



## Analyzing Politeness Strategies in Pragmatic Studies: A Theoretical Analytical Study

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### Abstract

The current study is a descriptive theoretical study. It aims to investigate the politeness strategies and their application in pragmatic researches. It also aims to identify the appropriate steps need to be followed by researchers to recognize the politeness strategies used in their data, so they can apply the strategies properly and get their analysis done appropriately. To meet this objective, the study counts on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory with their four basic politeness strategies. The study also explains the relationship between politeness theory and speech act theory of John Searle and J. L. Austin. The study concludes that politeness strategies are very important in linguistic research in general and pragmatics in particular for they were designed to avoid making someone feel embarrassed or uncomfortable, and to protect the listener's sense of dignity or "face." As well as revealing the social and communicative purposes of interaction and enhancing the understanding of language, culture, and context. The study also emphasizes the importance of speech acts in analyzing politeness strategies in order to provide an in-depth pragmatic analysis.

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### 1. Introduction

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that studies the influence of context on the interpretation of meaning during communication. In other words, pragmatics does not just focus on understanding what words literally mean (as semantics does), but rather focuses on what the speaker actually intends when using language in specific social situations. Pragmatics takes into consideration several elements, such as: the speaker's identity, the relationship between the speakers, the social or political context, the shared knowledge between them. All of these factors influence the interpretation of the message and the understanding of its intent (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996).

Leech (1983)<sup>[13]</sup> considered pragmatics a fundamental field for understanding the nature of language, as it concerns how language is used in actual communication, not just its abstract meanings.

In order to understand the utterances of other people, it is not sufficient to analyze language in terms of its linguistic structure or the meanings of its words alone. Rather, it is necessary to study the interactive relationship between language and the context in which these utterances are spoken. Thus, pragmatics helps to reveal the relationship between language and context (Putri & Kurniawan, 2015 as cited in Retnowaty, 2019)<sup>[19]</sup>.

People communicate primarily through language, which allows them to express their ideas, emotions, and aspirations in social settings. Effective communication, however, relies not just on proper grammar and linguistic structure but also on the speaker's ability to select words according to the social context and their relationships with others (Wardhaugh, 1998; Yule, 1996). Being courteous in speech is an essential component of social interaction, as it promotes harmony in relationships and preserves the reputation of both the speaker and the listener (Aulia *et al.*, 2026: 167)<sup>[2]</sup>.

Speakers frequently employ indirect methods and careful language use to maintain positive relationships, but how these

techniques influence communication, particularly in film dialogues, has not been thoroughly examined. According to Brown and Levinson's 1987 work, politeness is seen as a way to reduce potential embarrassment or conflict between people, and it also shows how close or distant people are in their relationships. They identify four main types of politeness strategies: direct speech, negative politeness, positive politeness, and indirect speech (Maharani & Junaedi, 2026: 9044) <sup>[15]</sup>.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Pragmatics

Pragmatics designates the science where signs are related to their interpreters (Morris, 1938, p. 30) <sup>[17]</sup>. Stalnaker (1972: p. 383) <sup>[22]</sup>, when defines pragmatics, focuses on linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed. For Leech (1983) <sup>[13]</sup>, pragmatics is a crucial field to understand the nature of language, it is concerned with the way language is used in communication (p. 1). As a field of linguistic inquiry, it was initiated in the 1930s by Morris, Carnap, and Peirce (Horn & Ward, 2006: p. xi) <sup>[11]</sup>. Pragmatics' main areas of investigation include implicature, presupposition, speech acts and deixis (Haung, 2007: 2). Levinson (1983) <sup>[14]</sup> claims that the term pragmatics is connected to the analysis of what speakers mean by categorizing words or phrases.

