

# “I Love You But I Disagree”: Politeness and Politics in Computer-Mediated Discourse

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## Abstract

In this paper we explore the possibility of new politeness paradigms in computer-mediated discourse on Facebook. Specifically, we examine the discursal expectations, linguistic catalysts for ‘face-threatening acts’, and mitigations of opinions to maintain ‘face’ in discourse about politics. The present study addresses the gap in the literature concerning the relationship between politeness theory and discourse about politics (defined as any conversation about governmental policies and figures and/or controversial social issues) in online communication. Following Brown and Levinson (1987), Wierzbicka (1991), and Herring (2004), we analyze 10 Facebook wall posts containing discourse about politics for norms of linguistic appropriateness, concepts of ‘face’, and other sociopragmatic aspects. An analysis of these data suggests that the concept of ‘face’ is especially important for Facebook, where real names are typically preserved and relationships between interlocutors can be altered based on the conversation at hand. This study is a first step towards analyzing the relationship between politeness theory, discourse about politics, and computer-mediated discourse. Additionally, it has important implications for understanding the constantly changing interpersonal relationships in today’s increasingly socioculturally diverse, globalized, and digitally-savvy society.

**Keywords:** computer-mediated discourse, discourse about politics, face-negotiation theory, interpersonal relationships, language and identity, politeness strategies

## 1 Introduction and context

The emergence of the Internet has created a popular avenue for people to discuss political and social topics (Holt 2004; Puopolo 2001). In recent years, social networking sites such as Facebook.com have created new and rich territory for exploring online discourse. Since it was first launched in 2004, Facebook has become widely used by billions of people. In December 2013, the number of monthly active users surpassed 1.23 billion (Facebook 2013). With the growing popularity of the social network site over the past decade, the potential for individuals to engage in online discourse about political topics has rapidly increased.

Individuals use the features of Facebook to make their best impression and attract attention or to ward off undesired contacts (Tong & Walther 2011). As a result, computer mediated discourse (CMD) on Facebook has become integral to the initiation, development, and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. CMD facilitated by Facebook allows users to connect with their family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, acquaintances, and even strangers by publicly

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posting information that they would otherwise share in traditional face-to-face settings. This provides opportunities for both passive and active information exchanges. Users are able to actively engage one another in direct conversations while everyone in their individual networks can passively observe. Therefore, this semi-public exchange of information not only enables users to form or break bonds through active discussion, but it also serve to enhance or diminish the social bonds of non-participants through the passive observation of self-disclosed information.

Many scholars have investigated the role of CMD in the online discussion of politics (cf. Brundidge 2006; Davis 1999; Holt 2004). Most previous research concerning the influence of this new technology on political behavior has focused on its ability to cause negative consequences for offline social interactions (Kraut et al. 1998), how it can be used to take advantage of individual privacy (Gross & Acquisti 2005; Hewitt & Forte 2006; Kraut et al. 1998; Stutzman 2006), or the possibility that it is an extension of unidirectional mass communication used by political elites to manipulate public agenda (Bimber & Davis 2003; Ward & Gibson 2003; Williams & Gullati 2007). However, this research does not examine the role of politeness strategies used by individuals when engaging in online political discussion to meet these goals.

According to Mills (2006: 3), politeness is defined as “the expression of speakers’ intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face-threatening acts toward one another.” Goffman (1989: 5) defines ‘face’ as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact.” Previous studies in politeness theory and political science (Brown & Levinson 1987; Barber 1984) also maintain that perfect strangers are not likely to engage in discourse about politics because doing so may result in a face-threatening act. In this paper, however, we provide evidence that discourse about politics does in fact commonly occur in Facebook communication regardless of the possibility of a face-threatening act occurring. Moreover, we show that discourse about politics on Facebook can be a means of socialization and one way to express attitudes and opinions about reality (Östman 2013) as well as a medium to establish and negotiate an online identity (Focault 1988; ‘me-forming’, Naaman et al. 2009).

This study applies the principles of politeness theory (Brown & Levinson 1987; Wierzbicka 1991) as well as computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA, cf. Herring 2014) to explore the politeness strategies used by individuals to engage in discourse about politics on Facebook. This research has important implications for politeness theory, discourse about politics, and CMD in that it suggests that online political discussion on Facebook has become a new tool for establishing and negotiating an online identity. As our paper will demonstrate, this requires participants of online political discussion on Facebook to use politeness strategies traditionally used for maintaining ‘face’ in face-to-face settings in a new virtual context where the concept of ‘face’ is particularly important because real names are typically preserved and relationships between interlocutors can be altered based on the conversation at hand.

## 2 Methods and data analysis

In this study, we qualitatively analyze 10 Facebook wall posts (three of which are discussed in this paper) containing discourse about politics. The identities of the Facebook users who participated in this study were anonymized; however, the wall posts were otherwise left unchanged. Following Herring (2004), we use a computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA, see Herring 2001 for the first mention of the term) approach to carry out a language-focused content analysis of the data. Using this approach, we adopt the following three theoretical assumptions that underlie CMDA (Herring 2004):

1. Discourse exhibits regular patterns.
2. Discourse involves speaker choices.
3. Computer-mediated discourse may be, but is not inevitably, shaped by the technological features of computer-mediated communication systems.

