% of them use super-polite form of language and indirect requests in their Facebook’s conversations. 31 or 62% of these female participants use honorific markers and the same numbers of female participants are also found to have the tendency to apologize more in their conversations via Facebook. A majority of 43 or 86% of the female participants avoid the use of coarse language while 41 or 82% of these female participants use tag questions in their Facebook’s conversations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Patterns of Different Genders</th>
<th>Frequency of Usage (Number of Participants)</th>
<th>Percentage of usage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Super-Polite Form Of Language</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent Apology</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance of Coarse Language</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Tag Questions</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Honorific Markers</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect Requests</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3 Frequency Count on the Use of Politeness Strategies in Facebook’s Conversations of Selected Participants

The collected data shows that the selected participants do apply several politeness strategies as proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) in their conversations through Facebook. These politeness strategies include: bald-on record, positive politeness, negative politeness and off record or indirectness.

Table 3.3.1 shows the frequency count on the application of the politeness strategies in Facebook’s conversations of selected participants based on its coding categories.
Table 3.3.1: Frequency Count for Application of Politeness Strategies of Different Genders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Politeness Strategies</th>
<th>Frequency of Usage (Number of Participants)</th>
<th>Percentage of Usage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Bald-On Record</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Positive Politeness</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Negative Politeness</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Off Record( Indirect)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.4 Findings of Qualitative Data Analysis

3.5 A Comparison on the Language Patterns and the Application of Politeness Strategies among Teenagers of Different Genders in Facebook’s Conversations

People from different cultural background may define politeness in a different way which suits their context and settings. According to Lakoff (1975), politeness is developed by societies in order to reduce friction in personal interaction while Sifianou (1992) says politeness is the set of social values which instructs communicators (the people who involve in a particular interaction) to consider each other by satisfying shared expectations. Hence, it can be seen that people practice politeness because there are needs to consider others’ feelings, establish level of mutual comfort and promote rapport (Hill, 1986).

Besides the application of politeness strategies, male and female are also found to be different in terms of language pattern. Lakoff’s theory on women’s language found that women are more polite than men in their speech. Lakoff (1975) proposed that women’s language can be differentiated from men’s by looking into a few aspects such as the use of hedges and tag questions, the avoidance of coarse language through super-polite form such as “Would you mind…”, “…if it is not too much to ask”, “Is it ok if…?” and etc. They also apologize more and prefer using indirect request(s) when asking for help. Furthermore, women tend to use the standard language more than men do. Female generally use speech to develop and maintain relationship as well as to achieve intimacy. Tannen further states that women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy, while men speak and hear a language of status and independence.

The findings from the analysis indicate that there are only a small number of participants meet the criteria of language patterns as suggested by Lakoff (1975). Female participants outnumber male participants in the use of language which depict the features of being soft and polite such as the use of tag questions, use of honorific markers and indirect requests. The use of language in these ways is not only meant to show a person’s background (social, economy, religion and education) but it is also considered to be one of the effective ways to avoid conflict by minimizing the threat to hearers’ positive face as suggested by Lakoff(1975). This finding is definitely parallel with Lakoff’s finding which highlighted those men and women speak differently.

3.5.1 Bald-on record

Bald On-Record politeness strategy refers to the strategy which the speaker has no effort to minimize the threats on the hearer’s face. This type of politeness is often used among people (speakers and hearers) who have known each other very well and it is very task oriented. The tone used is often sound like the speaker is trying to give command to his hearer with no occurrence of opening or closing clause in their use of words. From the analysis, there are a majority of 37 (74%) of male and 36 (72%) of female participants apply this strategy in their Facebook’s conversations. In this case, the selected participants are close to each other as they are friends, course mates or classmates. Hence, it is not surprising that they apply this form of politeness strategy in their conversations. Speakers often skip the preamble part of the conversations and will go straight to the point to achieve the communication goal.

