

## A Tentative Study of the Impoliteness Phenomenon in Computer-mediated Communication

### UNE ETUDE EXPERIMENTALE SUR LE PHENOMENE DE L'IMPOLITESSE DANS LA COMMUNICATION MEDIATISEE PAR ORDINATEUR

LU Shuang-shuang<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This article examines the politeness phenomenon in one particular computer-mediated communication (CMC) situation in China: synchronous private on-line chat. With the popularization of the internet, CMC has drawn the attention of many linguists and communication theorists. Some previous studies have compared computer-mediated communication (CMC) with face-to-face communication (FTF); findings reveal that CMC bears some resemblance and displays some differences from FTF communication in terms of the communication characteristics and linguistic features. Yet the politeness strategies have not received much attention in CMC. The present study aims to see whether the politeness principles based on FTF communication can be applied to CMC. The study finds that traditional politeness principles and maxims based on FTF are often violated and readapted in synchronous on-line chat; but instead of hindering the on-line communication, the violation and adaptation are found to fulfill different social and interpersonal functions in CMC, including fostering solidarity between the participants, venting one's emotions, improving the efficiency of communication etc..

**Key words:** politeness; computer-mediated communication; interpersonal function; social function; QQ.

**Résumé:** Cet article examine le phénomène de politesse dans une situation particulière de communication médiatisée par ordinateur (CMO) en Chine: le chat privé instantané en ligne. Avec la popularisation de l'Internet, la CMO a attiré l'attention de beaucoup de linguistes et des théoriciens de la communication. Plusieurs études antérieures ont comparé la communication médiatisée par ordinateur (CMO) avec la communication en face-à-face (FàF), dont les conclusions révèlent que le CMO

---

<sup>1</sup> MA of Beijing Foreign Studies University, China.  
E-mail: lushuangshuang@live.cn

\* Received 15 September 2009; accepted 7 January 2010

montre une certaine ressemblance et affiche certaines différences par rapport à la communication FàF en termes de caractéristiques de communication et des caractéristiques linguistiques. Pourtant, les stratégies de politesse n'ont pas reçu beaucoup d'attention dans la CMO. La présente étude vise à déterminer si les principes de politesse basés sur la communication FàF peuvent être appliqués à la CMO. L'étude conclut que les principes de politesse et les maximes traditionnelles fondés sur la communication FàF sont souvent enfreints et réadaptés au chat instantané en ligne, mais au lieu d'entraver la communication en ligne, la violation et l'adaptation semblent pouvoir remplir de différentes fonctions sociales et interpersonnelles dans la CMO, y compris la solidarité encouragée entre les participants, le déchargement des émotions, l'amélioration de l'efficacité de la communication etc.

**Mots-Clés:** politesse; communication médiatisée par ordinateur; fonction interpersonnelle; fonction sociale; QQ

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has penetrated into many peoples' daily lives. The Internet is no longer merely a useful means for information and entertainment; it has become an important venue for many people to establish and foster interpersonal and social relationships. Recent studies concerning the capability of the Internet to establish and maintain interpersonal and social relationships report that the Internet facilitates social communication and increases interpersonal solidarity, although it reduces nonverbal cues existing in face-to-face communication (FTF) (Duthler, 2006).

This increasing communicative ability of the Internet has drawn the attention of many linguists and communication theorists to the communication strategies employed in CMC. Pintel & Pittam (1997) examine the interaction management strategies adopted by the participants in IRC (Internet Real Chat) during the opening and closing phases of the interaction to develop interpersonal and social relationships. They explore various ways which participants employ to initiate and close interactions with others on IRC and find that the interaction management strategies in opening and closing phases in IRC bear some resemblance to FTF communication in terms of the general functions the strategies serve. But the content, structure and ordering of the strategies display some differences from those in FTF communication. Herring (1999) probes into the communication strategies in CMC in an attempt to explain the paradoxical relation between incoherent interaction in CMC and the increasing popularity of CMC. Her findings reveal a high degree of disrupted adjacency, overlapping exchanges, and topic decay in CMC situations, which are supposed to hinder the development of communication. Yet according to her, users are capable of employing adaptive turn-taking strategies to overcome interactional limitations of CMC systems and some disjointed effects in CMC situations in fact make the on-line communication be carried out in a more entertaining way.