In analyzing the data, we also paid special attention to features of politeness (cf. Brown & Levinson 1987; Wierzbicka 1991). The method for analyzing politeness in this paper distinguishes between two types of politeness: positive politeness and negative politeness. Negative politeness is characterized by behavior that aims to protect one or both participants' 'negative face', or "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his [sic] actions be unimpeded by others" (Brown & Levinson 1987: 62). In discourse about politics in CMD, violations of negative politeness include behaviors such as posting excessively long, low-content messages than normally considered acceptable. Observations of negative politeness may be apologies for or summaries of longer or lower-content messages before or after they are posted. On the other hand, positive politeness is "the desire to be ratified, understood, approved of, liked or admired" (Brown & Levinson 1987: 62). Violations of positive politeness in discourse about politics in CMD include behaviors such as posting hostile and abusive message content, commonly referred to as 'flaming' in net jargon (Kiesler et al. 1985; Kim & Raja 1990; Shapiro & Anderson 1985). Observations of positive politeness can include expressions of thanks and appreciation and other behaviors generally intended to make others feel supported and accepted. They can also include the use of nicknames and, humor, and hedging to close the social distance between two interlocutors.

According to Herring (1994), behavior associated with both types of politeness is especially likely to occur when speakers engage in 'face threatening acts', i.e., "acts that threaten the positive or negative 'face wants' of the speaker, addressee, or both" (279). In discourse about politics in CMD, 'face-threatening acts' can take the form of asking questions that require the addressee to make additional effort or modifications to their behavior, disagreeing with or verbally abusing other participants, or calling attention to participants' inappropriate online behavior (Herring 1994: 279).

In order to investigate the politeness strategies used in CMD about politics, the data discussed in this paper were coded for positive politeness or negative politeness, and if applicable, whether they constitute a violation or observance of each type of politeness. In the

section that follows, we analyze three Facebook wall posts containing discourse about politics using this approach.

### 3 Results

Our first example Facebook wall post containing CMD about politics is shown in (1) in the conversation between Tammy and Nelson about the 2013 shooting at a naval yard in Washington, DC.

#### 3.1 Wall post 1

(1) TAMMY: Obama "our tears are not enough" cry me a f---ing river. Disarming Americans and arming Syrian rebels seems like a terrific plan. He has yet to improve or create a mental health care establishment to help these people that need it. The shooter was reported to be hearing voices. Don't blame guns when it's the government that has turned it's [sic] back on the mentally ill.

NELSON: Tammy, I disagree with most of your comments (And, I'm afraid we are polar opposites). *But, I love your candor. Keep em coming. Good to see you out running the last couple of weeks. You need to come run Big Bend 50 25 10. It involves running and guns.*

In (1), Tammy's original wall post alone can be considered a 'face-threatening act' to positive politeness in that it threatens the positive "face wants" of any addressees (whether they become active participants or remain as passive observers in the discussion) who generally consider politics to be a taboo subject for discussion. Thus, Tammy's original wall post may be perceived as a 'face-threatening act' not only by Nelson, a friend of Tammy's who later comments on the wall post, but also by anyone else on Tammy's "friends list" who comes across the wall post on Facebook at any time.

In response to Tammy's wall post in (1), Nelson cautiously expresses his dissenting opinion, also engaging in a potential face-threatening act. However, in doing so, he mitigates the possible face-threatening act by hedging his disagreement with "*But, I love your candor.*" This shows how initiating discourse about politics in CMD can result in a 'face-threatening act' and how interlocutors can mitigate their opinions to maintain the face of their friend.

Nelson also ends his comment with several additional politeness strategies: changing the topic and mentioning a shared interest (both Tammy and Nelson are marathon runners). Furthermore, Nelson employs humor at the end of his post. Because jokes often require prior text that all participants in the conversation must have access to, they are associated with shared experiences and therefore positive 'face' maintenance. Thus, the politeness strategies used by Nelson to maintain face for Tammy all demonstrate appeals to positive 'face', closing the social distance originally created by the 'face-threatening act'.

### 3.2 Wall post 2

In our second example Facebook wall post containing CMD about politics in (2), Tammy initiates a discussion about the Obamacare penalty addressed to all “young people” among her friends who might see the wall post.

- (2) TAMMY: Young people - obamacare penalty \$95/yr vs. \$250/month for healthcare. Easy decision. Kill the law by avoiding it [...] And if you get a chronic sickness you can buy it later bc policies cannot discriminate against pre-existing condition.

REBECCA: It's cheaper to prevent sickness now than wait until you're already sick *Tam. I love you, but* that's a fact and even if you spend less in the short run by paying the penalty, you'll lose in the long run. And anyway, the penalty is going to increase each year, so again, you'll spend more in the long run. *I'm not saying the law is perfect by any means, but* the law isn't going anywhere - rather than try to kill it, we should be working together to improve it.

