Impoliteness in Reader Comments on Japanese Online News Sites

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Abstract—**Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) has become an important part of human communication nowadays. When communicating using computers or digital media, people seem to behave differently when compared to face-to-face communication, especially in anonymous settings. When expressing their opinions in such an environment, people tend to write more directly and sometimes emotionally, without taking into consideration other people's face. Some may even be deliberately impolite or offensive on some occasions. Although impoliteness in CMC has started to attract researchers' attention, little is known in regard to factors triggering impoliteness or making people emotional in CMC. Drawing upon data collected from readers' comments on Japanese online news articles, this study has observed some clear differences in terms of impoliteness of the language used across threads of comments on different topics. Although on the surface, it seems that the topic of discussion has an influence upon the participants, this study claims that social identity, group face and gender are among the most important factors triggering impoliteness in Japanese CMC.**

Index Terms—**Impoliteness, computer-mediated communication (CMC), Japanese, reader comments.**

I. INTRODUCTION

As the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become an increasingly important part of human communication, language use in CMC has emerged as a new area for linguistic research. Some studies have found that when communicating using computers or digital media, people seem to behave differently than in face-to-face communication, even more so in anonymous settings. When expressing their opinions in such an environment, people seem to write more directly and sometimes emotionally, without taking into consideration other people's face. Some may even be deliberately impolite or offensive on some occasions. It has been pointed out that "physical anonymity may lead to a certain loss of self-awareness and, in turn, to lesser inhibition" in CMC [1] (p. 2581), and that "anonymity not only fosters playful disinhibition (Danet *et al.* 1997), but reduces social accountability, making it easier for users to engage in hostile, aggressive acts" [2] (p. 212). It has also been claimed that the fact that discussion boards provide for two-way anonymous message transmission, "makes them a potential hotbed for conflict since anonymity can lead to an increase in conflictive behaviour in online settings" [3]. In addition, "[t]he possibility of quoting in discussion boards

also aids conflict because by repeatedly quoting a flaming message it is easier to keep the conflict active" [4] (p. 353). Although im/politeness in CMC has started to attract researchers' attention, little is known in regard to factors triggering hostile and aggressive acts or motivating people to write impolitely and emotionally in CMC. Even the most casual investigation of readers' comments on different topics posted on Japanese online news sites reveals differences in terms of the posters' attitudes and emotions toward the issue being discussed. The extent of tension between the participants also varies according to the topic. That is, while people sometimes discuss issues or share ideas calmly and peacefully, at other times the discussions almost smell of gunpowder, with highly aggressive or offensive expressions being used and strong emotions conveyed. This then raises the question: What is the relation between the topic and people's behaviour or attitude in CMC? In other words, do particular topics influence the way people behave? Or is it other factors that motivate people to express im/politeness or strong emotion?

To answer these questions, this study collected readers' comments on three different topics posted on Japanese online news sites, and analysed them from the viewpoints of types of speech acts and face-attacking actions. Differences between postings according to gender were also investigated. The study showed that, although on the surface it is the topic that makes people behave differently in CMC, the key issues behind this difference relate to the participants' social identity and face. Face is a central issue in im/politeness. In multi-party communications such as discussions in CMC, the group face or social face of the participants plays a more important role than each participant's individual face. When participants have strong awareness of their identity and feel that their social or group face is being threatened or attacked, they start to behave aggressively and emotionally, and in some cases engage in verbal abuse toward each other or a third party. The study also confirmed that male participants post the clear majority of the aggressive comments. This study therefore claims that social identity, group face and gender are among the important factors that trigger impoliteness in Japanese CMC.

In the following sections, some key concepts, face and im/politeness, language use and gender, will be discussed first, followed by a description of the procedure and steps of data collection and analysis. Details of the findings will then be discussed, before a conclusion in the last section.

