

Decoder-Generated Miscommunication as a Politeness Strategy on 2go Interactive Messenger

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Abstract

Politeness as a vital tool in human communication has been widely studied by linguists who sought to explicate its use in sustaining rapport and its perception in the patterning of human interaction. This paper furthers that line of enquiry by seeking to extend the application of existing politeness theories to the relatively new computer-mediated-communication domain of 2go.

It solicited and subjected samples of chats from 2go interactions, which display a potential for flame war, to qualitative analysis based on an eclectic framework suffused with insights from the Face-negotiation theory, Lim and Bowers' model of Face Theory, Spencer-Oatey and Jiang's Sociopragmatic Interactional Principles as well as Shea's Netiquette.

It found that 'chatters' on 2go achieve politeness and rapport management through the deliberate use of miscommunication generated by the decoders who save the conversations from degenerating into banter in line with the context negotiated in the chat. Chatters avoid countering with threats to others' face by avoiding autonomy face-threatening moves. They also adopt a desired interpretation from the alternatives in the encoders' messages, thus using avoidance or misconstruction to reject and mitigate impoliteness while emoticons ameliorate face threats. Politeness in the chats thus relies on the use of the strategies of avoidance, misinterpretation, distortion and FTA mitigation through emoticons.

Miscommunication is a key strategy of politeness on 2go chat. This strategy is deserving of intense study in order to further determine its relevance to rapport management in other virtual communities, as well as other domains of human interaction.

Key Words: Politeness, Rapport Management, Computer-Mediated-Communication, Virtual Community, 2go Interactive Messenger, Miscommunication

Introduction

People ‘get people wrong’ all the time and this can be traced to a myriad of reasons: ambiguity (lexical, syntactic, semantic or pragmatic), vagueness, linguistic asymmetry between co-interactants and various types of noise. In fact, “participants in an exchange can construct a particular meaning from a language interaction on the basis of their own experiences even though other possible interpretations can be envisioned by either” (Medubi, 2015:3-4). Ultimately, miscommunication, from whichever source it emanates, is a form of pragmatic failure. Of more interest for this paper, however, is a shade of communication which is exclusively pragmatic as it ensues from an attempt to be polite albeit in a way that yields another meaning when processed through the hearer’s world view and cultural field of experience. Co-interactants in such an inter-cultural communicative context could be said to be “speaking at cross purposes” (Tzanne, 2000). Thus, a Yoruba speaker who invites a listener to ‘dine with him’ (when the intended shade of meaning is the phatic aspect of communication embedded in the Yoruba culture which requires a person to invite everyone around to eat as a show of respect rather than as an actual invitation) may have been misunderstood by the American who actually joins them to eat. Such has been a phenomenon that interests scholars of pragmatic and linguistic politeness like Haugh (2007), Bayraktaroglu and Sofianu (2001), Tzanne (2000), Wilk-Lawton (2014) and a host of others.

However, inasmuch as studies continue to abound on the causes and sources of miscommunication, there is a need to also explore the communicative uses to which this phenomenon might be put. Rather than being seen as unintended fallout of an attempt to be polite, it might also be important to examine the situations where miscommunication can actually be featured as a means to avoiding impoliteness and, by implication, being polite.

One of the contexts in which the avoidance of conflict through implicit politeness is very crucial is the virtual community especially on social media. Where face-to-face communication affords interactants the opportunity of physiognomy, tone, voice modulation, gesticulations and other general nuances of impression that might cushion the effect of an impolite exchange or even a lot of time during which the ‘issues’ might be trashed out and conviviality restored after a conflict, social media like 2go or Facebook are bereft of such opportunity. Thus, there arises the need for chatters on these platforms to resort to the shortest route to politeness anytime impoliteness rears its head – miscommunication.

This study therefore becomes necessary because of the need to examine this interesting communicative behaviour where the co-interactants are simply trying to “get it right” (be polite) by “not getting one another right” in exchanges that are underpinned by co-operation and implicature (Grice, 1975). Focus is thus not on the disruptive role of miscommunication through “disruption”, “disagreement” and “misunderstanding” but the co-operative role it plays through “implication”, “confusion” and programmed “misunderstanding” (Mortensen, 2001).

General View of Politeness

Etymologically traceable to the word “polish”, politeness generally captures the sense of a conduct that is socially acceptable and worthy to be called polished (as against crude) behaviour.

In its simplest form, politeness is best expressed as the practical application of good manners or etiquette. It is however, a culturally-defined phenomenon as what is considered polite in one culture may be quite rude or simply strange in another. In a broad sense, interactants employ politeness to make all parties in an interaction relaxed and comfortable enough for the communication of ideas to succeed.

Scholars have made series of submissions on what politeness is, each having a universally acceptable standard as their aim (see Leech, 1983; Brown and Levinson, 1989, Watts, 2003, Lim and Bowers 1991, Spencer-Oatey and Jiang, 2003 and Mills, 2005). It has however, been found that politeness – both in expression and in reception – is likely to remain relative as some of the findings have failed to prevail across time, space and societal strata (Spencer-Oatey and Jiang, 2003). Whether considered diachronically from traditional to post-modernist eras or synchronically from the sociolinguistic to the pragmatic approach, what is least arguable is that a better verifiable and more reliable study would be one that takes a situation-specific and descriptive rather than prescriptive approach to the study of politeness where the phenomenon is associated directly with factors of circumstances (context of situation and context of culture) within which the disparities of gender, class and status are concretely brought to bear on language use and solidly situated within the negotiated rules of the particulars interaction which Fraser and Nolen (1991) describe as conversational contract.