Language is used by society as a form of communication to deliver messages and ideas and enables people to communicate with each other. Hence, there are two types of linguistic communication, these are oral and written types. These two types are mainly related to the field of pragmatics, which denotes the study of meaning in communication, what is said by the speakers or writers and understood by the listeners (Levinson, 1983) <sup>[14]</sup>. Summing up, and as defined by Mey (1993) <sup>[16]</sup> pragmatics is the study of the conditions of human language uses as these are determined by the context of society (p.42).

The main areas of interest in pragmatics include: implicature, meanings that are understood without being explicitly stated; presupposition, information implicitly taken for granted in discourse; speech acts, which show how language is used to perform actions (e.g., promise, command, request); and deixis, which is concerned with the interpretation of words that depend on context to understand their meaning (Haung, 2007).

### 2.2. Face and Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson fundamentally rely on Goffman's concept of "face" to explain their theory. Goffman (1967) described face as:

"The positive social value of a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact".

Goffman (1967) argued that the concept of "face," referring to a person's social persona, serves as the foundation for how individuals behave in social interactions. During these interactions, individuals often consider how they are perceived by others; for example, if occurrences lead to an image that exceeds their initial expectations, they are likely to experience positive feelings. Conversely, if their usual expectations are not met, they may feel negative emotions. Additionally, people also hold sentiments regarding the faces presented by other individuals. To avoid losing face, whether for themselves or for others involved, individuals typically engage in face-work, which includes routine and established

behaviors learned through socialization—the lifelong acquisition of societal skills, customs, and social norms—that align with maintaining face. Goffman explored the cultural variations of face and noted that "each individual, subculture, and society seems to possess its own unique set of face-saving behaviors" (Ulugbek qizi, 2021: 213-214) <sup>[23]</sup>.

Put differently, Goffman emphasizes the significance of not only protecting one's own image but also valuing the images of others. From this angle, every statement made can potentially undermine the face of the other party involved, necessitating the implementation of strategies to minimize such threats.

The concept of 'face' is associated with a well-known English expression that connects facial appearance to feelings of shame or loss of dignity, or the term 'losing face'. Face signifies something that holds emotional significance and can be either compromised, safeguarded, or improved. It necessitates careful consideration during social exchanges. Generally, individuals work together and anticipate similar actions from others to safeguard their own face. This shared cooperation stems from the recognition that one individual's face is linked to the faces of others. In essence, a person's face is shaped by the way others maintain their own faces. Since people typically strive to defend their own face when it feels threatened, this self-protective behavior can inadvertently jeopardize someone else's face. Therefore, it is usually advantageous for all parties involved to foster the preservation of each other's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 61) <sup>[4]</sup>.

Expounding on this idea, Brown and Levinson recognized two forms of face needs that people are thought to manage: positive face and negative face. Positive face pertains to the longing for approval and acceptance from others. It encapsulates the wish to be favored and respected (Sa'diyah, 2010, 16 cited in Al-Sa'ati, 2013: 6-7) <sup>[1]</sup>. Negative face: Denotes the assertion of autonomy and the desire to be free from constraints (El-Samir, n.d: 11).

In order to mitigate possible threats to face, Brown and Levinson suggest four strategies for politeness. Bald on Record entails straightforward and blunt communication, commonly used in critical situations or among individuals who share a close relationship. Positive Politeness aims to enhance interpersonal connections through displays of camaraderie, including common compliments, humor, or common interests. Negative Politeness prioritizes caution and deference by utilizing indirectness and reducing the impact on others. Conversely, Off-Record depends on expressions that are vague or indirect, prompting the listener to derive the intended meaning rather than it being spelled out directly (Aulia *et al*, 2026: 169) <sup>[2]</sup>.

