

LINGUISTIC POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN INDONESIAN NETIZENS' SOCIAL MEDIA COMMENTS AND POSTS

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Abstract

This study explores the use of politeness strategies in online interactions, particularly on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Using a qualitative descriptive approach and supported by a library research, this study analyzed user comments collected through documentation techniques. The data were then categorized through content analysis into four main strategies: positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on record, and off record. The findings indicate that positive politeness strategies were the most frequently employed, reflecting the collectivist orientation of Indonesian social media users in maintaining interpersonal harmony. Negative politeness and off-record strategies were primarily observed in interactions requiring deference, indirectness, or face-saving, whereas bald-on-record strategies occurred predominantly in emotionally charged or conflict-oriented exchanges. The selection of politeness strategies was influenced by socio-cultural values, platform-specific communication norms, and users' social identities. These findings contribute to the theoretical development of pragmatics and sociolinguistics by extending the application of politeness theory to digital communication, while also offering practical implications for fostering respectful online interaction and promoting digital communication literacy.

Keywords: politeness strategies; social media; Brown and Levinson; pragmatics; digital communication.

1. Introduction

The existence of the internet as a modern communication tool has made the world more accessible. Almost everyone has communication tool that make it possible to communicate with people around the world through social media. The aim is to find out more about the explanation of communication and social media. Communication is one of the most basic activities in human life. Social media as a collection of software that allows individuals and communities to gather, share, communicate, and in certain situations create collaboration or play with each other. The rapid development of information and communication technologies has transformed social media into a central component of contemporary communication. Through platforms that facilitate instantaneous interaction, information exchange, and user-generated content, social media has reshaped how individuals construct and maintain interpersonal relationships. Communication that was traditionally conducted through face-to-face encounters or conventional media has increasingly shifted toward digitally mediated interaction. This transformation is particularly significant from a linguistic perspective because social media provides users with new spaces for expressing attitudes, negotiating interpersonal relationships, and managing social identities. In addition, it also causes the communication that occurs to be more effective. With the presence of social media, communication becomes easier and faster and more transparent in conveying information (Sari et al., 2023).

Language as a communication tool must be maintained properly so that the purpose of communication is easily understood by speech partners or interlocutors, so that communication can be established properly. The use of language in social media helps establish communication relationships between speakers and speech partners easily. The ease of using social media causes the existence of language politeness that tends to decline. many language users on social media perform actions that threaten face negatively or positively, namely using hate speech, insults, criticism, emotional, arguing, and spreading fake news (Purnama et al., 2022). Jayanti et al. (2019) in their journal found that, based on these problems, it is clear that the use of positive and negative face-threatening actions as well as the use of politeness strategies turns out to be one of the important ways in considering whether someone's face is good or bad. This is what makes coercers in the process of speaking often use words or sentences that are nuanced to mock, ridicule, insinuate, accuse, threaten, urge, demand, charge, so that the speech offends and attacks the face of the speech partner and makes the result of the speech impolite, polite and impolite forms of speech that are in accordance with the principles of politeness with the rules of politeness of Brown and Levinson's politeness strategy (Halid, 2017).

Based on Brown and Levinson (1987 in Rahardi, 2005: 39), stating communication as a rational activity that contains certain intentions and properties (purposeful, rational activity), this principle is based on the concept of face, namely positive face and negative face. Positive face is a face that refers to the self-image of people who want what they do, what they have or what values they believe in to be recognized by others as a good thing. Actions that threaten positive face include: disapproval, criticism, demeaning or humiliating actions, complaints, anger, accusations, insults, opposition, challenges, and so on. Negative face, on the other hand, refers to the self-image of someone who wants to be free from having to do something. Actions that threaten negative face include: orders and requests, suggestions, advice, warnings, threats, challenges, offers, promises, compliments, and expressions of negative feelings such as hatred and anger. Brown and Levinson (in Rustono, 1978:64) distinguish a number of politeness strategies in a society that range from the avoidance of face-threatening actions to various forms of disguise in speech.