II. FACE AND IMPOLITENESS

Deriving from Goffman's account of face-work, Brown

and Levinson [5] define "Face", the concept central to their politeness theory, as the "public self-image" or the "positive social value" a person effectively wants to claim for himself (p. 61). The concept of "Face Wants" consists of two related aspects: "the want to be unimpeded" (p. 58) (i.e., negative face) and "the want to be approved of in certain respects" (p. 61-62) (i.e., positive face). According to Brown and Levinson, all competent adult members of a society not only have their own face, but also are aware of their interlocutor's face. Politeness in communication is achieved through the use of face-work strategies, such as maintaining each other's face. Impoliteness, on the other hand, can occur when a person's face is being threatened, that is, when a face-threatening act (FTA) is performed (p. 65-70). While Brown and Levinson discuss face as a tangible object enacted through an individual, some later research claims that face is relational, social and an identity-boundary issue. Drawing on social psychological theories of identity, Spencer-Oatey [6] analyses face and identity in interaction and claims that Brown and Levinson's concepts of negative face and positive face cannot explain the complexity of face in real-life situations, as one utterance could sometimes function as both face-enhancement and face-threat. Her examples also illustrate situations where what is primarily at stake is the face of a group rather than face of each of the individual members (p. 646). That is, face "belongs" to not only individuals but also collectives (p. 654). According to Spencer-Oatey [6], there are three types of face: *quality face*, *social identity face* and *relational face*. She defines *quality face* as people's fundamental desire to be positively evaluated by others in terms of their personal qualities; and *social identity face* as people's fundamental desire to be acknowledged and upheld in terms of their social identities or roles. In regard to *relational face,* she explains that sometimes one's different social roles "entail a relational component that is intrinsic to the evaluation" (cited in [7] p. 28-30). When discussing the concept of social identity face, Culpeper [7] points out that one feels that their social identity face is being threatened when "offence is induced by a claim that somebody is not part of a group that they would wish to be part of or claiming that they are part of a group that they would not wish to be part of" (p. 29). Kádár, Haugh and Chang [4] also claim that "face should be analysed not only at the level of interpersonal interaction but also at the intergroup level" (p. 343). The notions of group face and the social identity face are especially important when investigating impoliteness in online polylogues [1], [8], as in many situations, the key issue "is not about individual face so much as it is about the enactment of belonging to a specific social group, which is constituted in opposition to another social group" [8] (p. 174). These provide the current study with useful tools to answer the research questions, by identifying what exactly motivates people to behave differently in terms of im/politeness when posting comments on Japanese online news sites. (Details are to be discussed in later sections.)

While the notion of face is being more and more widely discussed among researchers, the amount of research on impoliteness has been increasing dramatically as a well. Many scholars have attempted to define and discuss impoliteness from different points of view, but there is yet to be a generally agreed-upon definition. Many researchers do not agree with

Brown and Levinson's view of impoliteness, which they claim is a result of the absence of the expected face-work, and claim that impoliteness can be conducted intentionally and to serve social purposes (for example, see [9]-[12] and others). That is, impoliteness does not only function negatively as face-threatening or is a violation of the social norms which are commonly accepted and followed by members of the society. It "can also be used to establish alliances through conflict discourse, thus reinforcing the individual's feeling of belonging" to a specific group [8] (p. 150). Summarising claims made in previous studies, Perelmutter wrote, "when tension is present between individual and group face wants, impoliteness can be used to establish, reinforce, or (re)negotiate values salient to the group". Impoliteness therefore can "have a positive sociability function such as establishing and reinforcing community norms ...... or contributing to alliance-building". It is for this reason that impoliteness "can be ratified/expected within a group; this communally-ratified impoliteness is often enacted within specific and recognizable genres, such as the flamewar" [8] (p. 150-151). These claims made in previous studies help to explain why it seems that, in some online discussions, the participants are tolerant of verbal aggression or share a similar aggressive attitude.