### 2.3. Face-Threatening Acts

The term used to describe actions that damage an individual's public and self-perception is Face Threatening Act, while the approaches utilized to alleviate this face threat are referred to as Face Saving Act. A face saving act that pertains to an individual's negative face highlights differences, stresses the significance of other people's time or worries, and may even involve an apology for any inconvenience caused. This concept is identified as negative politeness. In contrast, an act aimed at preserving someone's positive face expresses unity and underscores mutual interests between the speaker and the listener. This is termed positive politeness. Certain actions, including commands, requests, suggestions, advice,

reminders, threats, and warnings, can jeopardize the negative face since they impose pressure on the listener (Brown and Levinson, 1987:65-8 cited in Hussein, 2025:100-101) <sup>[12]</sup>.

Therefore, a face-threatening act (FTA) is a behavior that undermines the face requirements of those engaged in dialogue. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), these actions can impact either the speaker's face or the listener's face and may relate to positive face or negative face (Hussein, 2025:100-101) <sup>[12]</sup>.

As a result, a key principle of politeness theory is that every person possesses and is invested in preserving their face (Morand & Ocker, 2010: 136). They should employ specific tactics to counteract the repercussions of FTAs and to foster harmony in interpersonal communication (Sa'diyah, 2010: 10 cited in Al-Sa'ati, 2013: 7) <sup>[11]</sup>.

#### 2.4. Brown and Levinson Strategies of Politeness

Politeness strategies are designed to avoid making someone feel embarrassed or uncomfortable, and to protect the listener's sense of dignity or "face." According to Brown and Levinson (1978) bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record are the main types of politeness strategies. In his research, Hamuddin (2012) suggested that these four approaches are still relevant and applicable in today's context (Sapitri *et al*, 2018:115).

##### 2.4.1. Bald-on-record

According to Brown and Levinson (1978, 74) <sup>[4]</sup>, the bald on record strategy involves communicating in a direct and clear manner without any attempt to reduce the potential imposition on the listener. This method is straightforward, unambiguous, and concise. There are various forms of bald-on-record usage, depending on the context. This is because speakers may have different reasons for using the FTA (Face Threatening Acts) with minimal effort. These reasons can be grouped into two categories: one where the face threat is not reduced and is either ignored or considered irrelevant, and the other where the speaker minimizes the face threat through implication. Brown and Levinson (1977:100) offer an example of the bald-on-record strategy and note that direct forms of this strategy are commonly used. Imperatives are often softened with hedges or conventional markers of politeness (Sapitri *et al*, 2018: 115).

##### 2.4.2. Positive politeness

The second strategy is constructive politeness and It is usually found in groups of friends or in situations where people of certain social circumstances are (115) Reasonably familiar to each other. It typically tries to Minimize the difference between them by Demonstrating friendliness and a keen interest in Wanting to follow the address (minimize FTA), i.e. This technique aims to minimize the danger to the audience. Positive politeness is less polite than negative politeness because the particular face violated by the FTA is not necessarily corrected. Brown and Levinson (1978:106) note that good politeness is that the correction partly meets the desire that one desires, or that in some ways some of the addresses are closed to the desire of the addressee. Brown and Levinson (1978), added that the dimension of insincerity in inflated expressions of consent or interest compensates by implicating that the speaker Really wants a right image to be improved, for example (Sapitri *et al*, 2018: 116).

##### 2.4.3. Negative Politeness

Brown and Levinson (1978, 129) remarked: This represents a corrective measure aimed at addressing the negative aspect of the listener's identity, who requires unobstructed autonomy and thoughtfulness from the speaker. They distinguish between negative and positive forms of politeness. The essence of negative politeness constitutes the main part of their respective category, while the essence of 'families' and 'humor' pertains to positive politeness. Furthermore, Brown and Levinson (1978:130) indicated that various expressions of negative politeness are generally employed for establishing social 'distancing'. Consequently, these expressions are typically utilized when a communicator intends to impose a social pause on the interaction process (Sapitri *et al*, 2018: 116).

