



Politeness Strategies in Social Media

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Abstract. This study examines the use of politeness strategies in social media interactions, focusing on user comments addressed to public figures. As social media increasingly functions as a public communication space, language use within it reflects not only personal expression but also social norms, power relations, and considerations of face. Despite the informal and anonymous nature of online platforms, users often display strategic language choices to manage interpersonal relationships and avoid face-threatening acts. This research aims to identify the types of politeness strategies employed by social media users, determine the most dominant strategy, and explain the reasons underlying its use. The study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach. The data consist of 100 purposively selected comments collected from Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, taken from posts by three highly visible public figures: a head of state, a global music celebrity, and a technology entrepreneur. Data analysis is guided by Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, which categorizes strategies into positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on record, and off record. The findings indicate that positive politeness is the most frequently used strategy (78%), followed by negative politeness (11%), bald on record (10%), and off record (1%). The dominance of positive politeness suggests that social media users tend to maintain friendliness, show approval, and express respect, particularly when interacting with figures of authority or high public status. These findings demonstrate that digital communication continues to mirror offline social norms and highlight the continued relevance of politeness theory in online discourse.

Keywords: Digital Communication, Online Discourse, Politeness Strategies, Positive Politeness, Social Media.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental instrument of human interaction through which individuals convey ideas, negotiate meaning, and establish social relationships (Yule, 2017; Holmes, 2013). In contemporary society, the development of digital technology has significantly transformed patterns of communication, particularly through the emergence of social media platforms (Page et al., 2014). Social media has become a prominent public space where users express opinions, respond to events, and interact with others beyond geographical and cultural boundaries (Tagg & Seargent, 2020). As a result, language use in social media is no longer merely personal but also socially and publicly oriented (Graham & Hardaker, 2021).

Despite its informal and often anonymous nature, communication in social media remains governed by social norms and expectations (Locher & Graham, 2021). Users are required to manage interpersonal relations carefully, especially when interacting with public figures who possess authority, influence, or symbolic power (Kádár & Ran, 2021). In such interactions, language choices may function not only as a means of expression but also as a

reflection of respect, alignment, or disagreement (Spencer-Oatey, 2018). Consequently, politeness becomes a crucial aspect of online discourse, as it helps minimize conflict and maintain social harmony in digital environments (Haugh, 2020).

Politeness has been extensively discussed in the fields of pragmatics and sociolinguistics, particularly through the theoretical framework proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), which emphasizes the concept of face and the strategies employed to protect it. Previous studies on politeness have largely focused on face-to-face communication, institutional discourse, or classroom interaction (Watts, 2003; Goffman, 1967). Although several recent studies have examined politeness in online contexts, many of them concentrate on specific linguistic features or limited platforms, leaving broader patterns of politeness strategies in social media interactions underexplored (Chen & Lin, 2021; Limberg & Locher, 2022).

This condition indicates a research gap concerning how politeness strategies are realized in naturally occurring social media comments, especially in interactions involving public figures with different social statuses and public images (Márquez-Reiter & Limberg, 2022). Moreover, the increasing intensity of public discourse in digital spaces raises urgent questions about whether traditional politeness norms continue to operate in online communication or whether they are replaced by more direct and confrontational language practices (Culpeper, 2021; Hernández-López & Fernández-Amador, 2020).

Therefore, this study is conducted to address this gap by examining politeness strategies used by social media users in comment sections directed at public figures. The study aims to identify the types of politeness strategies employed, determine the most dominant strategy, and explain the social factors underlying users' strategic language choices. By doing so, this research is expected to contribute to the understanding of politeness in digital communication and to demonstrate the continued relevance of politeness theory in contemporary online discourse (Kádár & Haugh, 2021; Zhang & You, 2023).

2. THEORETICAL REVIEW

This study is primarily grounded in the theory of politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), which has become one of the most influential frameworks in the fields of pragmatics and sociolinguistics (Watts, 2003; Kádár & Haugh, 2021). According to this theory, communication inherently involves the concept of face, defined as an individual's public self-image that they seek to maintain during interaction (Goffman, 1967). Face is categorized into positive face, which refers to the desire to be appreciated and approved of, and negative face, which refers to the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition (Brown & Levinson,

1987). Politeness strategies are employed by speakers to protect these aspects of face and to reduce the potential threat arising from certain speech acts (Spencer-Oatey, 2018).