Once again, in (2), Tammy’s original post can be seen as a ‘face-threatening act’ to positive politeness, both for addressees who become active participants or remain passive observers of the discussion. Rebecca, Tammy’s friend, expresses her opposing opinion to the wall post but immediately follows it with Tammy’s nickname Tam. This politeness strategy is an appeal to positive ‘face wants’ because it serves as a reminder that Rebecca and Tammy are members of the same social group. Rebecca’s hedged use of the phrase “*I love you, but...*” also serves as a mitigation strategy intended to close the social distance between them before widening it again with a dissenting opinion. Additionally, Rebecca ends her argument with the disclaimer “*I’m not saying...*” which further lessens her commitment to the truth-value of her opposing opinions.

### 3.3 Wall post 3

In our third example in (3), Karen, a protest organizer and Sarah’s family member, initiates a political discussion about a union protest in North Carolina concerning raising wages for fast food employees to \$15 per hour.

- (3) SARAH: So if they want to make the same amount as skilled laborers, then why aren't they protesting for more affordable skills training? Or a more transparent and objective promotion/raise process? \$15/hr is much more than a living wage in most parts of the country, and not everyone deserves to make that much. What will the managers make? There are college graduates who aren't making that much, as a simple factor of the economy.

KAREN: I'm convinced that there are people who will never get this. If you've never had to pay to completely take care of yourself, you cannot know. If in your adult life

nobody had ever provided your vehicle and insurance, a roof over your head and food in the fridge you just don't have a frame of reference for this conversation. Sarah, *as much as I love you*, I will never be able to get you to understand the harsh realities of life for the 99% (unemployed college grads like myself included), so I won't even try anymore. Your comments tell me that *you are still a wonderful, smart young woman with an incredibly bright future* and this is not something you're going to learn. So when I post about labor rights being human rights; let it go right on past you!

As demonstrated in (3), Karen, as the initiator of the political discussion, is doing the 'face' work (as opposed to a subsequent commenter) in order to manage positive 'face'. By contrast, Sarah presents an opposing opinion without attempting to mitigate the 'face-threatening act' or mend 'face'. Karen's response to this affront can be considered a 'face-threatening act' both for positive and negative politeness. She implies that those "*who will never get this*" should "*let it go right on past,*" or, simply put, not comment any further. This is a 'face-threatening act' to 'negative face' because she is putting pressure on other participants of the discussion, whether active or passive, to perform a specific action. In her 'face-threatening act' to positive 'face', Karen increases the social distance not only between Sarah and herself, but also between potential passive observers of the political discussion by saying "*I'm convinced that there are people who will never get this.*" Interestingly, Karen later appeals to positive 'face' by using the phrase "*I love you*" and issuing compliments to decrease the social distance that she has created between herself and her family member, Sarah, as a result of their online discourse about politics.

### **3.4 Passive observers and political identity**

The exchange in (4) took place in a private message on Facebook in response to the previous series of wall posts containing political discussion between Sarah and Karen. This conversation takes place between Sarah and John (who is also a family member of Karen) and illustrates why some passive observers consciously choose not to participate in the speech community of those who discuss politics on Facebook.

(4) JOHN: I agree with u 150%. Kim and I had a "discussion" about it on the day of the march. The unfortunate truth is that some people think with their pain and not their brain. Fast food work is NOT worth \$15.00 an hour and they know it. But there's no use debating an issue with someone who is so emotionally tied to their point that they cannot think straight.

SARAH: I think so too, which is why I said my peace and walked away.

The example in (4) demonstrates another way that people can construct their online identities. In this example, John chooses to opt out of the political conversation because he does not want to be antagonized by those who have differing political views. This exchange also provides further

evidence that political opinions are closely tied with one's identity and that discussing political opinions can affect interpersonal relationships.

#### 4 Summary

As we have demonstrated in our data analysis, political discourse does indeed occur on Facebook despite the possibility of a 'face-threatening act' occurring (Brown & Levinson 1987). Our data also confirm that politeness strategies are socialization tools and are one way that online interlocutors can express attitudes and opinions about reality. Furthermore, the results of our data analysis suggest that online political discourse on Facebook has become a new way to establish and negotiate an online identity. Specifically, this study suggests that the concept of 'face' is especially important for Facebook, where real names are typically preserved and relationships between interlocutors can be altered based on the conversation at hand. This requires participants to use politeness strategies for maintaining 'face' traditionally used in face-to-face settings in a new virtual context.

Additionally, since Facebook provides opportunities for both active and passive information exchanges, this semi-public exchange of information not only enables users to form or break bonds through active discussion, but it also serve to enhance or diminish the social bonds of non-participants through the passive observation of self-disclosed information. Our data show that instead of participating in exchanges where FTAs may occur, some Facebook users may choose to "opt out" of such online conversations altogether. This suggests that even passive observers of online discussion about politics are consciously aware of the negative consequences such discourse can have on their interpersonal relationships.

The preliminary findings discussed in this paper provide a first step toward understanding the changing interpersonal relationships in today's increasingly socioculturally diverse, globalized, and digitally-savvy society. There are many interesting avenues of research that could be undertaken next, including exploring the hybrid nature of Facebook communication (i.e., as a mix between simulated face-to-face and internet message board interaction) as well as linking communities of practice to how likely users are to discuss politics.

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