The pertinent question at this stage before each immediately relevant theory is examined is: “What is the place of miscommunication in all this?” An attempt shall be made in this paragraph to examine this issue as a way of laying the hypothetical foundation for this study. As earlier discussed, politeness does not only contain in the actual display of polished behaviour but also in the art of avoiding conflict. Better put, politeness is both active (as in its overt communication) and latent or passive (as in a covert display of intention to avoid impoliteness). Specific examples are found in hearer-generated face repair mechanisms and FTA mitigation acts (Brown and Levinson, 1989, Lim and Bowers, 1991). And since the primary context in question in this study is both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic, attention shall be on such pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic strategies which include but are not limited to:

1. deliberately looking for the positive part of a seemingly impolite move (Pollyanna Principle),
2. pretending not to ‘see’ the impoliteness in an impolite move,
3. deliberately misinterpreting impoliteness-laden words or expressions to defuse it,
4. avoiding a confrontation or imposition in polite ways, and
5. indirectness (Haugh, 2007: 86)

In a nutshell, miscommunication is set to be contextually redefined in this paper as a form of language use which looks to the auditor as hugely pragmatically broken; in other words, as if the interactants are not ‘getting’ each other correctly but which to the interactants is serving a purpose of bridging the politeness-communication gap. More succinctly put, miscommunication as used here should be viewed as respondents reminding speakers of their unspoken contract to

be polite to each other and thus refusing to be dragged into a breach of such contract. It is therefore a politeness strategy that can find its place in many communicative situations and in virtual communities particularly from whichever perspective politeness is seen. Subsequent units are dedicated to an examination of these perspectives individually.

Taken as **Face Recognition** within the facework framework, politeness is defined as the art of presenting oneself in a certain manner that avoids offending others as well as protecting one's own integrity (keeping face). This contains in both the linguistic and extra-linguistic aspects of communication. For Brown and Levinson (1985), expanded in Brown and Levinson (1987), participants in a communication have a positive face which entails the person's desire to be liked, approved of and supported as well as a negative face which entails their desire not to be imposed upon and their desire unimpeded. Any communicative behaviour that threatens these face needs is thus seen as Face Threatening Acts which constitute impoliteness. For FTA's to be mitigated, therefore, the theory proposes strategies like hedging and off-record acts including indirectness and this paper adds miscommunication.

In their much more refined, less rigid and more comprehensive review of the face theory, Lim and Bowers (1991) propose a re-designation of the classification of positive face as a bi-partite fellowship face and competence face which covers solidarity and affection, recognition and positive evaluation while the negative face is renamed and reconfigured as autonomy face which deals with people's need for autonomy (no one wants their 'space' infringed upon).

Viewed in the light of observance of rules, **maxims** or pre-established principles of conversation, politeness has been seen as stemming from interactants' willingness to obey certain maxims which include tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement and sympathy (Leech, 1983). This theory has, however, generated criticism in terms of its taxonomic nature and not less so for its emphasis on politeness as a speaker-specific (generated) rather than a holistic manner of communication. In order to fill this gap, Spencer-Oatey and Jiang (2003) suggest the need to move on from the notion of maxims to Sociopragmatic Interactional Principles (SIPs) which they define as

Socioculturally-based principles, scalar in nature, that guide or influence people's productive and interpretive use of language. The principles are typically value-linked so that in a given culture and/or situational context, there are norms or preferences regarding the implementation of the principles, and any failure to implement the principles as expected may result in mild to strong evaluative judgments.

(Spencer-Oatey and Jiang, 2003: 2)

The principles are grouped into two. The lower order SIPs reflect people's stylistic concerns like Directness – indirectness, Modesty – approbation, Warmth – involvement and Cordiality/coolness – restraint. The higher order SIPs involve face SIPs: concern for own face and concern for other's face, rights and obligations SIPs and task achievement SIPs.

In a nutshell, the perceived suitability of this theory contains in its open-endedness and how it caters for sociopragmatic dimensions of communication including values, mindset and interpretation rather than just the pragmalinguistic dimensions.

Taken as an outflow of **co-operation and conversational contract**, politeness is situated in the relational works of Fraser and Nolen (1991), Kumiarahman (2011), Fraser (1990) and Ting-Toomey (2005). Lakoff (2011) argues for three rules guiding politeness in conversation which are:

“don’t impose, give options and make others feel good”.

As a contract, theorists opine that people enter ‘normal’ conversations with a tacit agreement to be polite with each other (Fraser and Nolen, 1991, Grice, 1975, Harrison and Crawshaw, 2012 and Mills, 2005). The contexts and every nuance of culture and situation however, work to determine what is (im)polite. As such, politeness is negotiated, and ‘insults’ being hurled may not even count as impoliteness if it has been predefined in the contract of a specific conversation as such.