III. GENDER AND LANGUAGE USE IN CMC

Pioneered by Herring's work on language and gender, gender disparity in CMC has been widely investigated. As Herring observes, it has been repeatedly reported that "traditional gender differences carry over into CMC, in discourse style and patterns of disparity and harassment" [13] (p. 218), despite the fact that CMC is distinct from traditional types of communication in terms of the physical or geographical distance between participants and by virtue of its asynchronous and anonymous nature. This challenges some earlier optimistic views, which suggested that cyberspace could be a gender-free platform of communication where all participants can speak equally without concerns of gender-based power and status differentials, as gender is invisible or irrelevant when dispersed users are collected on the Internet. Researchers explain the reason for the same gender-differences having been found in CMC as in face-to-face communication as being that "the development and uses of any technology are themselves embedded in a social context, and are shaped by that context (Kling et al. 2001)" (cited in [13] p. 203). Some systematic differences that have been reported repeatedly by many previous studies (e.g., [2], [13], [14] etc.) include that while female users in CMC tend to use neutral and polite words and often express their personal feelings, male users tend to use more violent verbs, profanity and offensive vocabulary. Male users also write more and longer messages, and often express strong assertions, disagreement and impoliteness toward others. (For a detailed review see [14] on p. 427-428.) Reference [13] also clearly points out "the fundamental failure of a 'self-regulating' democracy on the Internet to produce equitable participation: when left to its own devices, libertarianism favours the most aggressive

individuals, who tend to be male" (p. 209). These reported differences between genders have been observed in the data in the current study also. Details are to be discussed in Section V.

IV. DATA

As briefly mentioned earlier, data for this study are readers' comments posted on Japanese online news sites. The data include comments on three news articles published on Ameba News http://news.ameba.jp, a major news site allowing readers' comments. The site requires a member registration to write on the site, and all the news articles, readers' comments and each poster's username are entirely open access to public viewing. The public can also access the poster's profile by clicking on the hyperlinked poster's name. The poster's profile usually contains personal information such as gender, age, occupation, hobbies and personal blogs. This facilitates the current study to confirm the gender of each poster. News articles on the Ameba homepage are classified under tags of "Top", "Domestic", "Economy", "Entertainment", "Overseas" etc., and can also be searched by rankings of the day, the week, or the month. Among the three news articles and the comments on them, two were collected in the last week of August 2015, ranked as the top of the week in the areas of domestic and overseas respectively. The titles of the articles are *How much do you need for a "comfortable old age"?* (hereafter as "N1-Comfortable" for convenience sake) and *"Shut up Japanese! Go Harakiri!" – Vice-president of Russia expressed he's umbrage at Japanese protest against Russia's president's visit to Iturup Island (*hereafter as "N3-Russian"). Since the comments on these two articles seem to represent very different characters in terms of the entire mood of the conversation and the attitude or emotion of the participants, a third set of comments were collected in the last week in March 2016. Considering that the article on "comfortable old age" is about an issue facing everyone and the article reporting the Russian vice-president can easily boost readers' feelings of social identity, an article on "mum friends" was chosen, as it is an issue concerning only a certain and limited group members of the society, but not everyone. The article was ranked among those most accessed and commented on, although it was not the top article of the week. The topic of the article is *The most hated thing to do in a mum friends group* (hereafter referred as "N2-Mum friends").

The data were first transcribed into Excel spreadsheets, where each individual comment is assigned a unique number (e.g., C01) and each poster's name is coded (e.g., P01). In cases in which one post consists of multiple sentences, for the sake of the investigation, each of the sentences is placed into a single row on the spreadsheet with a unique number (e.g. C02-1, C02-2, etc.) indicating which comment the sentence belongs to and also the sequence of the sentences within the comment. The total number of participants (the posters), comments and sentences of each set of comments are as in Table I below.

Gender information of each poster is also added to the spreadsheet as (F) for female and (M) for male, according to information provided on each poster's profile page. Only a few posters did not identify their gender. These comments are marked as "Undisclosed" on the spreadsheet and excluded when discussing gender issues. Details of the numbers of females and males who commented on each news article are presented in Table II.

