

Mind your P's and Q's

When **politeness** helps and hurts
in online communities

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A combination of deductive and inductive approaches to modeling polite language in online communities that reveals when politeness (or rudeness) is more effective.

Deductive approach

We have developed a coding manual based on Brown & Levinson's (1978, 1987) theory of linguistic politeness. It contains 25 specific politeness strategies (e.g. "Question, hedge" or "Give or ask for a reason") with examples drawn from discussion groups on a wide variety of topics.

We are currently applying the codes to the messages to determine which strategies are perceived as most polite and which are most effective in starting conversations.

Research goals

We seek to understand how politeness affects the experiences that people have in online communities. Does polite conflict resolution lead a Wikipedia editor to be promoted to admin status? Do polite responses to newcomers in health support groups cause those newcomers to help others in the future? Does it get you killed in World of Warcraft?

To understand that, we are building a model of politeness driven both by linguistic politeness theory and bottom-up perceptions of politeness.

Inductive approach

Method

576 messages were randomly selected from 12 online discussion groups on a variety of topics including diabetes, atheism, C programming, math, and quilting. Each message was the first in its thread and thus likely an attempt to start a conversation.

Participants (N=194) who passed a simple English grammar quiz rated 48 counterbalanced messages on a 7-point scale from "very rude" to "very polite." Each message received an average of 14 ratings (Cronbach's alpha=0.93).

We performed a negative binomial regression on the number of replies each message received to determine the effectiveness of politeness (or rudeness) in starting a conversation.

Results

Politeness interacts with group norms to determine how many replies an author will receive. Controlling for average reply rates in each group, **politeness triples replies** in math and programming groups, while **rudeness triples replies** in the atheism group. We are currently examining the content and valence of the replies. Full details in accompanying paper.



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