Taken as **netiquette** and a mechanism for avoiding or remedying cyber bullying, politeness contains in the proper use of language in all its form while in an online community (CMC). Rheingold (2014) calls them “social codes” in virtual communities while Shea (1994) assembled ten rules for netizens which this paper attaches to the success of the miscommunication strategy (Shea, 1997: 45). Rules v, vii and x are particularly of interest for this study and it is apt to state them here:

- (v) make yourself look good online.
- (vi) help keep flame wars under control.
- (x) be forgiving of other people’s mistake.

Rapport Management and Politeness

People ever hardly start a conversation without a predefined motive. Whether the motive is a message to be passed across with emphasis on its semantic (content) or phatic dimension however, remains a prerogative of the interactants vis-a-vis their relationship with the context of the conversation (Crystal, 2002, Holtgraves, 2005). Therefore, interactants resort to the use of any available communicative device that can help keep the conversation going and in the way that they desire in order to avoid time wasting and a defeat of their intention. This is what scholars refer to as rapport management which has been a focus of several studies in Pragmatics and Conversation Analysis (see Glenn, 2003, Goffinan 1967, Haakana, 2010, Warner-Garcia, 2014, Holt, 2010 and Spencer-Oatey, 2005).

For Warner-Garcia, one primary strategy used to achieve this interesting and important phenomenon is what she refers to as “coping laughter” which is “utilized to manage the face-threatening relational aspects of disagreements rather than to deal with the actual content of disputes (2014:1). Even though the study is focused on “real-life” interactions, its relevance for the present study contains in its treatment of the same issue of politeness using the facework

framework. Besides, the need for rapport management is of equal, if not greater, importance in online chat as most interactants know that their conversations are limited by the eccentricities of network connection, lack of physiognomy and phonological enhancement for messages and so on. In fact, the chances of another chat are usually largely dependent on the success of the current one especially in chat rooms.

Warner-Garcia's coping laughter which we compare, for the purpose of this paper, with the textese "lol" or the emoticon☺ is found to perform four main functions of rapport management:

- (1) face-threat mitigation.
- (2) Face-loss concealment
- (3) Serious-to-nonserious frame switch and
- (4) topic transition facilitation

The extent to which the laughter performs any of the functions highlighted depends on "several contextual factors, including who initiates the laughter, how other participants respond to the laughter, and the overarching context and participant roles at play in the interaction" (Warner-Garcia, 2014:160).

The present study however, bases its analyses not only on the fringes of the conversation as, we argue, it is difficult to examine the 'laughter' without a recourse to 'what elicited the laughter' as well as 'what message, in relation to the context of the laughter, the participants attach the laughter to'. Therefore, the laughter is taken with what is said (verbally and non-verbally) in order to account for the strategies of preventing or repairing impoliteness.

While Spencer-Oatey (2000) favours the term "rapport management" as explained by the analytical framework she has proposed, Ting-Toomey's (2005) study is based on an expansion of her "face-negotiation theory" which she first proposed in 1985. For her, a person's face is their claimed "sense of favourable social self-image in a relational and network context" (*Ting-Toomey & Gudykunst 1988: 215*). Facework is thus a cluster of communicative behaviours that are used to enact self-face and to uphold, challenge/threaten, or support the other person's face. Her works thus revolves around the investigation of intercultural conflict styles emanating from content, relation and identity. The identity-based conflict is however, of more relevance for this paper as it is the type emanating from issues of identity confirmation-rejection, respect-disrespect, and approval-disapproval and thus tied closely to culture-based faced-orientation factors.

For Ting-Toomey (2005), face concern manifests in three ways in talk: preventative before a face threat occurs, but another occurs during the threat as well as restorative after the threat. The restorative form of face-negotiation would include excuses, justifications, direct aggression, humour, physical remediation, avoidance and apologies

Computer-Mediated Communication and Politeness

In his analysis of chat rooms or chat groups, Crystal (2004) makes the important observation about a distinction between the synchronous and the asynchronous chat where the former is more instantaneous and there is less emphasis on the semantic substance of the conversation as

is on the phatic aspect. This distinction carries into the selection of chats for the present study here. Some chats are chosen from the synchronous types with all features peculiar to it:

...participants frequently provide each other with expressions of rapport. Subjectivity rules: personal opinions and attitudes, often of an extreme kind, dominate, making it virtually impossible to maintain a calm level of discourse for very long (2004:180)

He opines, like Rheingold (2001), that the chat-room is not the ideal place to find “facts” but would be more proper for chatters on the look for opinions to react to, or in need of a platform to get some off their chest. Presumably, such is an ideal breeding ground for disagreement and insult, known in this context of language use as flame wars. (Shea, 1997)

It should be noted at this juncture however that private chat, though sharing some features with the asynchronous chat-room, is unique in the way it brings only two chatters together to the exclusion of the crowd in the “gossip group”. This explains the higher semantic substances found in such chats: the interactants have sent and accepted friend request from each other (usually for a purpose) and are now ready to exchange messages whether the other person is online in real time or not, unlike the synchronous chat groups where only ‘online’ group members see the posts (Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic, 2004).

According to crystal, these chats are more purposeful and thereby less likely to produce the level of “impoliteness” found in the other type. This, we argue, for the purpose of this paper, accounts for the need for rapport management in order to keep the focus of the chat.

