Chapter 35
The YouTubification of Politics, Impoliteness and Polarization

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ABSTRACT

This aim of this chapter is to relate deindividuation to impoliteness and impoliteness to polarization. To that effect, sequences extracted from the comments section to videoclips posted on YouTube and related to the 2008 US primaries and presidential elections were subjected to a quantitative and a qualitative analysis. The analysis sought to confirm the hypothesis that polarization, within this context, would be related to an increase in positive impoliteness strategies. Also, this chapter raises important questions regarding the applicability of current theories of impoliteness to the study of polyloguic, intergroup communication as most of their tenets were developed to tackle dyadic, interpersonal communication. Impoliteness is seen as multifunctional within the context analyzed and, contrary to general belief, it is argued that it can be also constitutive, rather than just disruptive, of communal life.

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this paper is to identify recurrent patterns of discourse and link them to polarization. Polarization is here defined, following Lee (2007, p. 385) as the trend found in individuals, after a group discussion, “…to endorse a more extreme position in the direction already favored by the group”. To that effect, sequences of comments posted as responses to YouTube videoclips related to the US 2008 primaries and presidential elections are analyzed. In these sequences, participants discussed the merits of a given candidate/policy/ideology/party. Some of the participants involved were pro the issue at hand, others were against it. No agreement or consensus was reached within the specific sequence. Furthermore, all sequences included in the corpus contain language that can be deemed face-threatening, i.e. impolite within this context. Face and impoliteness are not unproblematic concepts. Therefore, a section of the paper will be devoted to a discussion of how they are here understood.

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Although polarization is currently receiving significant attention, both within academia and the American press, most of the scholarly works reviewed do not provide a description of how participants “do” polarization, i.e. what type of pragmalinguistic resources are used to convey polarized positions. The main hypothesis of this paper is that polarization can be related to an increase in impoliteness strategies, more specifically those strategies conveying positive impoliteness. With this in mind, in the analysis of the data, patterns are sought at the micro-level through a close study of the impoliteness strategies used to realize the conversational moves. Then, any patterns at the macro level or lines of argumentation recurrently used in the corpus and related to polarization are sought, identified and described.

The study of IM-politeness in deindividuated, on-line contents has implications for theories of IM-politeness. It shows that impoliteness is not necessarily a way to destabilize relationships (Kienpointner 2008), but also may be used to construct communal life (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2009, 2010). In the context of mediated polylogues, as the one under study, impoliteness is multifunctional: it is used against the out-group to create a sense of “us versus them” by making their attributes undesirable, and to heighten a sense of membership in the in-group. Also, this paper argues that IM-politeness theories need to be extended to account for intergroup communication, i.e. instances in which social identity, versus individual identity, is salient.

YOUTUBE AND AMERICAN POLITICS

As indicated above, the sequences that make up the corpus on which the present study is based were extracted from the comments to videos posted on YouTube. YouTube was launched on February 15, 2005 as a personal video sharing service. Today, it has become an “entertainment destination” where people watch more than 100 million videos on the site daily (YouTube Fact Sheet). Nielsen Net Ratings reports that YouTube has almost 20 million unique users per month. With a 70% of users claiming to be from the USA (Lange 2007), YouTube’s impact on US politics was first noticed during the congress electoral campaign of 2006. However, the 2008 primaries and presidential elections have witnessed the “YouTubification” of politics. (May 2008).

Grove (2008: 28) reports that “…each of the 16 one time presidential candidates had YouTube channels; seven announced their candidacies on YouTube. Their staffs uploaded thousands of videos that were viewed tens of millions of times.” Also, advocacy groups, non-profit organizations and ordinary citizens actively participated in the electoral conversation by posing their messages on YouTube. Furthermore, news organizations launched YouTube channels, among others, the Associated Press, New York Times, the BBC, and The Wall Street Journal. Grove points out that YouTube provides a useful sounding board for politicians as 20% of YouTube users are over age 55; the same percentage who is under 18, which means that the YouTube audience “…roughly mirrors the national population” (Grove ibid, p. 29). Moreover, crucially for the purposes of this paper, YouTube has been described as the world’s largest town hall for political debate, where voters connect with other voters, candidates and the media no longer constrained by conventional barriers of time and space.

Public forums, such as YouTube, where citizens engage in discussions about the public good, constitute instances of public discourse. As defined by Sellers (2004, p.15): “Public discourse … regards public policy, as distinguished from private discourse among citizens seeking to develop their own private friendships and interests”. Sellers states that civility constitutes the standard of behavior that should govern public discourse.