In the context of social media in Indonesia, research shows that positive politeness strategies are more commonly used, especially on emotional topics such as social campaigns or fundraising. People often use compliments, appreciation, or expressions of support to strengthen social relations with other audiences (Maghfiroh, & Rahmiati. 2024). However, other politeness strategies also appear in various contexts. Negative politeness strategies are often used in the form of apologies or indirect statements, especially when users want to avoid conflict or show respect. The bald on record strategy appears in comments that are direct and assertive, while off record is seen in comments that are implicit or sarcastic (Sarila et al., 2023). This study aims to analyze the language politeness strategies used by social media users in Indonesia. Using a descriptive qualitative approach and literature study method, this study identified the form and function of positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on record, and off record strategies, as well as explore the social and cultural factors that influence the selection of these strategies.

Based on this background, the research questions posed in this study are what are the language politeness strategies used in social media comments?, what is the form and function of each strategy in the context of online interaction? and what social or cultural factors influence the selection of these politeness strategies?. This study aims to describe the forms of language politeness strategies used in social media based on Brown and Levinson's theory, as well as to

analyze the context of the use of these strategies in user comments and posts. This research is expected to make theoretical contributions in the fields of pragmatics and sociolinguistics, especially in the study of digital communication. Practically, the findings of this study can be a reference for social media users, educators, and policy makers in designing better digital literacy strategies and language ethics.

2. Method

This research used a qualitative descriptive approach, because it aimed to describe linguistic phenomena in the form of politeness strategies that appear in the comments of social media users in detail and in depth. According to Moleong (2017), qualitative research is research that aims to understand the phenomena experienced by the research subject holistically in a descriptive way in the form of words and language, and in a special natural context. This approach was chosen because it can explore the various nuances of communication and pragmatic context more flexibly and contextually. The data sources in this study are social media user comments (especially on Instagram and TikTok) on relevant public figure accounts, as well as scientific journals that discuss language politeness and communication strategies on social media. The study employed purposive sampling to select relevant social media comments that met predetermined inclusion criteria. The data were drawn from publicly accessible comments posted on Instagram and TikTok in response to posts published during the period from January 2025 to May 2026. The sampling period was deliberately restricted to this interval to establish a clearly defined and manageable corpus and to ensure that all selected interactions occurred within the same temporal context. Initially, some comments were identified from relevant posts. Following the screening process, some comments were retained as the final dataset. Comments were included when they (1) constituted a complete or interpretable communicative act, (2) were directly related to the corresponding post or interaction, and (3) contained linguistic features that could be analyzed as realizations of politeness strategies under Brown and Levinson's framework.

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis through a systematic six-step procedure. First, the collected comments were organized and screened to remove duplicate, irrelevant, spam, or unintelligible entries. Second, the researchers read each selected comment repeatedly to familiarize themselves with its linguistic form and interactional context. Third, relevant utterances were identified and coded according to their communicative functions and linguistic characteristics. Fourth, each coded utterance was classified according to Brown and Levinson's politeness framework, namely bald-on-record, positive-politeness, negative-politeness, and off-record strategies. Fifth, the classified data were interpreted contextually by considering the relationship between the interlocutors, the communicative situation, and the intended meaning of each utterance. Finally, the findings were compared across the identified categories, and the frequency of each politeness strategy was calculated to determine patterns of dominance, while the qualitative interpretation was used to explain how and why particular strategies were employed in Indonesian social media interactions.

This analysis aimed to categorize the data based on Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies, namely positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record strategy, and no politeness strategy. Krippendorff, K. (2018) mentions that content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from text or documents to the context of their use. The steps of data analysis in this study include data reduction by selecting comments that contain

elements of politeness or offense of politeness strategies, categorization by classifying comments based on politeness strategies (positive, negative, off-record, bald-on-record), interpretation by analyzing the meaning and context of the utterances based on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, and the last summarization is summarizing the findings that answer the problem formulation.

The trustworthiness of the analysis was established through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through repeated examination of the comments in their original contexts and through systematic comparison of the linguistic evidence with the operational definitions of Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies. Dependability was addressed by maintaining a consistent coding procedure and documenting the stages of data selection, coding, categorization, and interpretation. Confirmability was ensured by grounding analytical claims in the actual textual data and by revisiting ambiguous cases to minimize researcher subjectivity. Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of the research context, data sources, sampling procedures, and characteristics of the analyzed interactions. These procedures ensured that the interpretations were systematically derived from the data and remained closely connected to the theoretical framework.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings indicate that Indonesian social media users employ various strategies to manage face-threatening acts in their online interactions. The most prominent strategies identified include positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on record, and off record, as described in Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework. Positive politeness is frequently used in personal interactions, especially in supportive or celebratory posts. Users tend to express solidarity through praise, compliments, and encouragement. This strategy fosters social harmony and affirms shared values within digital communities (Maghfiroh & Rahmiati, 2024). Negative politeness appears in situations involving disagreement or sensitive content. Users employ hedging, apologies, and indirect language to reduce the impact of their messages (Sarila et al., 2023).