##### 2.4.4. Off-record

Brown and Levinson (1978: 216) noted that in the off-record strategy, the listener is granted the freedom to decide how to understand the speaker's actions. This form of dialogue is structured in such a way that the speaker's actual motives are not overtly clear. In this situation, the speaker consciously excludes themselves by presenting interpretations that can be rationalized. Additionally, Brown and Levinson (1978:230-232) recognized one of the primary methods within of-record strategies, which has various subcategories including hinting, offering associative cues, making presuppositions, minimizing, exaggerating, employing tautologies, presenting contradictions, using irony, incorporating metaphors, and posing rhetorical inquiries. Another significant method is characterized by either being explicit or ambiguous, with subcategories such as ambiguous, unclear, overly broad, displacing attention, and incomplete (Sapitri *et al*, 2018:116).

#### 2.5. Politeness and Speech Acts

For Searle (1969) <sup>[21]</sup>, all linguistic communications involve linguistic acts. Thus, it is important to focus on the study of speech acts. The production of the symbol, word or sentence in the performance of the SA is the unit of linguistic communication (p. 16). Then, language is not used just to describe the world; this is the fact that represents the starting point for Austin's (1962) theory of SAs. He points out that language can be used to create obligations as in (1) below, to influence the actions of others as in (2) below, to create new social relationships, consider (3) (Blakemore, 1992: 91) <sup>[3]</sup>.

1. I promise that I will not smoke.
2. Stop smoking.
3. I pronounce you man and wife (p. 92).

For Searle, in speaking one can perform just five basic kinds of action (Levinson, 1983, pp. 239-40), they are the following: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives ( For more, see (Cruse, 2006: 168-169) <sup>[5]</sup>.

When talking about politeness and the different ways people handle it, it's important to mention speech acts; politeness is clearly shown through what a speaker does with language, not just through the words themselves. Speech acts are closely connected to the actions that happen when someone uses language, like asking for something, saying no, apologizing, giving a warning, or expressing gratitude. To lessen the effect of these speech acts on the listener—since some can be seen as either directly or indirectly threatening—

it's important to use politeness strategies along with speech acts to ease social tension. For instance, when someone says, "Open the door," it's a direct order, which is considered impolite in English. But, if that person says, "Could you open the door?" and uses the word 'please' this will be a request using a polite way.

## 2.6. Previous Studies

1. Risti Yani Rahmawati (2022) <sup>[18]</sup> explored the topic of "Politeness Strategies on Social Media." This research aimed to analyze the politeness methods used in group conversations on Facebook and how they are applied. The results revealed that most participants in the group chat preferred positive politeness, with negative politeness coming next, while the off-the-record approach and bald on record tactic were utilized the least. Additionally, the results of the study emphasized the importance of politeness in written expressions. It can help reduce miscommunications in the context of social media.
2. Amani Mehdi Hussein (2025) <sup>[12]</sup> in her work titled "An Examination of Politeness and Its Approaches" explored the idea of politeness and suggests that the purpose of being polite is to avoid actions that could be seen as disrespectful in order to ensure that everyone feels at ease and comfortable in each other's presence; these culturally shaped norms can occasionally be adjusted. The outcome of this research is anticipated to serve as a basis for additional investigations that aim to delve into politeness, particularly through the lens of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory.
3. Firayani (2025) <sup>[7]</sup> conducted a study titled "Discourse Analysis of Politeness Strategies in Social Media Comments Related to Gender Issues," which explores the impact of online communication, the anonymity of users, and the absence of contextual signals on discourse behavior. This investigation reveals specific gender-related trends in the application of politeness tactics. Among the various strategies, positive politeness is found to be the most prevalent, particularly in discussions that seek to foster unity regarding gender equality, while negative politeness is noted in efforts to maintain respect during exchanges. In heated debates, both direct and indirect forms of impoliteness become more pronounced, shaped by user anonymity, the norms of the platform, and societal expectations.
4. Novita and *et al.*, (2026) explored "Politeness Strategies in the Dialogue of Dylan 1990: A pragmatic approach." The results indicate that all four strategies are present in the conversations of the film, with Positive Politeness emerging as the most prevalent strategy, showing intimacy, humor, and social connection, especially between the central figures, Dilan and Milea. Bald on Record is primarily employed in instructive and authoritative interactions, whereas Negative Politeness and Off-Record are utilized in more delicate scenarios or when implicit meanings are conveyed.
5. Aurellya Maharani and Sony Junaedi (2026) <sup>[15]</sup> investigate the application of politeness techniques in their study titled "A Pragmatic Analysis of Politeness Strategies Shaping Relational Communication Between the Main Characters in Me Before You." This research is founded on the politeness theory developed by Brown and Levinson (1987) as well as the relational