However, one of the most important aspects in communication strategies—politeness strategies has not received much attention in CMC with only a few exceptions. Although Pintel & Pittam's research (1997) focuses on phatic communication which involves politeness, they do not pay particular attention to politeness itself in CMC. Among the a few exceptions which explored the politeness phenomenon in CMC, consistency was achieved in terms of the tendency of impoliteness in CMC (Lin, 2003; Su & Wang, 2006; Wang & Huang, 2007). Lin (2003), for instance, points out that phatic communication expressions are rarely found in CMC and the Tact Maxim of Politeness Principle are often undermined in CMC situations. Su and Wang (2006) hold that Politeness Principle is frequently flouted by participants in CMC for the purpose of speeding up the process of information exchange and making the communication more efficient. Wang & Huang (2007) also claim that in most cases participants in CMC are more likely to use comparatively impolite ways in communication in comparison with face-to-face

communication. So one question that is worth people's attention is how can communication through CMC be effective and powerful in fostering social and interpersonal relationships without proper politeness strategies? Or does the impoliteness in CMC in fact facilitate and promote participants' social and interpersonal communication?

The present study is conducted to examine the impolite behaviors occurring in CMC. It is aimed to find how they violate or undermine the existing politeness maxims based on face-to-face communication and explore what motivates the participants to conduct impolite communicative behaviors, what effects those impolite conducts achieve and what communicative functions they perform, so as to see whether impoliteness in CMC hinder or facilitate the interpersonal and social communication.

## 2. POLITENESS THEORY

One of the most influential theories concerning politeness was initially proposed by Geoffrey Leech (1983). According to Leech, politeness is a "relationship" between "self and other" (1983, p.131). He postulates six maxims of politeness, which are supposed to be followed by interactants to conduct politeness behaviors: "*tact maxim*", which is to "minimize cost to other" and "maximize benefit to other"; "*generosity maxim*", to "minimize benefit to self" and "maximize cost to self"; "*approbation maxim*", to "minimize dispraise of other" and "maximize praise of other"; "*modesty maxim*", to "minimize praise of self" and "maximize dispraise of self"; "*agreement maxim*", to "minimize disagreement between self and other" and "maximize agreement between self and other"; "*sympathy maxim*", to "minimize antipathy between self and other" and "maximize sympathy between self and other" (p.132).

Following Leech and other politeness theorists, Gu (1992) comes up with a politeness theory applicable to Chinese culture. He proposes five maxims of politeness that are particularly featuring Chinese culture.

Firstly, "貶己尊人準則" (*the Self-denigration Maxim*). This maxim is similar to Leech's *Approbation Maxim* and *Modesty Maxim*. Gu points out that Chinese people tend to denigrate their own ability and achievement and compliment others' ability and achievement, so as to show their politeness and respect for other people.

Secondly, "稱呼準則" (*Address Maxim*). Gu claims that in China, different addressing terms reflect different degrees of politeness. Addressing terms are determined by a configuration of social variables as age, profession, social status and so on. For instance, the commonly-used addressing term for a student to address his/her teacher in China is: the teacher's family name + teacher, to show student's respect and deference for the teacher.

Thirdly, "文雅準則" (*Elegance Maxim*). In Gu's point of view, Chinese people regard elegant words as polite behaviors while vulgar words or rude expressions as impolite behaviors. There are two sub-maxims under this maxim: use more elegant expressions, fewer vulgar expressions; use more indirect expressions, fewer direct expressions.

Fourthly, "求同準則" (*Agreement Maxim*). This maxim corresponds with Leech's (1983) *Agreement Maxim*, but Gu's maxim incorporates the face theory proposed by Brown and Levinson's (1987). According to Gu, Chinese people resort to the *Agreement Maxim* to minimize the face-threatening effects. For example, when a Chinese person has to criticize others or raise his/her different opinions, both of which are supposed to be face-threatening, he/she will probably begin with some positive points about the hearer or express his/her agreement or appreciation before the face-threatening move.

Finally, "德，言，行準則" (*Maxim of Virtue, Words and Deeds*). This maxim is a combination of Leech's (1983) *Tact Maxim* and *Generosity Maxim* with some modifications. Gu argues that Leech's (1983) *Tact Maxim* and *Generosity Maxim* should be viewed from two levels, that is, the motivation level and the expression level. Thus the two maxims can be interpreted as follows: to minimize cost to other

and maximize benefit to other at the motivation level; to minimize cost to self and maximize the benefit to self at the expression level.

