



Greetings and interpersonal closeness: The case of Bengalis on Orkut



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 21 January 2016

Keywords:

Bangla
Greeting
Orkut
Politeness
Social distance

ABSTRACT

This study investigates to what extent greetings on a social network site popular with South Asians are associated with the degree of interpersonal closeness of the users, educated middle class Bengalis in the United States. Computer-mediated discourse analysis, face-to-face interviews, and participant observation were employed to analyze the textual comments exchanged in 79 Bengali dyads. The analyses reveal a relationship between degree of social distance and frequencies of Bangla greetings when type of greeting (regular vs. ritualistic) and manner of expression (unmarked vs. intensified) are taken into account. However, some aspects of the interplay between interpersonal closeness and greetings can only be understood if cultural nuances and medium factors are taken into consideration.

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1. Introduction

Politeness, as it is commonly understood, is the pragmatic application of good manners or etiquette. Its primary goal is to make one's conversation partner (or occasionally a third party) feel relaxed and comfortable, so that a cooperative common ground emerges for the smooth functioning of activities and pleasant co-existence (Brown and Levinson, 1987[1978]; Leech, 1983). Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]) remains the most thought-provoking and influential starting point for studying linguistic politeness across cultures and societies. Yet critics (e.g. Eelen, 2001; Ide, 1989; Matsumoto, 1988, 1989; Mills, 2003; Watts, 2003) have pointed out various shortcomings of the work, charging that it suffers from Western bias. Meanwhile, more recent politeness studies (Chen et al., 2013; Leech, 2007) have argued that there is no East-West divide in politeness, although they acknowledge that there are qualitative and quantitative parametric variations in observations of linguistic politeness across different societies and cultures.

Even if there are only parametric variations in politeness behaviors across societies and cultures, it is important that people be aware of these possible variations and their appropriate uses in different socio-pragmatic contexts, so that they can avoid misunderstanding, which is a potential cause of damage to interpersonal relationships. Misunderstandings are especially likely to arise in text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC), which lacks the audio-visual cues that in face-to-face communication help to clarify speakers' intentions. Furthermore, the technical and social contexts of CMC influence language use (Herring, 2007). However, the relationship between interpersonal closeness and politeness practices in virtual space has not been addressed, as such, and linguistic studies of politeness in CMC have focused mostly on Western languages

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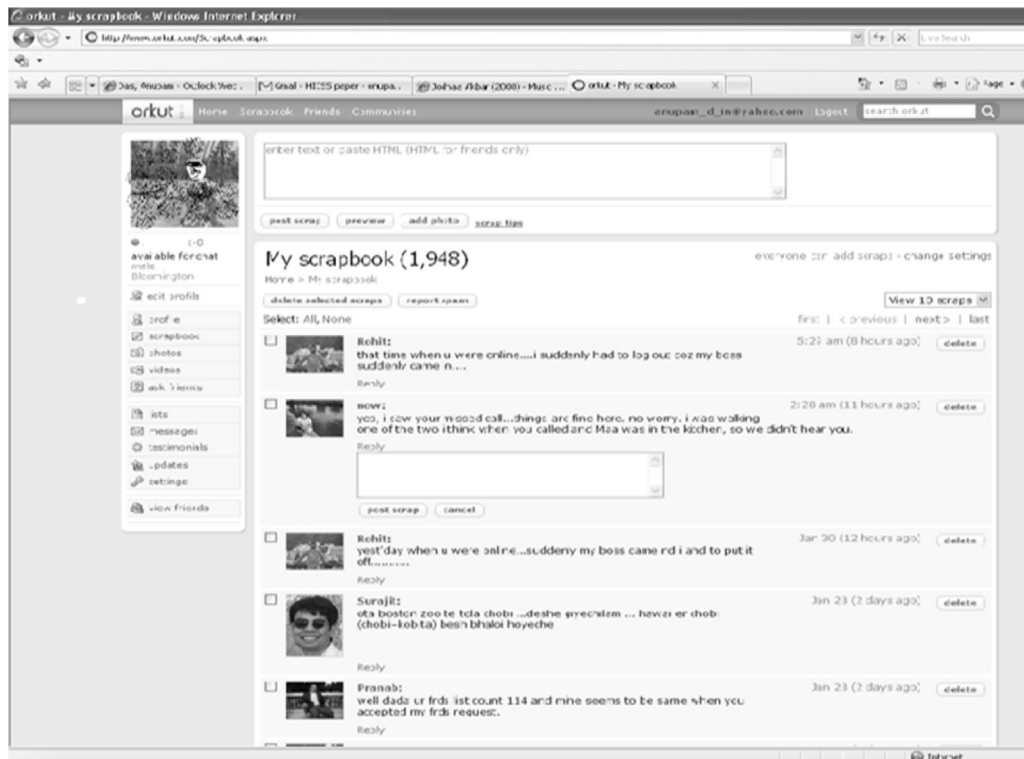