The 2go Chatrooms and 2go Instant Messenger Chat as Virtual Community

2go is a relatively new social media app in Africa. Situated in the group that has applications for tete-a-tete patterns of communication like Whatsapp, Viber or BBM, it however, also offers chatrooms where chatters can move out of their private instant messaging chats and become posters like on Facebook, Orkut, Najaworld and other such online communities. It is this particular advantage of double functionality that forms the basis for the selection of this community for the present study. Suffice it to say at this stage then that the study borrows from the methodology employed in studies on virtual community (Lamidi, 2011, Locher, Bolander and Holm, 2015, and Anupam Das, 2010).

For the purpose of this study, we classify 2go chat and chatrooms under virtual communities of interest going by Rheingold’s (2000) definition of virtual communities as social aggregations that emerge from the internet when enough people carry on public discussions long enough and with sufficient human feelings to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.

Methodology

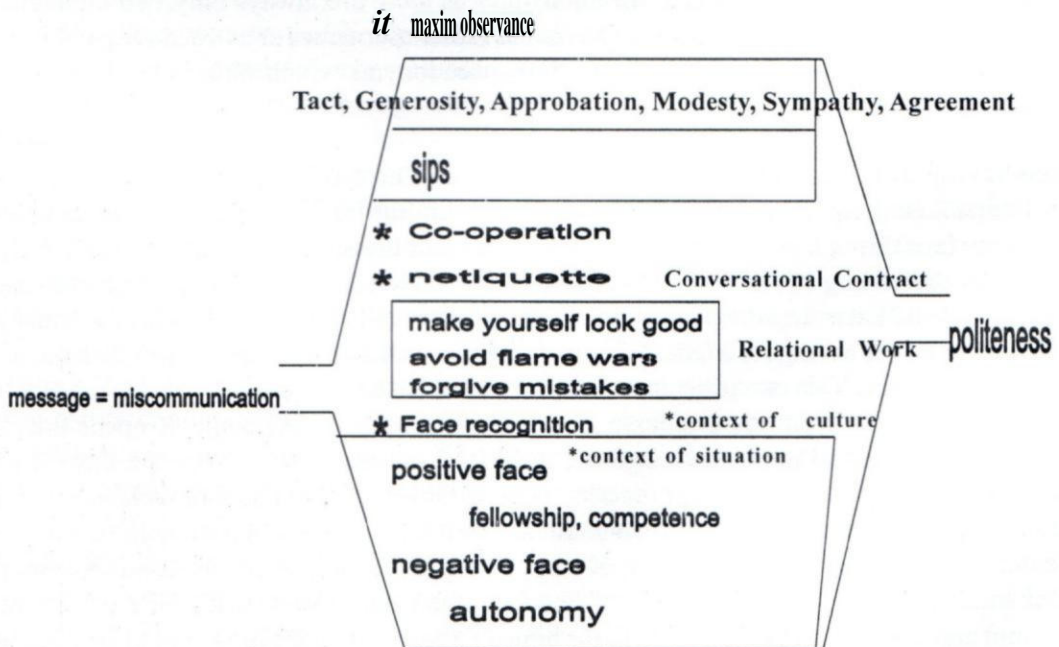
The data for this study were taken from exchanges in a 2go chatroom (Osogbo, Osun State, Nigeria specifically because of the way it offers a broader base or a heterogeneous community of chatters from all ages and social background) as well as private Instant Messages solicited from co-operating 2go users who had been previously informed about the researcher’s need to

read up their chats at some point between January and August, 2015. The study made use of a sampling method where exchanges showing instances of miscommunication which demonstrate a deliberate effort by the interactants (or one of them) to avoid being impolite were extracted and analysed for the politeness pattern as situated within the mega model that is based on the politeness theories of Shea, 1997, Ting-Toomey (2005), Lim and Bowers (1991), Spencer-Oatey and Jiang (2003) and Fraser and Nolen (1991).

For data collection, the study utilised the built-in android mobile® screenshot application which was used to capture the chats in their original forms in order to, more faithfully, reveal the details and linguistic nuances in the chats especially the non-verbal cues like emoticons and typography. In its presentation however, and in keeping with the promise of anonymity on which condition the subjects in IM allowed this researcher to collect screenshots of their chats, some usernames and profile pictures which are too revealing of the chatters’ identities were effaced with ‘shapes’ in Microsoft word®. Same was done in any move where a chatter’s name is mentioned or used as a vocative.

The chats’ screenshots were instantaneously captured and saved with particular attention to the exact relevant threads found on the screens before logging out. This is because 2go chats and messages on certain devices are not saved for the next login. Finally, the chats that exhibited the required character were selected for sampling and analysed as shall be found in the analysis and findings section using the paradigm graphically presented presently.