Since cultural variation influences the conception and content of politeness and the current study is conducted in Chinese culture about Chinese language, Gu's (1992) politeness theory is adopted as the theory framework of the study. The scope of the present study is limited to the synchronous private on-line chat through one particular medium in CMC: QQ. Such focus is necessary in that studies have shown that public and private chats, synchronous and asynchronous on-line chat exhibit great differences in many aspects, including pragmatic expressions and functions (Crystal, 2001).

### 3. Method

The data of the present study were collected through one particular medium in CMC: QQ, which is a popular chat tool among young people in China. 15 native Chinese provided chat record on QQ for the present research. They are the author's old classmates, friends, and relatives, aged from 12 to 28. They were informed to provide their on-line chat texts which were automatically recorded by the chat tool and were also asked to provide the related information about the conversation partners and the conversation itself, such as the identity of the participants, their relationships with the participants, and the main purpose of their chatting. They were asked to send the chat records to the author after the consent of the other interactant was gained. All together 56 pieces of conversation samples were collected, ranging in length from a few lines to several pages.

The collected conversation samples were then closely analyzed and nine conversation samples were selected as examples to illustrate the impoliteness phenomena in QQ communication, using the method of conversation analysis. The conversation samples in the examples were intact, only with the nicknames of the conversation participants replaced by symbols at the participants' request. Further on-line interviews were conducted to 1) elicit the participants' motivation and explanation of their impolite behavior during QQ chatting; 2) check the researcher's understanding and interpretation of their communication behaviors. Presented below is a list of translation symbols adapted from Sun (2006), whose translation codes are based on Li and Thomson (1981):

ASP	aspect particle
CLS	classifier
DU	durative aspect
INTJ	interjection
MPT	mood particle
NEG	negation
PT	particle
Q	question tag
SFP	sentence final particle

### 4. Results and discussion

The collected data of the current study do reveal a high degree of impoliteness occurrence in QQ, which conforms the results of previous researches in this field (Lin, 2003; Su & Wang, 2006; Wang & Huang, 2007). In this section I present various linguistic expressions of impoliteness phenomena occurring in QQ conversations and analyze how the expressions violate or adapt the *Politeness Maxims* proposed by Gu (1992). A tentative explanation of the social and interpersonal functions of those linguistic expressions is also provided. The present study primarily probes into Gu's first four maxims in that no example involving the last maxim is found in the collected data.

#### 4.1 “貶己尊人準則” (the Self-denigration Maxim)

Analysis of the collected data suggests that the “貶己尊人準則” (the Self-denigration Maxim) is often undermined in QQ situations, as is illustrated in example 1, example 2 and example 3.

##### Example 1

This conversation takes place between two friends. A is a college student; B is working in a school. A is female and B is male.

A 22:19:21  
你的電腦技術很牛嘛  
ni de dian nao ji shu hen niu ma  
You PT computer skill very ox SFP  
You are so good at computer

B 22:20:07  
你才知道啊  
ni cai zhi dao a  
You just know SFP  
Yes, isn't it  
A 22:22:06

◊◊◊◊◊(Chinese ellipsis; here indicating A didn't know how to describe B in terms of his arrogance; this is elicited from the interview with A).

A 22:22:18  
現在的年輕人怎麼都這樣!  
xian zai de nian qing ren zen men dou zhe yang!  
Now PT young people why all this!  
Why are young people nowadays all like this!

B 22:22:36  
HOHO (not standard *pinyin*, participant's creative use of *pinyin* as an interjection)  
我在這方面是公認的好不好  
wo zai zhe fang mian shi gong ren de hao bu hao  
INTJ I at this aspect am public know PT good no good  
Everyone knows I'm good at this.

A 22:23:10  
行了你牛!  
Xing le ni niu!  
Good PT you Ox  
All right, you are excellent!