TABLE I: NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS, COMMENTS AND SENTENCES IN THE DATA SET

	Participants	Comments	Sentences
N1-Comfortable	43	45	97
N2-Mum friends	48	49	131
N3-Russian	61	73	165

TABLE II: GENDER INFORMATION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

	Female	Male	Undisclosed
N1-Comfortable	23	19	1
N2-Mum friends	27	20	1
N3-Russian	20	40	1

Although information provided on the profile pages may not be their real-life gender identities, this is at least how they choose to present and characterise themselves in this particular virtual community. More importantly, most of the features of discourse observed in the data seem to match the gender identity provided.
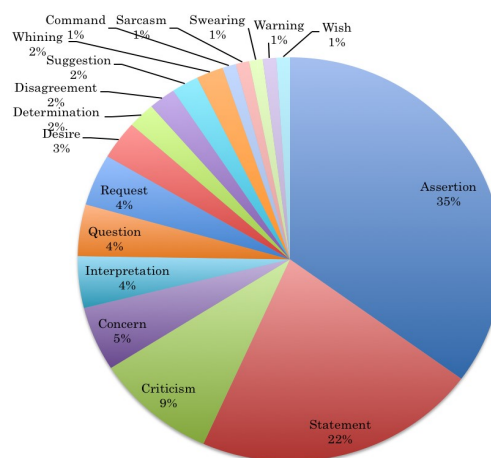
V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

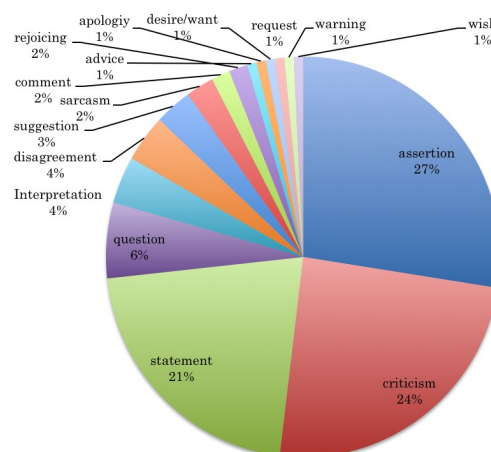Fig. 1. Speech acts observed in N1-comfortable.

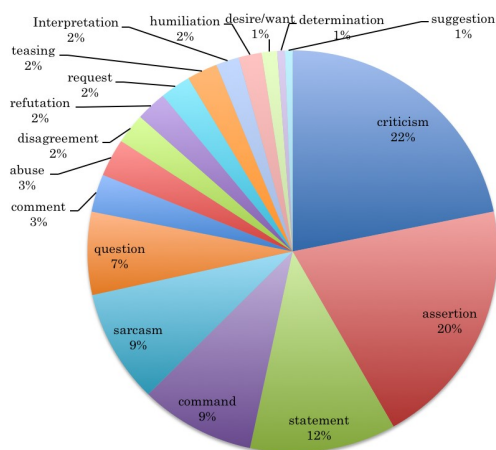Fig. 2. Speech acts observed in N2-mum friends.

Fig. 3. Speech acts observed in N3-Russian.

To investigate impoliteness in the readers' comments on the Japanese online news sites, data were first examined from the viewpoints of speech acts to see what readers did by posting comments, whether they were exchanging information, expressing their own ideas or opinions, or were criticising others. The top three types of speech acts commonly observed across the three sets of comments are statement, assertion and criticism, although the frequencies of occurrence of these speech acts in each of the three sets are different due to the different natures of the news articles. Details are as follows.

If we compare the top five types of speech acts that occurred in the three sets of comments, then concern, interpretation, question, command and sarcasm need to be added to the list as well, as shown in Table III.

TABLE III: THE MOST FREQUENTLY USED SPEECH ACTS OBSERVED IN THE DATA SET

	N1-Comfortable	N2-Mum friends	N3-Russian
Criticism	9 (9%)	32 (24%)	36 (22%)
Assertion	34 (35%)	36 (27%)	33 (20%)
Statements	21 (22%)	28 (21%)	19 (12%)
Command	1 (1%)	0	15 (9%)
Sarcasm	1 (1%)	3 (2%)	15 (9%)
Question	4 (4%)	8 (6%)	11 (7%)
Interpretation	4 (4%)	5 (4%)	3 (2%)
Concern	5 (5%)	0	0

To make it easier to compare the frequencies of each of the most frequently occurring speech acts in the three sets of comments, the figures presented in Table III are re-presented in Fig. 4 below.