Diagram 1: Politeness Paradigm



Politeness paradigm based on Shea (1997), Ting-Toomey (2005), Fraser and Nolen (1991), Locher and Watts (2005), Brown and Levinson (1987), and Spencer-Oatey and Jiang (2003)

As the schema indicates, the conceptualisation and interpretation of politeness in the analysis were taken as emanating from a variety of factors which the different theories of politeness have explained. To begin with, a message is encoded based on a perceived misconstruction or pragmatic failure of a previously decoded message. When this new message is filtered through the different frameworks of politeness (prominently featuring SIPs and maxims, face, co-operation and netiquette) however, the supposedly wrong response comes across as an attempt by the participant at being polite. However, the box through which this 'miscommunication' is filtered does not only include theories of politeness but theories that explicate how aspects of context affect communication and perceptions of politeness.

Then, glosses of each chat, when the need be, were presented in order to fill the communication gaps that the chatters' peculiar use of 'Nigerian English', textese, 2go-specific language and other forms of unconventional language use might have created.

Analysis and Findings

In each exchange analysed, more than one theory of politeness feed into the explanation of politeness. Each exchange, presented in a labeled plate, was thus analysed to reveal the place of miscommunication as displayed in politeness theories. The participants in exchanges from private chat were labelled X and Y for anonymity as there are always only two interactants whose real names sometimes appear in the chat as either usernames or as vocatives in the chat. In the chat rooms however, most posters have pseudonyms which already guarantee their anonymity to an extent.

Face-Saving and Negotiation Through Avoidance (The Snub)

Interactants help save the competence face of an earlier chatter as well as their own autonomy face through outright failure to acknowledge a message that contains the FTA. This is done by pretending not to have read or not to have understood the message. In some cases, however (plate 2), it is the encoder's semantic intention or an illocutionary force that is snubbed.

In plate 1, X is asking for a 'real life' meeting but must have come across to Y as a threat to her autonomy face. This assertion is not only arrived at based on the subsequent responses but can also be inferred from the discourse structure of the opening exchange. X opens the chat with a not-too-unusual greeting on 2go but seems to have received no response from Y who might be negotiating for a different greeting pattern. Going by the contextual relevance of the time however, it is also presumable that X did not wait for a response before going ahead with the demand for a meeting. Either way, X can be seen as coming across as insensitive to Y's need for deference via a recognition of her face needs and lower-order SIPs of distance, restraint and coolness therefore drawing for himself a response that can be said to be close to a hearing check, disbelief or both.

X's next move, a question, is not only an FTA threatening Y's autonomy face but a flouting of netiquette by being too presumptuous, thus not looking good especially as 2go warns against giving private information to strangers (X and Y are obviously not well-acquainted to each other going by the tone of the discussion as well as the claim of the co-operating subject who turned in the chat). X's failure to mitigate his FTA is also obvious as he fails to even mention Y's name or use some hedging for his flouting of the tact and approbation maxims. Obviously, X was asking for Y's location, specific contact address and asking for a rendezvous.

Y's response however, seems to show that she is simply deciding on not getting the message and, by extension, its impolite import (avoidance). Rather than respond with a reminder to X of his impudence which would show a threat to his positive – fellowship and competence face or even 'flame' him, she chooses not to understand in order to keep both of their faces – forgiving X's mistake and maintaining the contract of chatting without fighting. Her response also pays attention to the SIPs of distance/restraint as well as coolness which are lower order SIPs.

With respect to the demands of context in this analysis, X's initial move would initially come as a double edged one: it seems to be in keeping with the 2go context of culture as it is currently a rave among 'young boys' to meet up with 'girls' in chat rooms, send them friend requests to get them into private chats and open the chat with 'hey', 'xup' or any other form of greeting that is found in the online 2go sociolect. It is usually from here that they arrange a quick real-life meeting and start a romantic relationship. Given the context of situation however, X and Y are strangers and X does not know Y's expectations or intention and should try to be friendly enough first before asking for a meeting. The task of negotiation of the context thus lies with Y who stepped up accordingly by issuing an "I-don't-get-you" iconic gesture. It thus becomes clear from that point on that X is pushing an unwanted agenda, at best a hurried one, a point which will take Y's insistence on miscommunication to drive home with X. It is therefore this new context that stays at the background for the rest of the chat which ends then on convivial terms.

Face-Negotiation and SIP Maintenance Through Misinterpretation and Distortion

Chatters demand that their autonomy face, and sometimes competence face, be observed by selecting a meaning they find desirable in an expression directed at them, thus dropping a hint that the original intent was unacceptable and face-threatening or sociopragmatically inappropriate.

In plate 2, X's initial move is, like exchange 1, rather presumptive. By assuming that Y wants a 'real life meeting' or a date, because X wants it, it appears to threaten her autonomy face. Y miscommunicates by choosing not to get X's intention by interpreting the meeting being requested as another virtual meeting. X however continues his lack of tact and abrasive request which Y again dispels by firmly, yet jokingly, refusing to budge. She uses miscommunication by equating the opposite concept of real life to heaven rather than a virtual community, thus seeming to hint that this platform is the only available platform for their relationship (at least at the moment). X ends up co-operating, recognising her positive and negative faces and using the appropriate SIPs cool, restrained and recognising her right to privacy.