B 22:23:31  
[呲牙] (the brackets here indicate the content inside are emoticons originally, which were transferred to words automatically by QQ system when being recorded)  
[zi ya]  
[grin teeth]  
[grin]

B 22:23:56

這個周末幹嘛呢你  
Zhe ge zhou mo gan ma ne ni  
This CLS weekend do Q PT you  
What are you going to do on this weekend

A 22: 24: 12

不知道，有個同學要過來  
Bu zhi dao, you ge tong xue yao guo lai  
NEG know have CLS classmate ASP come  
I'm not sure; one of my classmates may come to see me

As can be seen from turn one in the above example, A was complimenting B's computer skill; according to the “*貶己尊人* 准則” (*the Self-denigration Maxim*), B was supposed to respond with some modest expressions in a Chinese way, like “哪里哪里” (not so good) or “一般啦” (just so so) or “還可以吧” (its just OK). But B's response in turn Two didn't show any modesty at all; on the contrary, B was showing off his ability in computer! After A's complaint of B's loss of sense of modesty in turn Three, B again boasted about his computer ability in turn Four. This kind of conversation does not occur quite often in face-to-face circumstances, but is quite frequently spotted in CMC situations as is illustrated in the collected data. Example 2 is another instance of this kind.

## Example 2

E and F were high school classmates. Both of them are in their last year of college life. Both of them are male and they are in different cities. The conversation took place after E heard that F had got an offer from *fangtai* company.

01 E 20:17:56

恭 喜 ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! !  
Gong xi ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! !  
Congratulation ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! !  
Congratulations ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! !

02 F 20:18:17

哈哈，預料的事情  
Ha ha yu liao de shi qing  
Haha, expect PT thing  
Haha, I know it

03 F20:18:21

實力啊  
Shi li a  
Solid strength SFP  
I deserve it

04 E 20:18:25

倒  
Dao  
Faint  
Faint

As can be seen, both examples presented above violated the politeness principle by self-praising when they were supposed to be modesty. Such violation is supposed to leave the bad impression of the

boaster, but interviews with the participants to whom these impolite expressions were addressed revealed that such boasting expressions did not arouse negative feelings towards the boaster; rather, they believed it was a humorous expression which they encountered quite often in CMC situations and they also stated that such expressions in fact indicated the intimate relation between the interactants. Interviews with the speakers who uttered those rude expressions also revealed that the speakers' motivation was to create a sense of humor in the communication so as to make the communicating process more fun and enjoyable and at the same time draw the distance between the interactants. The following example is an instance of the violation of “貶己尊人準則” (*the Self-denigration Maxim*) by superficially despising others.

### Example 3

G and H were high school classmates; G is now studying in the postgraduate program of a university and H is working in a local factory. Both of them are male.

G13:58:32

我打算去學車

Wo da suan qu xue che

I plan go learn car

I'm going to learn driving cars.

H13: 59: 02

就你? 小樣! 能學會麼

Jiu ni? Xiao yang! Neng xue hui me

Just you? Small appearance can learn SFP

You? Look at you! I doubt your ability

G 13: 59: 22

滾!

Gun!

Roll!

Out!

H14:12:02

哈哈

Haha

Haha

H 14:12:58

什麼時候學

Shen me shi hou xue

What time learn

When to learn

G 14:13:05

下個月

Xia ge yue

Below CLS month

Next month

H 14:13:28

累死你

Lei si ni

Tired dead you  
That must be tired

G14:13:55

是 啊

Shi a

yes SFP

Exactly

This example also illustrates the violation of “*貶己尊人準則*” (*the Self-denigration Maxim*) in QQ. H's response in turn Two obviously offended G by denigrating G's ability. But H's impolite words didn't prevent the conversation going on and G seemed quite tolerant with H and didn't take H's words seriously, otherwise he would certainly end the conversation immediately. The on-line interview with G showed that H's words did not hurt him since he knew that H was joking around because what he said was obviously unacceptable; but the fact that H said those words implied that he really took G as a close friend. G also expressed that “that is the attraction of the Internet; people can tease each other and have fun and their relationship fostered”. Also, the interview with H revealed that H was saying those offending words only to amuse and tease G without any malicious intent. He believed that such a teasing way of communication fit in CMC situations and was advantageous in forming intimate relationships; serious talk in CMC situations on the contrary created distance.

The above three examples suggest that “*貶己尊人準則*” (*the Self-denigration Maxim*) is often challenged in QQ situations. Instead of weakening the communication ability, such violation in CMC creates intimacy and enhances the solidarity between the participants.