As can be seen from Fig. 1-Fig. 4 and Table 3, when commenting on N1-comfortable, participants seem to mainly express their opinions or understanding/interpretations about the issues being discussed, that is, how much one may need for a comfortable golden age. Some even wrote their concerns about themselves or the country as a whole, or put forward a question they had. Among the total of 97 sentences (in the 45 comments as presented in Table I), the top speech act observed is assertion, which expresses the posters' views or opinions about the topic (34 sentences making up 35% of the total). The second most frequently observed speech act is statement, which was found in 21 (22%) sentences, by which posters added additional and related information. There are 9

examples of criticism toward the government, politicians (Example 1 C02-1/P02 (M), the first sentence in comment C02 posted by poster P02 who is a male), people who are unfairly living on pensions (Example 2) and people who are still trying to save instead of investing money (Example 3). There is also one example of sarcasm toward the country (Example 4) and one command toward the financial adviser who was mentioned in the news report (Example 5). The expressions used in these examples are neutral, although a face-attack action is conducted in each of these examples.

1) C02-1/P02 (M)
   Mukashi no seijika ga warui.
   past GEN politicians NOM bad
   (Politicians at the time should be blamed.
   [Lit. Politicians in the past were not good.])

2) C17-3/P17 (M)
   Kanzenni kuni o kuimono ni shiteiru.
   completely country OBJ food PAR do-ing
   ([They] are completely living on the country's [pension].
   [Lit. They are eating the country.)

3) C09-1/P09 (F)
   Ahona hito wa mada tameru yoona kangae ga aru mitai desu.
   foolish people TOP still save like thought NOM have seem COP
   (It seems that some fools still think that [they should] save money.)

4) C26-1/P25 (F)
   Roojin ga anshinshite sumenai utsukushii kuni nihon!
   aged-people NOM having-peaceful-mind cannot-live beautiful country Japan
   (Japan, a wonderful country where aged people cannot live without worries!)

5) C22-3/P21 (M)
   Negoto wa nete ie
   sleeping-talk TOP sleep-ing say-IMP
   (Don't talk nonsense!
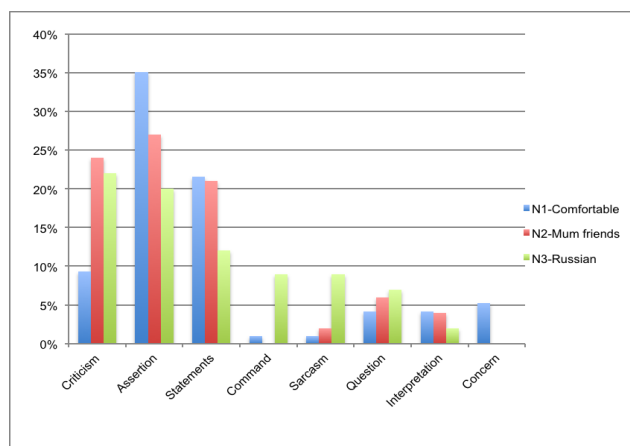   [Lit. Talk somniloquies only when you are sleeping.])

Fig. 4. The most frequently used speech acts observed in the data set.

It needs to be pointed out that the adjective *ahona* "foolish" is the only offensive expression found in this set of comments. From the examples presented above, we can see that even when posting critical messages or expressing frustration or unhappiness with sarcasm or using the imperative form, the posters still used neutral language rather than being offensive or performing verbal abuse. Taking this into consideration, together with the fact that assertion (34%) and statement (22%) make up more than half of the total comments, it can be claimed that participants posted their comments on this topic (N1-comfortable) rather objectively and calmly without too much emotion involved.

The frequencies of the three top types of speech acts observed in comments on N2-mum friends differ somewhat from those on N1-comfortable, as shown in Table III and Fig. 4. Although assertion (27%) is again the most frequent, the number of criticisms (24%) exceeded that of statements (21%), which placed criticism second in this set of comments (compared with third in the comments on N1-comfortable). Targets of the critical comments also differ from those discussed earlier. Participants in this thread of communication seem to form three groups – (1) females who are housewives belonging to a group of mum friends, (2) females who are not housewives or who do not have any mum friends and (3) males. The examples of criticism observed in this data set can be classified in relation to these three groups. Some are posted by females in one group to criticize members in the other (e.g., a non-housewife vis-à-vis housewives in Example 6), some by males criticizing women and their discussions in general (Examples 7 and 8), and some are replies to an earlier comment (Example 9). An example of a comment toward the news writer is observed also (Example 10).

