

What makes a complaint im/polite? An experimental study of the influence of verbal modification on affective responses to online complaints

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Im/politeness on the web has caught the attention of computer-mediated communication specialists and politeness scholars (e.g., Graham & Hardaker 2017, Haugh 2010). There is also an increasing interest in the expression of emotions in online communication (Parkinson 2008, Derks et al. 2008). However, to date, the ways in which people react emotionally to online im/politeness remains unexplored. In this paper, we present an original experiment in which we test the influence of verbal modification, in particular mitigation and aggravation, on individuals' affective assessments of the speech act of complaining. Following Decock & Depraetere (2018), we distinguish between 'linguistic in/directness', which refers to the researcher's assessment of how explicit the linguistic realization of a complaint is, and 'perceived face-threat', which refers to interpreters' and addressees' affective evaluations of complaint realizations. Our experimental stimuli are designed on the basis of the detailed analysis a corpus of French-language authentic Twitter complaint interactions posted on the official Twitter page of the French and Belgian national railway companies. In our experiment, participants are asked to read Twitter complaints, and they are invited to assess them in terms of perceived im/politeness. They will do so by assigning a more or less positive/negative emotional valence to the stimuli using Bradley & Lang's (1994) Self-Assessment Manikin. The degrees of verbal mitigation/aggravation in these complaint stimuli will be manipulated. We predict that complaints containing mitigating/aggravating elements will give rise to positive/negative valence judgments, respectively, and the intensity of these judgments should positively correlate with the number of mitigating/aggravating elements. We also discuss methodological issues that have arisen while designing the experiments and that have to do with the operationalization of im/politeness in perception studies.

References

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