Bald-on-record strategies were identified primarily in interactions characterized by direct evaluation, disagreement, or heightened emotional engagement. In the present dataset, these strategies were realized through comments that conveyed criticism or disagreement explicitly, without hedging or other linguistic devices intended to mitigate the potential face-threatening effect. In accordance with Brown and Levinson's framework, the utterance is therefore categorized as bald-on-record because the communicative intention is conveyed explicitly, with limited attention to the recipient's face wants. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that direct linguistic forms may occur in emotionally charged or conflict-oriented online interactions (Jayanti & Subyantoro, 2019).

Off record strategies are used when speakers wish to convey criticism, irony, or skepticism without stating it explicitly. These comments often rely on context and shared understanding to convey their meaning. An example is "Wow, so professional... late again 🙄", which uses sarcasm to criticize while maintaining plausible deniability (Rahardi, 2005). The choice of strategy is closely tied to the perceived level of social distance, power dynamics, and the situational context. For instance, while Instagram interactions tend to favor positive politeness due to the platform's visual and emotional orientation (Maghfiroh & Rahmiati, 2024), TikTok presents a

mix of all strategies due to its diverse content and spontaneous comment culture (Sarila et al., 2023). Several sociocultural factors were found to influence the way users select and apply politeness strategies in social media interactions. Cultural expectations, digital literacy, audience type, and platform design all play crucial roles (Rahardi, 2005; Halid, 2017; Purnama et al., 2022).

The findings validate Brown and Levinson's notion that speakers constantly evaluate the risk of face-threatening acts before constructing their messages. In the online setting, users negotiate their identities through language, adjusting their politeness strategies based on audience size, topic sensitivity, and communicative goals. To strengthen the findings and show how politeness strategies are realized in actual online discourse, here are several comments taken from TikTok and Instagram posts. Each comment demonstrates a specific strategy and reflects the speaker's intent, emotional tone, and awareness of social dynamics.

a. Positive Politeness Strategy

This strategy emphasizes solidarity, approval, and emotional closeness. It is widely used to compliment, support, or encourage others — often with expressive language, emojis, or friendly tones.

1. @ArinDwi_R: "*cantik bngt matanya* 😊 "

This is a direct compliment using informal and affectionate language. The emoji enhances the speaker's warmth. Function: Enhancing positive face by expressing admiration. Analysis: This aligns with Brown & Levinson's concept of *positive politeness* aimed at reducing social distance.

2. @mutii: "*ciee ngedate nya diliput media* 😊❤️ "

A playful comment that expresses interest and affection. The word "*ciee*" is typical of Indonesian teasing in friendly tone. Function: Building in-group solidarity, signaling friendliness. It often used among close friends or followers with parasocial familiarity.

3. @15/05/1948 ❤️ PS: "*i lovee your content so MUCH, lanjutkan brother* 🤔👍 "

This bilingual comment contains praise, enthusiasm, and humor. The emojis indicate emotional engagement. Function: Showing strong appreciation, encouraging continuation. Analysis: The strategy reinforces a sense of shared community.

4. @Jo.: "*Thank you for sharing your story, bro. It takes courage to open up like that, and I truly appreciate it.*"

A highly supportive message acknowledging vulnerability and effort. Function: Encouraging the speaker and validating their experience. This is a strong example of positive politeness with emotional maturity.

b. Negative Politeness Strategy

This strategy reflects respect, carefulness, and an effort to avoid imposing. It is often used in humorous or potentially face-threatening situations.

@mow: "*kak maaf ngakak bgt yang terakhir* 🤔 "

The phrase “*kak maaf*” softens the impact of the laughter. It shows the speaker’s awareness of politeness norms. Function: Mitigating potential offense while expressing amusement. Analysis: A clear case of *negative politeness* using apology as a hedging device.

c. Off Record Strategy

Off record strategies are indirect, relying on implications or sarcasm rather than straightforward language.