The role of context is also significant in this interpretation generated here. Whereas X, in a regular interaction, would be considered polite, having “asked” rather than “ordered” for a meeting in such an indirect pattern that would have qualified as autonomy face-saving, and also seems sufficiently compliant with tact maxim as well as the lower order SIPs of distance, warmth/involvement and cordiality. The hint for a negotiation of this context which X imagined, and within which he operated, was however dropped by Y whose response reveals that she would rather keep this interaction/relationship virtual, and thus any desire or request to make it ‘real’ would be seen as imposition, threatening her autonomy and competence face, transcending the restraint-cordiality as well as face SIPs, asking for a flame-war and therefore impolite. It would thus take her use of deliberate miscommunication to re-orient the slant of the chat towards her own face needs.

Plate 3 shows the word “mad” distorted by Sancti both in terms of its signification as well as in terms of Lizzybaby’s intention to flame him. It is pertinent to note that the relevant thread here is the chat between Sancti and Lizzybaby. While Lizzybaby seemed to be responsible for the onset of a flame war in her response to Sancti’s earlier impolite move in the immediate context of this exchange, the respondent and victim of the flame deliberately chooses to misinterpret the direct FTA in the word ‘mad’ (crazy) which he forces to devolve into ‘mad’ (angry). He quickly moves to avoid a flamewar and repairs the speaker’s FTA by monopolising the discourse with his argument to underline the miscommunication. At the end, he switches along the face SIPs (higher order) and lower order SIPs of cordiality-restraint by mildly castigating and ending with a wink to show how lightly he meant what he said anyway.

This double use of miscommunication in his decoding as well as in the encoding of his response helps to dissipate the tense atmosphere and to negotiate a context which Lizzybaby finally shifts into by recognising him as a clown despite his earlier rudeness and sexism; a phenomenon comparable with Plate 4 which is a typical flame war-inducing or flame war-characterised exchange sparked by a battle of the sexes. Y has however, created a polite atmosphere of camaraderie out of it by his use of the strategy of miscommunication. X pulls an angry face and makes out sick while disparaging the male gender – a post that would ordinarily be deemed unsuitable for the face of any male chatter in such an exchange. The responding male here (Y) however, dispels the tension it comes with by misinterpreting the stereotype that underlies the move by selecting the literal meaning of the phrase ‘the same’. The next move shows that X realises that Y is deliberately deciding to not get her slant immediately and is willing to drive the message home in case Y might really not be getting it. Y’s next move however, throws light on his miscommunication strategy and intention to keep the contract of polite and peaceful communication in the room. Though carrying some impolite import, the next move by X can be seen to have been modified and couched in a way that co-operates with the conversational contract held on to by Y by being lighter (consider the use of ‘jare’ and the paralinguistic “mtchew”) and funnier, while the male chatter laughs it off.

In Plate 5, the exchange looks rather more heated than the other examples examined in this study. One feature that remains constant however, is the presence of an interactant who wants to and actually does maintain the peace by struggling to eke out politeness from the potentially

impolite moves around them. The major participants identified seem to be Virtuoso, Cuterose and Lizzybaby whose interpretation of the word 'suck' is different from the slangy slant it comes with. She succeeds in forcing this miscommunication on the other participants thus making them bend and subscribe to the conversational contract of politeness. This rapport management strategy also heavily relies on the interpretation of each interactant's personality as positioned in the relational work theory. The participants' aspect of context is therefore based on the sex and personality roles assumed by each chatter in the room. From his tone as well as the content of his first move, Virtuoso exudes the image of a boy who is subscribing to the chauvinist bias that most guys enjoy in the room. In this case however, he faces stiff opposition and threat to both his face and survival in that community. Even the other seemingly male chatters do not seem to have his back but it took the intervention of Cuterose, using the strategy of misinterpretation and distortion of meaning and intention (decoder-generated miscommunication) to both maintain politeness in her response as well as impose politeness on the chat ultimately.

Face-Negotiation, FTA Mitigation and SIP Maintenance Through Emoticons

Emoticons usage is another important strategy of miscommunication observed in the data. The strategy is found to be apt and multi-faceted as it is found in all the chat samples performing various functions but with the same goal of rapport management.

In plate 1, the 'confused' face is contributing to avoidance strategy in a way while also mitigating the threat that such implication of obscurity poses to X's competence face (just as it lessens the impact of avoidance of X's message and intention in Plate 4). If X finds it to mean that Y does not want to hear such a thing, it remains a threat still, but to his fellowship face. That effect is however, lessened through the emoticon which 'attracts sympathy for the confused Y' rather than 'apathy for her impudence' same as when she highlights the nascency of their friendship as a ground for refusing a meeting (just as Y in plate 2 does while insisting that the virtual community in which they are currently operating is to be their only platform for interaction). Y uses another emoticon, a smile, to lessen the effect of her refusal to give out her address or exact location as X's fellowship face would have required and adds a thumbs up to positively reinforce his competence face at agreeing to drop the issue.