#### 4.2 “*稱呼準則*” (*the Address Maxim*)

In face-to-face communication, addressing terms play an important role in social and interpersonal relationship. It seems quite impolite if you don't greet someone when you see him/her; and greeting often involves choosing the proper addressing terms. Addressing term in China is really a complex system (Gu, 1992). However, the addressing terms seem quite simplified in QQ communication. Two forms of addressing appear most frequently in the analyzed data: no addressing terms and addressing by nicknames.

#### Example 4

I and J are colleagues. I am male and J is female.

01 I 19:53:23

[微笑] (the function of brackets here is the same with example1, indicating the content in the brackets is originally emoticon)

[wei xiao]

[smile]

[smile]

02 J 19:53:32

[呲 牙]

[zi ya]

[grin teeth]

[grin]

I19:54:28

在 幹 什 麼 ?

Zai gan shen me ?

Du do what?  
What are you doing?

J19:54:37

聊天

Liao tian

Chatting

Chatting

### **Example 5**

K and L were college roommates. They are now working in different cities. Both are male.

01 K 21:01:01

大鍋

Da guo

nickname

Big pot

02 L21:01:29

四顛

Si dian

Nickname

Four craziness

03 K 21:02:21

聽說你現在肥的跳進海裡能引起海嘯了

Tingshuo ni xian zai fei de tiao jin hai li neng yin qi hai xiao le

Listen speak you now fat jump into sea can cause tsunami SFP

It is said that you are now fat enough to cause a tsunami if you jump into the sea

04 L21:02:34

誰說的??

Shui shuo de

Who say SFP?

Who said that?

### **Example 6**

M is a primary school student in his sixth year. N is his English teacher. M is male and N is female.

01 M 19:30:00

在嗎

Zai ma

There Q

Are you there

02 N19:30:05

在

Zai

There

yes

03 M 19:30:14

在幹什麼啊

Zai gan shen me a

DU do what Q  
What are you doing

04 N 19:30:25  
剛才出去了  
Gang cai chu qu le  
Just out go ASP  
I went out just now

As can be seen from the above examples, participants prefer to use nicknames as the addressing terms or simply skipping the addressing procedure in QQ situations, which conforms Lin's (2003) finding that phatic expressions rarely occur in CMC situations. Participants in example 4 greeted each other by emoticons; example 5 began the conversation by nicknames and example 6 started with a direct question "are you there" instead of greeting the participant. It has to be noted that example 7 was a conversation between a teacher and a student, which in face-to-face encounters, usually involves addressing terms that carry respect for the teacher. Interviewing with N reveals that students use more formal words when encountering her in face-to-face situations, greeting her as "Miss Xu" or "Xu *laoshi*". But they often don't greet her as "Miss Xu" or "Xu *laoshi*" in QQ chat. N feels that students are more likely to treat her as a friend in QQ situations and it really helps to foster the relationship with her students. One possible explanation for this is that the Internet provides participants with a channel in which people can get rid of social differences and communicate with an equal position; as pointed out by Lin (2003), the Internet culture advocates a kind of democratic communication; regardless of the participants' gender, age, profession and social status, they all use the same variety of language codes in communication.

#### 4.3 “文雅準則” (the Refinement Maxim)

“文雅準則” (*the Refinement Maxim*) in face-to-face conversations requires participants to use more refined words, fewer vulgar words; and use more indirect expressions, fewer direct expressions. Analysis of the collected data shows that this maxim is frequently violated in QQ communication.

#### Example 7

N and O were college classmates, N is now working in a local primary school as an English teacher and O is working in a junior high school in the suburb of a city. Both are female.

01 O19:27:03  
你去哪個學校知道了啊?  
Ni qu na ge xue xiao zhi dao le a  
You go which CLS school know ASP SFP?  
You know which school you will go to?

N19:27:30  
暈死早知道拉都上班兩個月了  
Yun si zao zhi dao la dou shang ban liang ge yue le  
Faint dead early know PT all work two CLS month ASP  
Faint I've known it a long time ago. I've already worked for two months

O19:27:48  
挖塞那你混的如何啊  
Wa sai na ni hun de ru he a  
INTJ there you do PT how SFP  
Wa how were things going

N19:28:10

NND 教室裡什麼破設備都沒的  
nainaide jiao shi li shen me po she bei dou mei de  
grandma's vagina Classroom inside what break equipment all none PT  
Fuck there's no equipment available in the classroom at all  
以後上課都用我手寫的  
yi hou shang ke dou yong wo shou xie de  
later teach all use I hand write SFP  
I have to write everything on the blackboard