6) C02-1/P02 (F)
   Shufu nante konna mon desu yo.
   housewife INT this-kind thing COP SFP
   (Housewives are just like this.)

7) C34-1/P33 (M)
   Obahan-tachi no kaiwa wa kuroi wa
   old-women-PL GEN conversation TOP black SFP
   (Old women's discussions are sinister.)

8) C44/P43 (M)
   Maido bakabakashii o-hanashi de ...
   always ludicrous PRE-talk COP
   ([Their (i.e. females')] discussions are always ludicrous …)

9) C45/P44 (F)
   Hidoi
   cruel
   ([You are so] cruel)

10) C40-1/P39 (F)
    Mamatomo o sanbishiteiru tokoro kara, kono kiji wa machigatteiru.
    mum-friend OBJ praise-ing point from this news TOP is-wrong
    (This news article is wrong, as it is praising mum friends.)

Several issues have emerged in the above examples, which need to be highlighted here. The first is the use of the interjection *nante* and the noun *mon,* the colloquial form of *mono* ("thing") in Example 6. Both these two expressions function to show that the speaker treats something or somebody with contempt. By using these expressions in the comment, the female poster P02 not only criticized housewives, members of the other female group in the communication, but also did it emotionally by looking down on them. The second point that needs additional attention is that the male participant P33 used the word *obahan* in Example 7, instead of its formal form *obasan* ("auntie", "old woman/women"). In the Japanese language and its culture, it is considered rude to call a female *obasan,* unless it is used to refer to or address a relative "auntie". Using the word *obahan* (*obasan* in the Kansai dialect) indicates that he is heckling female members. This in turn makes his sentence even more offensive. It also needs to be mentioned that *bakabakashii* ("ludicrous") in Example 8 is also an offensive word. Other offensive words such as *aho, baka* ("fool(ish)") *kuso* ("shit"), *saru* ("monkey", used to refer to mum friends) are also observed in four different comments all written by male members. Among the 32 examples of criticism in this set of comments, 20 (i.e., almost two thirds) are from males, although males are a minority in this communication (27 females vs. 20 males as shown in Table 2). The third point is regarding Example 10. It is a reply to Example 9 where a male participant P43 says that females' discussions are always ludicrous. This is against women in general rather than any particular individual such as the female participant coded as P44 here. However, participant P44 perceived the comments as offensive, and fought back by posting, "You are so cruel". What is behind this conflict is apparently not an issue of anyone's individual face being threatened or attacked, but an issue of group face.

Compared with the comments on N1-comfortable discussed earlier, it can be seen clearly that there is more criticism, more conflict and more impoliteness, either between the participants or toward a third party. One factor that can be considered as the reason is the type of groups involved. When commenting on N1-comfortable, the news article on personal financial planning for a comfortable golden age, which is an issue facing everyone in the country, the participants seem to have formed one single interest group in the online community. However, when discussing issues like mum friends (N2-mum friends), it is clear that participants fall into at least three distinct groups, as discussed earlier. The participants' feelings of belonging or not belonging to a particular group, their social identity and group face emerge in the discussion. Therefore, some become aggressive and attack the individual face of members of other groups or their group face, and some feel offended when their individual face or group face is being threatened or attacked. That is, social identity and group face can trigger the expression of impoliteness in CMC on the Internet. This claim can be further verified when we examine comments on N3-Russian, as the sense of belonging to different groups/nations becomes even stronger when dealing with international or bilateral issues. In other words, participants' awareness of different groups and national identities, and

different group/national face wants trigger the use of aggressive and hostile language.