Table 3.5.1 shows examples of the application of bald on-record strategy from male and female participants in the group of AD118 (4B) MACHE in their Facebook’s wall posts.
Table 3.5.1 Examples of Bald On-Record Strategy in Facebook’s Wall Posts: AD118 (4B) MACHE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>M1</th>
<th>F1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender/Age</td>
<td>Male/ 19 years old</td>
<td>Female/ 19 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Form of Conversations</td>
<td>“banyak kerja belum siap weh~help me!!!!”</td>
<td>“bkk email korang skrg,result utk sem dua sedang menunggu..hehehe”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translation</td>
<td>“There are a lot of works yet to be completed ~help me!!!!”</td>
<td>“Open your email now, second semester’s result is waiting…heheheee”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample M1 (male) has no intention to minimize threat on his hearer’s face as there is a great urgency or desperation for the speaker to ask for help or assistance from his hearers. On the contrary, sample F1 (female) is very task oriented in which her main intention is to merely inform the hearers without any attempt to maintain her hearers’ face.

3.5.2 Positive Politeness

Positive politeness strategy seeks to minimize the threat to the hearer’s positive face and to make the hearer feel good (William, 1997). It is mostly used in situations where the audience knows each other fairly well. In the effort to reduce and to avoid conflict, some strategies of positive politeness include statements of friendship, solidarity and compliments are also applied by the speaker. The analysis shows that 21 or 42% of male participants and 43 or 86% of female participants apply this strategy in their Facebook’s conversations.

Table 3.5.2 shows examples of the application of positive politeness strategy from male and female participants in the group of CS 110 Group C in their Facebook’s wall posts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>M8</th>
<th>F8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender/Age</td>
<td>Male/21</td>
<td>Female/22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Form of Conversations</td>
<td>“jom gy rantau panjang!! syok!~”</td>
<td>“jom share jadual,pakat2 masuk group sama kwn2”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translation</td>
<td>“Let’s go to Rantau Panjang!! It must be fascinating!~”</td>
<td>“Let’s share the timetable, let us be in the same group,friends”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Speaker M8 offers his hearers an interesting deal by exaggerating interest in his hearers and his interests which is visiting Rantau Panjang while speaker F8 uses solidarity in-group marker “friends” in her words to show that there is a close relationship between her and her hearers.

3.5.3 Negative Politeness

Negative politeness strategy is normally applied when there is a big social distance among the communicators to emphasize avoidance of imposition on the hearer (Brown and Levinson, 1987). In this strategy, we presume that the speaker will impose authority on the listener but the message will be sent in a nicer way to avoid the act of face threatening toward the listener. As the main motive of this strategy is to impose power and remain autonomous on the speaker in a softer way, the speaker is found to have the tendency to exclude the listener in an activity through various distancing styles such as using apology, being indirect, being pessimistic, minimizing the sense of imposition and using plural nouns.

This study shows that females outnumber males in the application of negative politeness strategy. Out of 50 male participants, there are only 14 or 28% of them apply this strategy in their Facebook’s conversations. For the females, there are a majority of 32 or 64% of them apply negative politeness strategy in their Facebook’s conversations.
Table 3.5.3 Examples of Negative Politeness Strategy in Facebook’s Wall Posts: BM112 UiTM MACHANG (Intake Disember 2010)

Both male and female speakers remain autonomous in the conversations by using questions to direct their hearers to follow their command to avoid face-threatening on their own face as well as to avoid sense of imposition on their hearers.

3.5.4 Off Record (Indirect)

In this strategy, the speakers use indirect language to express his messages. At the same time, speaker will tend to minimize or remove the potential of losing his own or the speaker’s positive face by not imposing power on the speaker.

Table 3.5.4 Examples of Off Record Strategy in Facebook’s Wall Posts: CS110 GROUP A-G2011

Both male and female participants as they score a very minimum percentage in the application of this politeness strategy. Hence, this finding does not meet the arguments produced by previous researchers which claimed that women tend to be indirect than men. In the case of communication through Facebook, both male and female participants prefer to be more direct in sending their messages to ensure the success of the communication process.

4. Discussion

Information from the data analysis has identified several language patterns used by both male and female participants in their conversations through Facebook based on Lakoff’s (1975) theory of women’s language which include: the use of super-polite form of language, frequent apology, avoidance of coarse language, use of tag questions, use of honorific markers and indirect requests.