communication model by Burgoon and Hale (1987). The results reveal that all four strategies are utilized, with bald-on-record being the most commonly employed, which signifies straightforward communication in critical scenarios. Both positive and negative politeness demonstrate attempts to sustain emotional equilibrium, whereas off-record is observed in delicate situations.

Most previous studies focused on the analysis of politeness strategies and their communicative purposes, as well as the different models of politeness theory. This study focuses on how the researcher apply politeness strategies in their analysis and on what basis should they do so.

## 3. Analyzing Politeness Strategies in Pragmatic Studies

Individuals typically act in daily interactions with consideration for their social appearance. As outlined by Brown and Levinson in 1987, the effort to preserve one's public persona in social interactions encompasses behaviors that can threaten or protect one's image. According to their politeness framework, the concept of face comprises two interconnected parts: a positive face and a negative face. A positive face is primarily understood as one's self-perception, while a negative face relates to the need for personal autonomy.

To determine which approach to take, Brown and Levinson suggested that a speaker assesses the significance of the face-threatening act by reviewing three social aspects: power, distance, and rank. The total significance reflects the extent of the face threat entailed in executing the face-threatening act, which can be computed with the following equation:

$$W_x = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + R_x$$

In this equation,  $W_x$  represents the numerical value indicating the significance of the face-threatening act  $x$ ,  $D(S, H)$  indicates the social distance between the speaker ( $S$ ) and the hearer ( $H$ ),  $P(H, S)$  denotes the authority that  $H$  exerts over  $S$ , and  $R_x$  represents a measurement of how the face-threatening act  $x$  is perceived as a burden within the culture. Brown and Levinson argued that while these social elements are consistent globally, they differ across cultures in the methods utilized for executing face-threatening acts (Ulugbek qizi, 2021: 215) <sup>[23]</sup>.

To analyze politeness strategies in pragmatic studies, the researcher usually goes through several steps:

### 3.1. Data collection

The researcher collects the data required in his/her research relying on conversations, films, novels, interviews, social media comments,

### 3.2. Highlighting speech acts

The researcher identifies speech acts mostly used in the selected data and categorize them according to Searle's classification which include: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives. We can depend on speech acts as a supporting criterion.

Grundy (2000) emphasizes a central idea in his book "Doing Pragmatics", he states that language is not merely words and grammatical structures, rather it functions as a social action performed in relation to a specific context. In other words, he pointed out that speakers do things through using language. In relation to the theory of speech acts, he highlights that a sentence may appear to have two levels of meaning: the literal meaning, what the exact meaning of words as mentioned in

the dictionary; and the understood or intended meaning, what we mean by uttering our words (p:67). For example: there is a difference between "can you pass the salt" and " pass the salt", the choice of one of the two utterances depends solely on the societal or individual attitudes that motivate the way the illocutionary act is performed.

After identifying the speech act in the selected data, the researcher should focus on whether the speech act is direct or indirect; off-record strategy will always be highly direct. However, it will be on-record strategy if the speech act delivered through hints or implicature.

### 3.3. Determine the Face-Threatening Act

At this stage, the researcher wonders about the type of present threat if there is any, and does the speaker impose on the addressee? also, does the speaker threaten the addressee's social image or even his freedom?