Recalling information presented in Fig. 3 and Fig. 4, we can see that criticism is the most frequently observed speech act in the comments on N3-Russian. The frequencies of assertion and statement, however, are dramatically lower (only 20% are assertion and 12% statement), when compared with those found in comments on N1-comfortable and N2-mum friends. On the other hand, the frequencies of sarcasm and command both increased. These figures indicate that many people involved here are not calmly expressing their opinions or exchanging information on the topic, but doing something else more subjectively and emotionally. Taking a close look into the comments, it is found that the criticism, sarcasm and command do not only target the Russian vice-president who made the controversial remark "Shut up Japanese! Go Harakiri!" (Example 11) or politicians (Example 12), but in many comments also extend to the entire Russian nation (e.g., Example 13). Some are also toward the Japanese government (Example 14) and other participants (Example 15).

11) C46-02/P60 (F)

Nihon no seishin o rikaishitenai kuseni

Japan GEN spirit OBJ understand-ing-NEG though

([He] has no idea about the Japanese spirit.)

12) C32/P29 (M) (reposted as C33/P16 (M))

Kooiu kudaranai gendoo o suru baka-tachi ga iru kara itsu made tattemo sensoo ga nakunaranai

this-kind stupid words-and-deeds OBJ do fool-PLR NOM there-are when till war NOM disappear-NEG

(Because of these fools who make such stupid statements and actions, wars will never disappear no matter after how many years.)

13) C04-2/P03 (M)

Kuso roshia-jin wa damatte-ro!!

Shit Russians TOP shut-up-IMP

(Shit Russians, Shut up!)

14) C11/P10 (M)

"Ikan!! Ikan!!" to shika ienai nihon seifu mo nasakenai !!

regret regret QUA only can-say Japan government also disgusted

(I am also disgusted with the Japanese government!! They can only say "Regret!! Regret!!")

15) C34-03 (M)

Kangaete komentoshiro yo, nihon no haji no Erikku yo.

think comment SFP Japan GEN shame GEN (name) SFP

(Think before you comment, Eric, you are shame of Japan.)

As these examples show, expressions used by posters in this set of comments are much stronger, when they are compared with the examples found in the other two sets of comments examined earlier. It is also evident that the exclamation mark is used intensively and that swearing and offensive language appear frequently (e.g., *baka* "fool(ish)", *kuso* "shit", *haji* "shame"). Offensive language and swearing

expressions including these three are observed in 29 comments in this data set, of which 2 are posted by females, 2 are from the participant who did not disclose their gender information on the profile page; the rest are all by male posters. The characteristics of this set of comments indicate that this news report, to be more precise, the Russian vice-president's words turned all the Japanese people into his enemies. In other words, the participants feel that their group face is being threatened and attacked by an outsider. This enhances the feeling of belonging amongst Japanese nationals. Further, this also indicates the posters' awareness of identity, and in turn encourages them to behave aggressively and to perform varying types of verbal abuse by attacking the individual face of the Russian vice-president, the group face of Russian people in general, and the face of posters (such as Eric in Example 15) who seem to be less strongly against the Russian vice-president or Russian people. Impoliteness performed here also has a sociability function, as pointed out by previous studies: "when tension is present between individual and group face wants, impoliteness can be used to establish, reinforce, or (re)negotiate values salient to the group" [8] (p. 149). It functions to "establish alliances through conflict discourse, thus reinforcing the individual's feeling of belonging to a specific group" [8] (p. 150). By performing the face-attacking acts using hostile and offensive language, posters established stronger awareness of their national identity and reinforced their feeling of belonging to the nation/group.

VI. CONCLUSION

Investigating the data collected from Japanese online new sites, this study compared three sets of readers' comments on different news articles, two on domestic issues and one international (bilateral). On the surface, it seems that the topic of discussion is directly related to the participants' attitude and their language use. By carefully examining the speech act(s) of each set of comments, and the relationships between the posters and how the issue being discussed relates to them, this study confirms that when participants belong to different social groups in a CMC community, they tend to have stronger awareness of their social identities and feelings of belonging or not belonging to a particular group. When discussing international or bilateral issues, these feelings are further boosted. It is the identity and participants' group face want which triggered the performance of impoliteness in these cases. This study also confirms that males tend to post more impolite comments than females in terms of both frequency and the force of the offensive expression. To better understand impoliteness in CMC, detailed investigations on types of language forms used and types of impoliteness strategies remain to be done.

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