N 19:28:54

以後就每天吃粉筆灰了NND  
Yi hou jiu mei tian chi fen bi hui le nainaide  
Later just everyday eat chalk powder ASP grandma's vagina  
I will be filled up with chalk powder everyday from now on fuck

O19:29:17

哎鄉村教師的日子  
Ai xiang cun jiao shi de ri zi  
INTJ country teacher PT day  
Oh the days of a country teacher

N19: 29: 49

那寫毛孩都跟猴似的,MD,難關四了  
Na xie mao hai dou gen hou si de, made, nan guan si le  
That write hair child all and monkey like, mother's vagina, difficult close four SFP  
Those little children are like monkeys, fuck, difficult to control

N19: 29: 56

難管死了  
Nan guan si le  
Difficult control dead SFP  
Difficult to control

O19: 30: 07

看來很辛苦啊  
Kan lai hen xin ku a  
Look very tired SFP  
You seem to be very tired

It has to be noted that the initials NND in turn 4 is short for “奶奶的” (*nainaide*), a taboo phrase in Chinese; similarly, the initials MD in turn 7 is short for “妈的” (*made*), also an obscene phrase usually employed in situations like quarrelling or cursing. The corresponding English words may be “grandma's vagina” and “mother's vagina”. Such taboo words are not quite often uttered by Chinese in face-to-face conversations, even rarely by females, because such utterances are impolite and not elegant and devalue the speaker's face; but they appeared commonly in QQ conversations. One of the reasons gained from the follow-up interviews is that communication through the Internet reduces non-verbal cues, which makes it easier for people to utter obscene words. Furthermore, the vulgar expressions are often in the form of *pinyin* initials. The on-line interview with the speaker revealed that she believed typing out the initials of *pinyin* without uttering the sound realizations lessened the negative effect of those taboo words on the hearer and saved the speaker's own face. The interview with the hearer showed that she did not feel being offended by the speaker's obscene expressions, especially when they were presented in initials. Obscene expressions seem to be used to let out the participant's negative emotions without causing the

interactant offensive feelings and losing the speaker's face.

Another situation that undermines “文雅準則” (*the Refinement Maxim*) is the frequent use of direct expressions instead of indirect implications in QQ conversations.

### **Example 8**

P is working in a translation company. Q is a college student. They have previously cooperated several times. P is male and Q is female.

01 P 21:06:23

在 啊

Zai a

Stay Q

Are you there

P 21:06:30

找 你

Zhao ni

Look for you

I need you

Q 21:06:38

什 麼 事

Shen me shi

What matter

What

P21:06:55

翻 譯 下 這 段 文 章

Fan yi xia zhe duan wen zhang

Translate under this CLS passage

Translate this passage

Q21:07:09

我 沒 時 間 啊

Wo mei shi jian a

I NEG time SFP

I don't have time

P21:07:50

行

xing

OK

OK.

The above conversation began with P's direct expression of the need of Q's help. Instead of asking Q's opinion or will, P directly threw out the request in the form of a command “translate this passage”. On the other hand, Q's reply was also impolite in that it was a direct refusal without explanations. This way of asking for a request and declining a request is quite impolite in a face-to-face conversation and is avoided if possible. But participants in the QQ situations seem to be more tolerant with such rude behaviors as the analyzed data illustrated. P's answer from the interview revealed that he did not intend to command Q; the reason that his words were put in a command form was to get the communication clear and efficient; and Q's direct reject did not upset him since he believed it was an efficient way. Q's

respond in the follow-up interviews showed that she did not feel being commanded and she understood that being direct saved both people's time. Therefore, the use of direct expressions seems more efficient, which is appreciated in the CMC environment; when someone breaks the maxim of politeness, the other participant will assume that he/she is doing so for the sake of efficiency and thus forgive his/her rude behavior.

#### **4.4 “求同準則” (the Agreement Maxim)**

It is assumed that participants in CMC are more likely to have conflict ideas since CMC excludes various nonverbal cues and thus “impersonal” (Walther & Park, 2002, p.532, cited in Dulther, 2006). Analysis of the collected data provides evidence for this claim but suggests that CMC has its own channel to reduce the impoliteness effect of the conflict expression.