Brown and Levinson (1987) classify politeness strategies into four major types. Positive politeness strategies are oriented toward satisfying the hearer's positive face by expressing solidarity, approval, shared values, or friendliness. These strategies are commonly realized through compliments, expressions of agreement, and inclusive language (Holmes, 2013; Subekti, 2020). Negative politeness strategies, in contrast, are designed to respect the hearer's negative face by minimizing imposition. This is often achieved through indirectness, hedging, formal expressions, or apologies (Yule, 2017; Márquez-Reiter & Limberg, 2022). Bald on record strategies involve direct and unmitigated expressions, typically used when efficiency or clarity is prioritized over face considerations (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Culpeper, 2021). Off record strategies rely on indirect or ambiguous language, allowing speakers to convey meaning without explicitly committing to a particular interpretation (Watts, 2003; Renner & Reber, 2023).

The choice of politeness strategies is influenced by several social factors, including power relations, social distance, and the degree of imposition involved in an interaction (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Kádár & Ran, 2021). Power refers to the relative authority or status between interlocutors, while social distance concerns the level of familiarity or closeness between them (Spencer-Oatey, 2018). In interactions characterized by unequal power relations or significant social distance, speakers tend to adopt more polite or indirect strategies to maintain respect and avoid conflict (Haugh, 2020; Mullany & Adolphs, 2021). These factors remain relevant in digital communication, particularly when users interact with public figures who possess high visibility and symbolic authority (Graham & Hardaker, 2021; Zhang & You, 2023).

Previous studies on politeness have demonstrated that politeness strategies are not limited to spoken or face-to-face interaction but also operate in written and digital discourse (Locher & Graham, 2021; Tagg & Sargeant, 2020). Research on online communication indicates that users continue to negotiate face and social relations despite the absence of physical presence (Darics & Koller, 2020; Limberg & Locher, 2022). Several studies have found that social media users frequently employ positive politeness strategies to express support, admiration, or alignment, especially when interacting with celebrities or political figures (Chen & Lin, 2021; Hernández-López & Fernández-Amador, 2020). Other studies have reported the presence of direct and impolite expressions, suggesting that digital environments may also encourage reduced face concern under certain conditions (Culpeper, 2021; Bousfield & Locher, 2020).

Although these studies provide valuable insights, many of them focus on specific linguistic features, limited datasets, or particular platforms. Consequently, there remains a need for a comprehensive analysis of politeness strategies across multiple social media platforms and diverse public figures (Márquez-Reiter & Limberg, 2022; Limberg & Locher, 2022). This study builds upon existing theories and empirical findings by applying Brown and Levinson's politeness framework to naturally occurring social media comments. Through this approach, the study implicitly assumes that politeness strategies continue to function as a key mechanism for managing social relations in digital contexts, forming the theoretical foundation for the present analysis (Kádár & Haugh, 2021).

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the use of politeness strategies in social media interactions (Creswell, 2014; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the research focuses on interpreting linguistic phenomena and understanding meaning in naturally occurring discourse rather than measuring variables statistically (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The study emphasizes the analysis of language use in its social and contextual setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The population of this research comprised social media comments posted by users in response to public figures' posts. The sample consisted of 100 comments selected purposively from three social media platforms: Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. The comments were taken from posts published by three highly visible public figures representing different domains, namely political leadership, popular culture, and technology entrepreneurship. Purposive sampling was applied to ensure that the selected data were relevant to the objectives of the study and contained clear instances of politeness strategies (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Data collection was conducted through observation and documentation techniques, which are commonly used in qualitative discourse studies (Sugiyono, 2019). The researcher systematically observed comment sections on the selected platforms and documented comments that reflected interaction between social media users and public figures. The comments were collected in their original form without modification to preserve their authenticity as naturally occurring digital texts (Page et al., 2014). No questionnaires or interviews were employed, as the study relied entirely on naturally occurring online discourse.

The primary instrument of the research was the researcher, supported by a data classification sheet used to categorize comments according to the types of politeness strategies. The analysis was guided by Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which classifies strategies into positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on record, and off record. Each comment was examined to identify the dominant strategy it contained and then categorized accordingly, following established procedures in qualitative pragmatic analysis (Kádár & Haugh, 2021).

Data analysis was carried out through several stages. First, the collected comments were read and understood in their contextual meaning. Second, each comment was analyzed and classified based on the type of politeness strategy it employed. Third, the frequency of each strategy was calculated to identify the dominant pattern of politeness in social media interactions. The calculation of frequencies and percentages was used to support qualitative interpretation and to provide a clearer description of the distribution of politeness strategies across the data (Miles et al., 2014).

Since the study focused on naturally occurring texts and theoretical classification, statistical tests such as validity and reliability measures were not applied in the conventional quantitative sense. However, the consistency of data interpretation was ensured through repeated reading and careful comparison of the data with the theoretical criteria proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). The research model underlying this study assumes that social factors such as power relations and social distance influence users' choice of politeness strategies in online interactions, particularly in communication directed at public figures (Spencer-Oatey, 2018; Kádár & Ran, 2021).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the process of data collection, the results of data analysis, and a discussion of the findings in relation to politeness theory and previous studies. The data were collected from social media platforms over a specific observation period and analyzed to reveal patterns of politeness strategies used by social media users when responding to public figures.