Fig. 1. Screenshot of an Orkut scrapbook.

such as English (e.g. Duthler, 2006; Waldvogel, 2007; but cf. the papers in Locher, 2010). Research is needed to investigate how degree of interpersonal closeness influences online politeness practices, especially in lesser-studied languages.

Bangla is the mother tongue of about 220 million speakers, most of whom live in the Indian state of West Bengal and Bangladesh; it is spoken by about 300 million people worldwide (Wikipedia, 2015). Many Bangla speakers in the diaspora communicate via CMC as a way to maintain contact with other Bengalis. It was learned that a group of middle class young urban Bengalis from West Bengal who moved to the US between 2002 and 2004 used the social network site Orkut to socialize and stay connected with fellow Bengalis both in the US and in India. This group provided the impetus for the present study.

Orkut, which was owned and operated by Google, was the most popular social network platform among Indians until it, like many other SNSs that were popular in different regions of the world, was eclipsed in popularity by Facebook.¹ Orkut is like Facebook in terms of its forms and functions. It is a convergence of various applications, for instance, profiles, 'friending' via links, 'communities', email, chat, photo uploads, videos, and 'scrapbooks'. Users personalize their profiles to express their interests and tastes. The friend network lets users link to their friends and traverse the resulting network of profiles. The 'scrapbook' is the most widely used text-based asynchronous mode of communication on Orkut, similar to the Facebook 'timeline' (known as the 'wall' at the time of data collection for this study). Fig. 1 shows a screenshot of an Orkut scrapbook.

Although Orkut has lost its popularity to Facebook, it was widely used, primarily by Brazilians and Indians, between 2004 and 2009. Unfortunately, there is dearth of scholarly research on languages and SNSs that are perceived not to be sufficiently prominent either economically or politically. Although the use of Orkut by Portuguese speakers has been described in a number of studies (e.g. Recuero, 2005; Soares and Bezerra de Sa Peixoto, 2010; Lisboa and Coutinho, 2011), there has been little research on Orkut use by speakers of Indian languages; moreover, no studies of Orkut have focused on politeness, to our knowledge. However, research on lesser-studied languages and SNSs would strengthen understanding of how politeness practices vary parametrically across cultures, societies, and virtual spaces.

The focus of this study is on two aspects of politeness practices. First, we investigate whether, and if so, how, the degree of interpersonal closeness of Bengali Orkut users relates to the frequency of occurrence of Bangla greetings (i.e. regular vs. ritualistic) in their scraps. Further, we examine whether there are quantitative differences in the manner of expression of the greetings (i.e. unmarked vs. intensified) with respect to the users' degree of interpersonal closeness.

¹ The website <http://vincos.it/world-map-of-social-networks/> indicates that Orkut was overtaken by Facebook in popularity in India by December 2009. Google closed Orkut down in late 2014.

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