In Plate 5, Lizzybaby uses the smile to dispel tension as she obviously misinterprets 'sucks'. The emoticon helps to signal that she admits misinterpreting but that it is in a bid to re-orient the chat towards appropriate SIPs of cordiality and face need.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that there is a positive use for miscommunication in politeness studies. As can be deduced from the 2go chat exchanges analysed, interactants behave communicatively in manners that can be termed as polite within the purview of a myriad of politeness theories, but by using an unusual strategy which we call decoder-generated miscommunication. Miscommunication as used here is to be conceptualised not in its ordinary or conventional meaning of unintended interpretation of expressions (Tzanne, 2000), but as a deliberate effort from a respondent to twist the meaning that got across to them. While

miscommunication in the conventional sense proceeds largely from the speaker and the message gets waived due to an improper recognition of the factors of context, miscommunication as a politeness strategy ensues from the hearer who twists the message received to suit their perceived (negotiated) context for politeness. In a nutshell, its findings are that:

1. throughout all the exchanges analysed, chatters are willing to subscribe to the rules of netiquette which includes 2go's strict warning against abusive language. It is thus not all too difficult for an encoder who has made an earlier impolite move to switch the tone to suit the polite tone insisted upon by the decoder and thus minimising flame wars,
2. paralinguage, in the form of emoticons, plays a key role in the negotiation of the context. In most of the instances observed, it is a very reliable instrument for measuring the state of the chatters' emotions as they flare up and cool down. But more importantly, it functions directly in the context of miscommunication in cases whereby the decoder uses it to make out a lack of comprehension of the encoder's (impolite) move as a polite way of demanding a re-phrasing, re-wording or recanting. Successive verbal or paralinguistic responses then follow to specify the (polite) meaning that the decoder would rather have, and
3. context is a predominant driving force in the interpretation and negotiation of politeness on 2go. This context is however being constantly negotiated itself by the particular chatters in a certain conversation. Exchange 1 apparently explains how the decoder in that context negotiates the context: switching from the "we-meet-online-and-book-a-real-date" context of culture on 2go to a less expected "we-are-strangers-so-don't-push-for-too-much-familiarity" context of situation which would be more expected in real-life interactions.

As such, miscommunication flows into the mainstream politeness theories like the face theory (Brown & Levinson 1987, Lim and Bowers, 1991), the maxims/principles theory (Spencer-Oatey and Jiang, 2003), the conversations contract theory (Mills, 2005) and finally the CMC context-specific theory of netiquette.

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Appendix

Plate 1. Hasty 'real life' meeting turned down

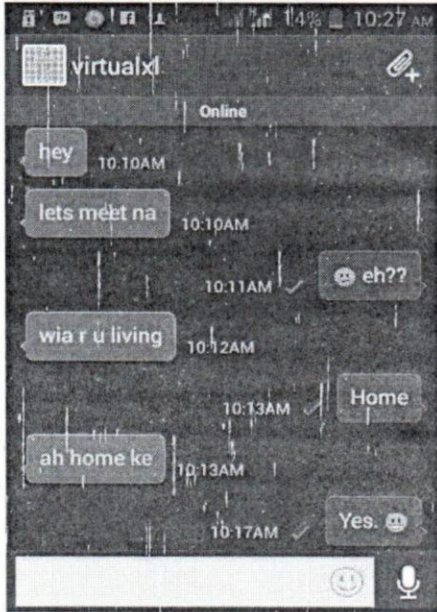


Plate 1 continued

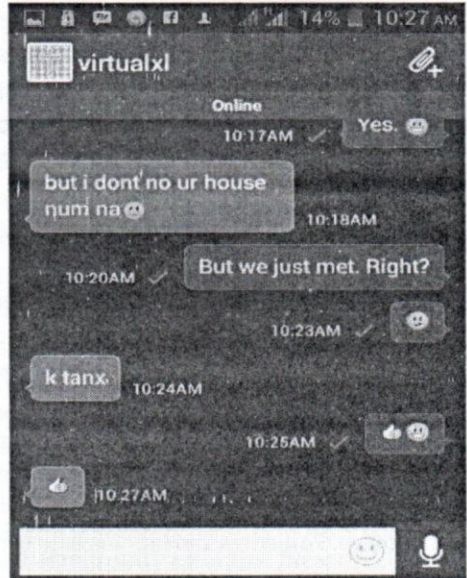


Plate 2. Virtual Community is 'real life'