#### **Example 9**

S and T are colleagues. S is female and T is male.

01 S20:15:23

幹 啥 呢

Gan sha ne

Do Q SFP

What are you doing

T 20:16:05

電 影

Dian ying

Movie

Movie

S20:16:45

什 麼 電 影

Shen me dian ying

What movie

Which movie

T 20:17:29

韓 國 的

Han guo de

Korea PT

Korean movie

S 20:18:04

韓 國 的 電 影 基 本 上 是 垃 圾

Han guo de dian ying ji ben shang shi la ji

Korea PT movie basic up be rubbish

Korean movies are mostly rubbish

T 20: 18:48

汗 你 看 過 多 少 韓 國 電 影 啊

Han ni kan guo duo shao han guo dian ying a

Sweat you look ASP much less korea movie Q

Sweat how many Korean movies have you watched

07 T 20:19:04

有很多拍的不錯的  
You hen duo pai de bu cuo de  
Have very many pat PT NEG wrong SFP  
There are many good ones

08 S 20:19:56  
恩我就是覺得韓劇比較好看電影不怎的  
En wo jiu shi jue de han ju bi jiao hao kan dian ying bu zen de  
INTJ I just think korea TV compare good look movie NEG how SFP  
Oh I mean I think Korean TV series are good but Korean movies are so so

09 S 20:20:34  
可能是我看的比較少的緣故吧呵呵  
Ke neng shi wo kan de bi jiao shao de yuan gu ba hehe  
MPT be I look PT compare less PT reason SFP hehe  
Maybe because I don't watch a lot movies

Obviously, S in turn five offended N by directly expressing her different opinions towards Korean movies, which provides evidence for the claim that participants are more likely encounter conflicting ideas through CMC (Walther & Park, 2002, cited in Dulther, 2006). But on the other hand, precisely because CMC excludes those nonverbal cues, participants can more carefully edit and modify their previous “utterances” to reduce the negative effect caused by the impolite expressions, which according to Dulther, “advantages communicators” due to the “filtering of nonverbal cues” (2006, p.2). More specifically, he expressed as the following:

Communicators are strategically enabled to manipulate their identity, time the transmission of their messages and plan, organize, and edit their communication in pursuit of relational goals. Such strategic control in CMC can facilitate negotiation, relationship development and social task (ibid.).

As in the above example, S herself must have noticed her offensive expression and carefully modified her opinion by choosing more indirect words and expressions in turn eight; worrying that be not adequate, she further negates her original point of view by adding the reason that may have misled her to the biased opinion. In this way, she may have reduced the negative effect of conflicting with the other participant and maintained their relationship.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the collected conversations in QQ situations and the follow-up interviews, several observations can be made. First, the findings of the current study do reveal a relatively high degree of impoliteness in QQ situations. Several impolite cases occurring frequently in CMC do not often appear in FTF communication. The findings suggest that relatively impolite communicative ways are preferred in CMC situations. But although this study does not discuss the polite behaviors in CMC, it does not mean that all the communication is carried out in impolite ways and that *Politeness Maxims* based on FTF communication are not applicable in CMC at all. Second, analysis of the impolite conversations in QQ reveals that instead of weakening the communicative effect, various impolite conducts in QQ do perform certain interpersonal and social functions in communication, which is similar to FTF communication in general, but reveals some characteristics of its own in particular, due to the cue-limited characteristic of the Internet system. Specifically, impolite conducts in QQ situations create intimacy and humor between interactants and thus fulfill the function of developing and maintaining interpersonal solidarity between participants; impolite communications in QQ create a democratic communicative environment where social differences lose their power in influencing communication.; impolite expressions also perform the function of communicating social-emotional content and the cue-limited characteristic of the Internet system enables participants to vent their negative emotions

without causing impolite impressions and losing their face; impolite communications are also employed for the purpose of speeding up the process of information exchange so as to save both participants' time and improve the communication efficiency; some impoliteness may incur the danger of hindering the development of interpersonal relationships, but collected data reveal that participants have developed the ability to employ adaptive strategies to organize and edit communication expressions so as to maintain and develop positive relationships. In short, various impolite phenomena analyzed in QQ situations do reveal that impoliteness in CMC fulfills certain interpersonal and social goals in communication and thus contributes to the increasing communicative ability of CMC.