1. @shelsayaa*: “slide terakhir kek mau nyuci mobil 🤪”

This humorous comment suggests a funny comparison without explicitly criticizing. Function: Inviting shared laughter through indirectness. Analysis: The exaggeration and absurdity create humor and allow the speaker to avoid direct critique.

2. @fun: “AWAS UJUNG2 NYA DI KALAHIN SAMPA UANG!!!”

This comment is a cynical or sarcastic warning. Though not directly offensive, it implies distrust or pessimism. Function: Expressing social critique without directly attacking the content creator. Capital letters show emphasis or strong emotion — a stylistic feature in online expression.

d. Mixed Strategy / Cross-Linguistic Politeness

This shows an empathetic tone using English and emotional expression. Despite minor errors, the message is sincere.

@hereme: “I do, feel you... bcs toxic friends and jealousy is the biggest ruin everything... keep spirit.”

Function: Offering emotional support while sharing mutual experience. Analysis: Combines *positive politeness* (solidarity) and *off record* (vague but emotionally loaded expression).

Table 1. Multilingual comments often reflect identity performance and audience adaptation.

No	Username	Comment	Politeness Strategy	Linguistic Form	Pragmatic Function	Analytical Note
1	@AriDwi_R	“cantik bngt matanya 😊”	Positive Politeness	Direct compliment + emoji	Expressing admiration and boosting social closeness	Affirms positive face using informal and affectionate tone
2	@mutii	“ciee ngedate nya diliput media 🥰💖”	Positive Politeness	Playful teasing + informal tone	Reinforcing in-group identity and showing affection	Common in peer interactions; strengthens social bonds
3	@15/05/1948	“i lovee your content so MUCH,	Positive Politeness	Exaggerated praise + code-mixed expression	Strong approval and support	Mixes languages and emojis to increase

		<i>lanjutkan</i> <i>brother</i> 👉👉”				emotional intensity
4	@Jo.	“Thank you for sharing your story, bro. It takes courage...”	Positive Politeness	Gratitude + empathetic tone	Acknowledgin g vulnerability, encouraging the speaker	Emotionally mature comment aligned with supportive online discourse
5	@mow	“kak maaf ngakak bgt yang terakhir 👉”	Negative Politeness	Apology + humor	Minimizing offense while showing amusement	Uses hedging to reduce potential face threat
6	@shelsayaañ ★	“slide terakhir kek mau nyuci mobil 🇲🇻”	Off Record	Implicit comparison + humor	Indirectly mocking through metaphorical phrasing	Criticism masked in humor; requires interpretation
7	@fun	“AWAS UJUNG2 NYA DI KALAHIN SAMA UANG!!!”	Off Record	Sarcasm + all caps for emphasis	Implying distrust and warning in a roundabout way	A passive- aggressive tone; avoids direct accusation
8	@hereme	“I do, feel you... bcs toxic friends and jeolusy... keep spirit.”	Mixed (Pos + Off Record)	Empathy + vague reflection	Emotional support, indirect sharing personal experience	Combines solidarity and subtle complaint; of emotionally expressive and indirect.

This shows that Indonesian netizens tend to maintain politeness in online communication. Politeness strategies are not just linguistic choices, but also sociocultural actions that reflect identity, societal norms, and communicative intentions. The dominance of positive politeness among Indonesian language users is consistent with collectivist cultures in countries that

prioritize harmony and the maintenance of interpersonal group closeness (Hofstede, 2010). This finding is in line with other cross-cultural research on pragmatics, such as Chen (2017), which shows that collective firms tend to favor conflict to minimize conflict and focus on social relationships. This finding is supported by the theory of Brown & Levinson, where politeness is a strategy to maintain face or self-image.

In online discourse, the fluid nature of identity also shapes how politeness strategies are used. Social media allows users to display their identity in managing public figures by selectively choosing language formats (Tagg et al., 2017). This is especially true for comments that emphasize the multimodal and multilayered aspects of digital communication, combining humor, irony, and compassion with politeness strategies. In addition, digital benefits such as emojis, hashtags, and GIFs serve as practical information to increase or decrease the tone of your statements. A study by Locher & Graham (2021) highlights that these visual elements play an important role in creating politeness in computer-assisted communication (CMC). Therefore, studying civility on social media should go beyond text analysis and include the full scope of multimodal semiotics.