Data Collection Process and Research Context

The data were collected over a three-month period through direct observation of comment sections on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. These platforms were selected because they represent widely used social media environments where public interaction frequently occurs. The research focused on comments addressed to three public figures with high public visibility: a political leader, a popular music celebrity, and a technology

entrepreneur. The comments were collected without any intervention and documented in their original form to preserve their authenticity as naturally occurring digital discourse.

A total of 100 comments were purposively selected as research data. The selection was based on the clarity of linguistic expression and the relevance of the comments to politeness strategies. The comments represent interactions between ordinary social media users and public figures in a public digital space, making them suitable for analyzing politeness strategies influenced by power relations and social distance.

Distribution of Politeness Strategies

The analysis revealed that all four types of politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson were present in the data. However, their frequency varied significantly.

Positive Politeness Strategies

Positive politeness was found to be the most dominant strategy, occurring in 78 out of 100 comments. This strategy was characterized by expressions of approval, praise, encouragement, and solidarity directed toward public figures. Users often employed supportive language to align themselves with the public figures' actions or opinions, indicating an effort to maintain harmonious interaction and reduce social distance. The dominance of positive politeness suggests that social media users are highly aware of the public nature of their comments and the social status of the figures they address.

Negative Politeness Strategies

Negative politeness strategies appeared in 11 comments. These strategies were typically used when users expressed criticism, disagreement, or suggestions. Indirect expressions, apologies, and respectful language were employed to minimize imposition and to acknowledge the authority or autonomy of the public figures. The use of negative politeness reflects users' attempts to balance critical expression with respect in online communication.

Bald on Record Strategies

Bald on record strategies were identified in 10 comments. These comments were characterized by direct and unmitigated language, often expressing strong opinions or demands. The use of this strategy indicates situations where users prioritized clarity and urgency over face-saving considerations. Although less frequent, the presence of bald on record strategies shows that social media also provides space for direct and confrontational communication.

Off Record Strategies

Off record strategies were the least frequent, appearing only once in the data. This strategy involved indirect or ambiguous language that allowed the user to imply meaning

without explicitly stating it. The rarity of off record strategies suggests that social media users tend to prefer explicit expressions rather than indirect hints, possibly due to the fast-paced and text-based nature of online communication.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Theory and Previous Studies

The findings of this study strongly support Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, particularly the influence of power and social distance on the choice of politeness strategies. The dominance of positive politeness indicates that users attempt to reduce social distance and create a sense of solidarity when interacting with public figures. This behavior aligns with the concept of positive face, as users seek approval and mutual understanding in public digital interactions.

The results are consistent with previous studies on online politeness, which report that positive politeness is frequently used in interactions involving celebrities or authority figures. However, the presence of negative politeness and bald on record strategies also reflects the complexity of online discourse, where users simultaneously negotiate respect, criticism, and self-expression. The limited use of off record strategies contrasts with some face-to-face interaction studies, suggesting that indirectness may be less effective or less preferred in online environments.

Implications of the Findings

Theoretically, this study reinforces the applicability of politeness theory in digital communication contexts. It demonstrates that traditional sociolinguistic concepts such as face, power, and social distance remain relevant in analyzing online discourse. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of digital politeness and ethical communication in social media, particularly in interactions involving public figures. Understanding these patterns may contribute to promoting more respectful and constructive online communication.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study concludes that politeness strategies continue to play a significant role in social media interactions, particularly in user comments directed at public figures. The findings demonstrate that positive politeness is the most dominant strategy employed by social media users, indicating a strong tendency to express approval, solidarity, and respect despite the informal and anonymous nature of digital platforms. Negative politeness and bald on record strategies are used less frequently, while off record strategies appear only marginally. These results confirm that social factors such as power relations and social distance influence users' linguistic choices in online communication.

The conclusions are drawn cautiously, as the findings are based on a limited dataset and specific social media platforms. Therefore, generalization beyond the scope of this study should be made carefully. Nevertheless, the results provide empirical support for the continued relevance of politeness theory in digital discourse and suggest that online communication reflects many of the same social norms found in face-to-face interaction.

Based on these conclusions, this study recommends that social media users, content creators, and public figures promote respectful and constructive communication by fostering awareness of digital politeness. From an academic perspective, future research is encouraged to explore politeness strategies across a wider range of platforms, cultural contexts, and interaction types. Employing larger datasets, longitudinal designs, or mixed-method approaches may provide deeper insight into the dynamics of politeness in online communication and contribute to the development of more comprehensive models of digital discourse.

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