The frequency of usage of language that shows politeness among female participants is found to be higher than the male’s. This indicates that females are actually more concerned about the importance of being polite. The findings of this study have agreed with Lakoff’s (1974) theory which she proposed that women are more polite than men only a casual context as they were brought up in a different manner (Lakoff, 1975). Women are always taught to be passive and behave as a lady while men are taught to be active and aggressive (Lakoff, 1975). Women are seemed to be more conservative in expressing their language as they try to be in good manners all the time by using super-polite form of language, frequent apology, avoid coarse language, use tag questions, use of honorific markers and make requests indirectly while men are vice versa.

However, in some contexts especially when the purpose of communication is task oriented, both male and female participants still prefer to communicate directly by applying proper politeness strategies namely bald-on record strategy and positive politeness strategy. Regardless of their gender, participants of this study
hardly exhibit the language features that show politeness as proposed by previous researchers. In a task oriented context, the use some language features that show politeness namely tag questions, hedges, frequent apologies and etc. are hardly seen. This shows that the statement from previous researchers which said “women are more polite than men” is not fully applicable in the context of communication in Facebook.

While in term of politeness strategies, data shows that the selected participants have applied several politeness strategies as proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) in their conversations through Facebook. These politeness strategies include: bald-on record, positive politeness, negative politeness and off record or indirectness. Based on the observation, the selected participants, regardless of their gender, prefer using strategies that allow them to convey their messages to the hearer in a direct manner without paying much concern on the issue of politeness.

Majority of male (74%) and female (72%) participants prefer applying bald-on record strategy in their Facebook’s conversations. This strategy is applicable when the speaker has no effort to minimize the threats on the hearer’s face. This type of politeness is often used among people (speakers and hearers) who have known each other very well. As these participants are close to each other, there is no surprise that this strategy outnumber other politeness strategies for the communication in Facebook among teenagers of different gender. Only a very small number of participants are applying off-record strategy. Most of the participants regardless of their gender prefer direct communication through Facebook. It is found that the selected participants tend to make requests and make statement in a direct manner in order to ensure that they can convey their messages in the fastest and most effective way. This shows when there is only 8 male participant and 17 female participants apply off-record strategy in their Facebook wall posts.

These findings have indicated that both male and female teenagers are applying different politeness strategies in order to convey messages effectively in their Facebook wall posts to show the sense politeness whether consciously or subconsciously. Different strategies of politeness are also been used by these teenagers of different gender in their communications through Facebook. Besides gender, language features and politeness strategies which are chosen by the participants are based on the context and the purpose of communication.

4.1 Conclusion

Based on the data analyzed, it shows that there are a variety of language patterns applied by teenagers of different gender when they are communicating through Facebook. Analysis shows that female teenagers outnumber male teenagers in applying language which portraiture politeness features in their Facebook conversations in certain situations. People communicate differently in different context and setting.

In some contexts especially when the purpose of communication is task oriented, both male and female participants still prefer to communicate directly by applying proper politeness strategies namely bald-on record strategy and positive politeness strategy. Regardless of their gender, participants of this study hardly exhibit the language features that show politeness as proposed by previous researchers. In a task oriented context, the use some language features that show politeness namely tag questions, hedges, frequent apologies and etc. are hardly seen. This shows that the statement from previous researchers which said “women are more polite than men” is not fully applicable in the context of communication in Facebook.

For casual conversations, both male and female participants prefer to apply negative politeness strategy in order to minimize the threat on their hearers’ face and also to maintain a good relationship. In this case, female participants score higher frequency in the use of language patterns that represent politeness. Female participants in this study often use tag questions and hedges in order to seek for agreement, to seek for confirmation, to build solidarity, to show sympathy and empathy as well as to improve the relationships between speakers and hearers. Female participants are also found to have the tendency to apologize more and avoid coarse language when communicating in a casual setting.

It can be concluded that only partial of this study has agreed with Lakoff’s (1974) theory of language and gender which suggested that women are more polite than men when they are communicating. In CMC, especially in Facebook, the notion of "women are more polite than men" by previous researchers seems to be no longer suitable in this modern era. This is because there is no face-to-face interaction. This flexibility helps to eliminate the risk of losing face by the communicators. Therefore, any gender regardless male or female can abuse the principle of politeness.
References