In conclusion, the current research examines the impoliteness phenomena in the synchronous private on-line chat situation mediated by QQ. It provides some insights into how the politeness principles grounded in face-to-face communication are violated or undermined in CMC situations and how these violations and adaptations serve to obtain certain social and interpersonal goals. Such descriptive exploration and analysis of the politeness phenomena in CMC may provide some implication and inspiration for further pragmatic studies in CMC situation. Furthermore, people who regard the Internet as an important tool for social and interpersonal communication may get some hint from this study to better make use of the medium.

## References

- Brown, P. & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.
- Duthler, K. W. (2006). The Politeness of Requests Made Via Email and Voice Mail: Support for the hyper-personal Model. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. Vol.11. P.500-521.
- Gu, Y. (顧曰國). (1992). Politeness, Pragmatics and Culture. (禮貌，語用與文化). *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Research (外語教學與研究)*. Vol.4. P.10-17.
- Herring, S. (1999). Interactional Coherence in CMC. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 4 (4). Retrieved November 16, 2007 from Blackwell on the World Wide Web at: <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1083-6101.1999.tb00106.x?prevSearch=allfield%3A%28conversational+analysis+in+IRC%29>
- Leech, G. (1983). A Survey of the Interpersonal Rhetoric. *Principles of Pragmatics*. P.131-151. New York: Longman Group Limited.
- Lin, Q. (林秋茗) (2003). An Analysis on the Characteristics of Conversation on ICQ. ICQ 網上會話特點分析. *Journal of Foreign Language Electronic Teaching 外語電化教學* Vol.90. P. 32-36.
- Li, C. N. & Thompson, S. A., (1981). *Mandarin Chinese: A Functional Reference Grammar*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Pittam, J. & Pintel, E. S. (1997). Strangers in a Strange Land: Interaction Management on Internet Relay Chat. *Human Communication Research*. Vol.23(4). P.507-534.
- Su, Y. & Wang, X. (蘇一凡，王秀容). (2006). Challenges Posed by Cyber Language to Pragmatic Principles. 網路語言對語用學原則的挑戰. *Journal of China University of Mining & technology (social science) 中國礦業大學學報 (社會科學報)* Vol.3. P.136-139.
- Sun, H. (2004). Opening Moves in Informal Chinese Telephone Conversations. *Journal of Pragmatics*. Vol 36. P.1429-1465.
- Wang, T. & Huang, T. (王婷婷，黃鐵流). (2007). An Exploration into CMC Language and its Pragmatic Analysis. 網路語言的成因及語用分析. *Modern Chinese. 現代語文*. Vol.8. P77-78.

Walther, J. B. & Parks, M. (2002). Cues filtered out, cues filtered in: CMC and relationships. In Knapp, M. & Daly, J. (Eds.) *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*. P.529–563. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

## **Appendix: On-line Interview Questions**

1. 你覺得對方的話語有沒有禮貌？冒犯了你嗎？為什麼？  
你覺得他為什麼這麼說？  
Do you think the participant is rude or impolite? Did he/she offend you? Please give explanations.  
Why do you think he made these words?
2. 你覺得你在對話中的行為是不是禮貌的？為什麼會說這樣的話？  
Do you think your behavior in the conversation is polite?  
Why did you say that?
3. 你覺得這樣的理解你們的對話合試嗎？  
Do you think this interpretation of your conversation is proper?
4. 你怎樣理解上述對話？  
How do you interpret the above conversation?
5. 你覺得這樣理解上述對話合適嗎？  
Do you think the above interpretation of the conversation is proper?
6. 你怎麼看待網上私人聊天中的禮貌現象？或者不禮貌現象？  
你覺得這對你們聊天的順利進行或你們關係的發展維持有什麼影響？  
How do you view the politeness phenomenon in private on-line chat or the impoliteness in on-line chat?  
Do you think that politeness influences the carrying out of the conversation successfully or politeness affects your relationship?
7. 你覺得網路私人聊天跟人們在現實世界中面對面的聊天在禮貌表現上有什麼區別？  
What do you think is the difference in terms of the politeness phenomenon between private on-line chat and face-to-face communication?
8. 你覺得網路私人聊天與現實世界中面對面的聊天相比，在建立和維持社會、人際關係上有什麼缺點與優點？  
Compared with face-to-face communication, what do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of Internet private chat in building and maintaining social and interpersonal relationship?