In case of requesting for example, there will be a threatening to the addressee's negative face as there is an imposition on his/her freedom.

### 3.4. Categorizing politeness strategies

Here, the researcher classifies the collected data according to Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies that include: Bold-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off record. As it was mentioned earlier in this research, speech acts help identify the appropriate strategy, so the attention should be given first to the speech act being used in the data in order to identify the appropriate politeness strategy. Also, the researcher could rely on the indicators like is the utterance indicates friendliness, hints, ambiguity, indirectness, direct imperatives, or even apologies and hedges. As each of these indicators represents a politeness strategy.

Therefore, certain politeness indicators should be noticed by the researcher, like the following: Please, could you, would you mind, I'm/was wondering if.. These markers are associated with or indicate negative politeness strategy as they reduce the imposition on the hearer.

In addition, the researcher could rely on other expressions as politeness markers, for instance, my dear, my friend, you are nice person,... as these expressions and the like express solidarity and friendliness which associated with positive politeness strategy as they indicate closeness.

### 3.5. Understanding pragmatic significance

At this point, the researcher explains the pragmatic function of each politeness strategy being used in the data and mentions why it is used and what are communicative purposes of that specific strategy.

The researcher should pay attention to the context; it has a great importance of the way the utterance is understood, and whether the utterance is appropriate or not. Nearly, all utterances occur in a context. For example, "The present king of France is bald", is perfectly grammatical and meaningful but it is inappropriate because nowadays France has no king, so the context is very important in determining the meaning as well as the appropriateness of an utterance (Fromkin *et al*, 2017: 167)<sup>[8]</sup>.

In our case, for example if you say "Open the door" it can be considered a rude behavior, urgent or normal command, this depends on the social relationship between the speaker and the addressee. Brown and Levinson (1978) explains this relation according to the following equation:

$$W_x = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + R_x$$

In this equation,  $W_x$  represents the numerical value indicating the significance of the face-threatening act  $x$ ,  $D(S, H)$  indicates the social distance between the speaker (S) and the hearer (H),  $P(H, S)$  denotes the authority that H exerts over S, and  $R_x$  represents a measurement of how the face-threatening act  $x$  is perceived as a burden within the culture (Ulugbek qizi, 2021: 215)<sup>[23]</sup>.

## 4. Sample Analytical Examples

Here are some utterances with their politeness strategies and their pragmatic function:

### 4.1. "Give me that book over there."

In this utterance the speaker uses direct command or even request which represents bold-on record strategy. This indicates that the speaker may have a friendship with the hearer, or he may be in a position of power that allow him to use command.

### 4.2. "Sweetie, give me that book over there."

In this utterance the speaker tries to seek common ground and co-operation through the employment of positive politeness strategy with indirect command as he used the intimacy word "sweetie".

### 4.3. "Could you please give me that book over there?"

In this utterance the speaker uses polite request to maintain negative politeness strategy. Using such utterance, the speaker tries to put a distance with the hearer as a kind of respecting his private distance during the interaction, and makes him feel freedom.

### 4.4. "I'm really tired, I can't stand and get the book over there."

In this utterance the speaker employs indirect speech act using an implicature, leaving the ground for the hearer to interpret his utterance. He employs the off-record politeness strategy to indirectly ask the hearer to give him the book.

## 5. Conclusion

The study concludes that politeness strategies are very important in linguistic research in general and pragmatics in particular for they were designed to avoid making someone feel embarrassed or uncomfortable, and to protect the listener's sense of dignity or "face." As well as revealing the social and communicative purposes of interaction and enhancing the understanding of language, culture, and context. The study also emphasizes the importance of speech acts in analyzing politeness strategies in order to provide an in-depth pragmatic analysis. Further, the study provides the researcher with several steps to analyze politeness strategies in pragmatic studies, so they can apply the strategies properly and get their work done appropriately.

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