Conversely, the presence of negative politeness illustrates a high level of social awareness. Users often insert hedges such as “sorry” or “I think” to express disagreement or correction in ways that minimize face threat. This aligns with Leech’s (1983) politeness maxims particularly the tact and modesty maxims—and shows that indirectness continues to be a marker of politeness online. More confrontational strategies such as bald on record are employed in emotionally charged or controversial discussions. While these comments lack politeness markers, they reveal an emergent digital culture where users sometimes prioritize assertiveness or emotional release over politeness, particularly under conditions of anonymity (Culpeper, 2011; Purnama et al., 2022). Off record strategies, including sarcasm and rhetorical questioning, highlight how users navigate sensitive issues without directly confronting others. These strategies serve to critique or resist while preserving plausible deniability, a common technique in online satire and social commentary (Jayanti & Subyantoro, 2019).

In language and pragmatics teaching, English and Indonesian educators can utilize real social media examples to illustrate pragmatic competence, especially in sociolinguistics or discourse analysis (Halid, 2017). For platform moderators and developers, insights into politeness strategies can inform more culturally nuanced moderation tools. Rather than relying solely on keyword detection, platforms could develop AI models that interpret context-based threats to politeness norms (Krippendorff, 2018). From a broader linguistic standpoint, the study opens opportunities for comparative analysis of politeness across cultures and languages, which is increasingly vital in globalized digital communication (Sarila et al., 2023).

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. It is limited to comments on TikTok and Instagram, which may not reflect the full range of social media behavior. Other platforms like Twitter or Reddit may reveal different politeness patterns due to their unique audience structures and interaction styles (Culpeper, 2011). Furthermore, since the data were drawn from screenshots and secondary sources, the study cannot capture real-time user intentions or reactions. While Brown and Levinson’s theory provides a strong analytical foundation, it may not fully account for multimodal elements like emojis, visuals, or memes prevalent in digital discourse (Maghfiroh & Rahmiati, 2024). To build upon these findings, future studies should consider using ethnographic and mixed methods approaches, including interviews or surveys, to understand users’ perspectives on politeness (Moleong, 2017). Cross-platform comparisons could uncover how

different media environments shape politeness behavior (Sari et al., 2023). Research integrating NLP technologies can help automate the detection of politeness and impoliteness, aiding both moderation and linguistic analysis (Krippendorff, 2018). Expanding this work to include cross-cultural comparisons would provide insight into how politeness is shaped by diverse value systems, such as individualism versus collectivism (Rustono, 1978). Lastly, longitudinal research could track how online politeness evolves over time, particularly in response to social or political shifts.

4. Conclusion

This study illuminates the way language strategies are actively used in digital interaction, particularly in the Indonesian context on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Through Brown and Levinson's Theory of Politeness (strategies demonstrates how important it is to maintain social harmony and collective identity in Indonesia's digital culture. This corresponds to Indonesia's collectivist values. In Indonesia, users often praise praise, solidarity and sensitive communication. Negative politeness strategies, although not common, show perceptions of potential facial threats and are often characterized by protection, indirectness, or excuses. Conversely, bald strategies reflect a tendency towards directness that can manifest in emotionally intensive or conflict-enhanced contexts and affect interpersonal harmony. In the meantime, users' efforts such as irony and implications have been made to maintain plausible denials while simultaneously expressing criticism and humor.

From a broader perspective, the findings emphasize that courtesy is not only a matter of linguistic representation online, but also reflects cultural values, digital literacy and platform standards. In theory, this study contributes to practical disciplines and sociolinguistics by expanding the theory of courtesy into digital spaces and providing practical knowledge that may affect educational programs and digital moderation guidelines. Future research recommends examining other platforms such as Twitter and Reddit, applying multimodal analytics, and examining intercultural courtesy to a deeper understanding of how communication ethics develops in the digital age. Furthermore, integration of user perspectives and arithmetic methods can enrich an understanding of how courtesy is perceived and practiced in real-time online interactions. examining intercultural courtesy to a deeper understanding of how communication ethics develops in the digital age. Furthermore, integration of user perspectives and arithmetic methods can enrich an understanding of how courtesy is perceived and practiced in real-time online interactions.

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