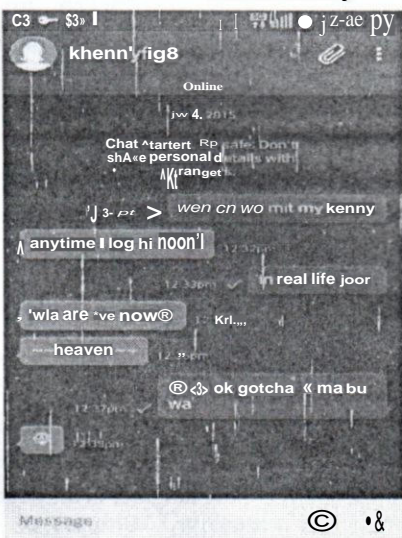


Plate 3. Don't call me 'mad', I'm mad

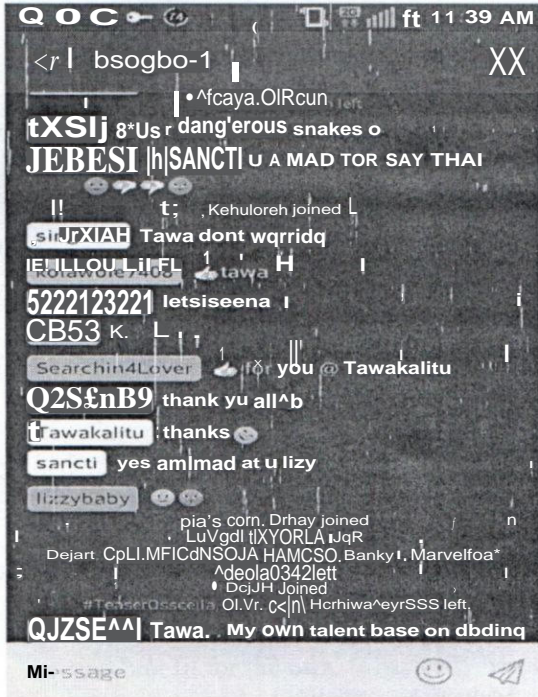


Plate 3 Continued

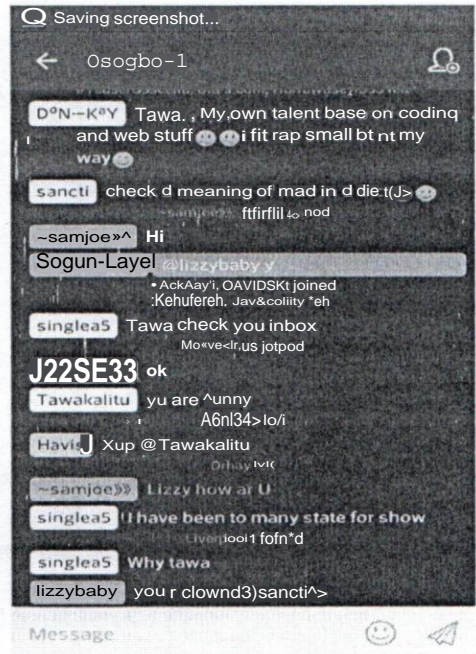


Plate 4. Sameness of physiology vs essence

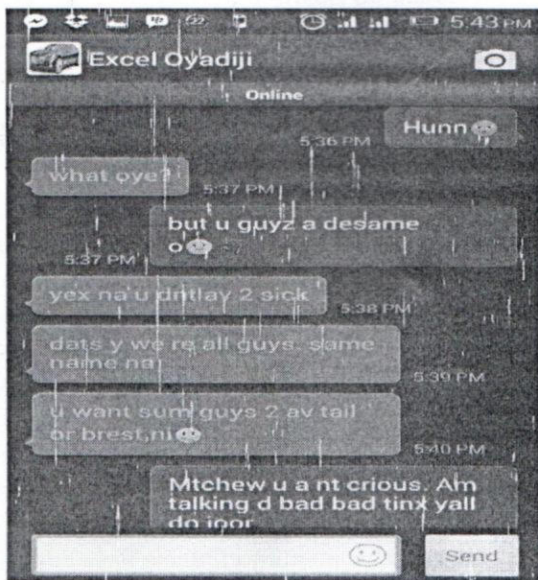


Plate 4 Continued

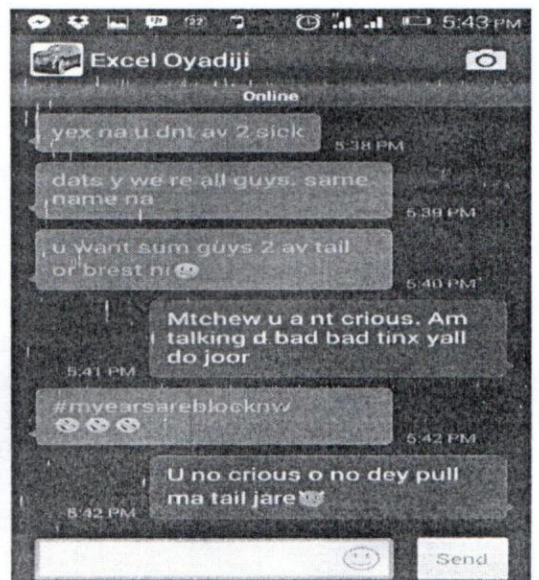


Plate 5. Battle of the sexes

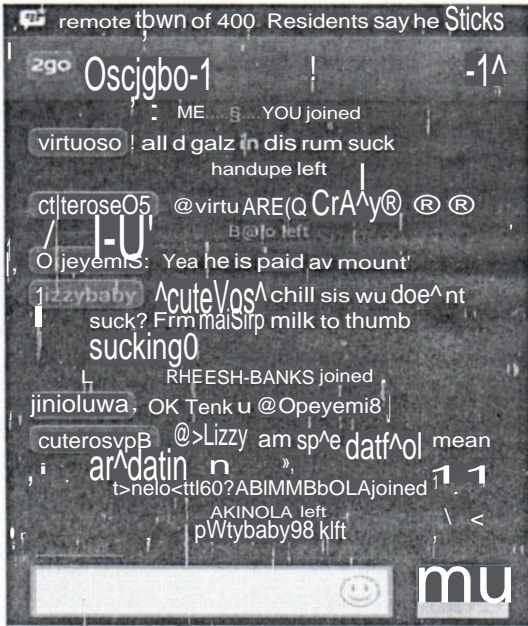


Plate 5 Continued

