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Facebook as a Public Discourse Platform: Analysing Online Users' Language Politeness

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DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.24090/celti.2025.1345>

Pages:

37-48

Abstract: This study investigates the implementation of politeness strategies within Facebook comment sections, guided by Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987). As digital communication continues to thrive, Facebook serves as a prominent space where individuals from diverse backgrounds engage in conversations about social, political, and cultural issues. Using a descriptive qualitative method, this research examines how Indonesian users articulate their thoughts in response to controversial or debate-inducing public posts. The data comprise selected Facebook comments containing relevant opinions, emotional expressions, and language use. Employing pragmatic and discourse analysis, the research uncovers the presence of four politeness strategies: positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and bald on-record. These strategies represent various communication goals—from fostering solidarity to delivering critique. The analysis reveals that while many users strive to uphold politeness to maintain social balance, others opt for more straightforward or ironic expressions that defy conventional etiquette. Overall, this research underscores how language use in digital spaces mirrors broader cultural values, interpersonal dynamics, and user behavior, highlighting the importance of polite interaction in sustaining healthy online discourse.

Keywords: *politeness strategies; brown and levinson; pragmatics; digital discourse*

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Introduction

Language plays a crucial role in human life. We use it to communicate with others to fulfill various needs and to understand one another. Through language, people express emotions, intentions, goals, and aspirations. It seems impossible for humans not to use language. According to Finocchiaro (1964), language is an arbitrary system of vocal symbols that allows individuals within a particular culture or those who have learned it to interact and communicate. This means language is a structured set of vocal symbols agreed upon socially, and its origin cannot be logically explained. As social beings, humans need to develop strong communication skills to be accepted across different sectors of society. In addition to good communication, understanding linguistics is also essential. Linguistics is the study of human language. Kreidler (2010) explains that linguistics focuses on identifying meaningful elements within a particular language. Furthermore, in his book *The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory*, Chomsky (2010) states that linguistics aims to analyze the nature of human linguistic knowledge—referred to as

competence. This involves explaining what speakers know that enables them to produce and understand speech or signs.

According to Murliati (2013), politeness is a behavior that pays attention to the feelings of the interlocutor in communication. This is an important aspect in establishing good communication. Meanwhile, Pishghadam (2012) states that politeness plays an important role in building effective relationships with others. If politeness strategies are misused, communication can be disrupted, which in turn leads to dissatisfaction and lack of care from individuals. Proper use of politeness strategies helps us to control ourselves during interactions. Communication in a high or rude tone can hinder the creation of good communication. Brown and Levinson (1978) mention that politeness is the basis for the formation of social order and is a condition for the realization of cooperation between humans. Therefore, it is important to choose the right politeness strategy to avoid misunderstandings in communication. Politeness is divided into two types, namely “negative politeness” and “positive politeness”, each of which has a specific strategy in its use.

In the era of digital communication, social media has evolved into a virtual public space that enables social interaction across geographical, social and cultural boundaries. One of the most dominant platforms in this regard is Facebook. Since its launch in 2004, Facebook has evolved from a social network to a discursive space that brings together individuals from various backgrounds to share opinions, discuss, and debate current issues (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). In this context, Facebook not only functions as a communication tool, but also as an arena of public discourse (public sphere) as conceptualized by Habermas (1989), a place where citizens can engage in rational discussions about common interests. However, the openness of this space also brings challenges in terms of communication ethics, especially with regard to language politeness. Language politeness is an important aspect in maintaining the harmony of interaction, especially in online spaces that tend to be free and anonymous. Brown and Levinson (1987) in their Politeness Strategies theory emphasize that in every speech act there is an effort to maintain the “face” or honor of self and others. In the context of Facebook, this politeness strategy is often tested when users are faced with differences of opinion, criticism, or comments that provoke emotions.

This phenomenon is interesting to study further, given that Facebook is currently one of the main mediums for Indonesians to express political, religious, social and cultural views (Lim, 2013). The comments that appear in the discussion column often show the dynamics between free expression and the limits of civility. In some cases, the language used tends to be aggressive, sarcastic, or even insulting, indicating a violation of the norms of politeness in communication. This study aims to analyze how language politeness strategies are used by netizens in interacting on Facebook, especially in public discussions in the comments section. By using pragmatics and discourse analysis approaches, this study is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of the emerging communication patterns and challenges in maintaining language politeness in the digital space. Furthermore, this study also wants to explore how the dynamics of online communication reflect the social and cultural values of the Facebook user community itself.

Literature Review

In linguistic studies, language politeness is one of the main topics in the field of pragmatics, which is a branch of linguistics that studies meaning in the context of use. According to Yule (1996), politeness is a form of strategy that speakers use to maintain social relationships and avoid conflict. The most

influential politeness theory was proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), who introduced the concept of “face”, which is the social image that each individual wants to maintain in communication. They divided politeness strategies into four: bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. These strategies are used to mitigate potential threats to the interlocutor’s “face” (face-threatening acts).

Politeness strategies themselves include direct politeness strategies (bally on record), positive politeness strategies (showing respect), negative politeness strategies (showing solidarity), and indirect politeness strategies (off records). Each politeness strategy has a purpose that is in accordance with the situation or condition to whom we will speak. According to Watts (2003:1), some classify polite people as people who are always attentive to others; others think that polite people are people who are not arrogant. Thus, if we are polite, many people feel comfortable and do not hesitate to establish a relationship with us, even if it is just a short chat. In addition, by being polite, we can maintain our relationships and feelings with others. Here, being polite can be shown by facial expressions, controlling speech, gestures, and many more.

Otherwise, politeness strategies are also used in literary works such as novels, dramas, or movies. Especially for dramas or movies, politeness strategies are taken from real life. Many movies are adapted from true stories and appear as interesting movies, such as love stories or stories about politics, patriotism, social, and so on. In dramas or movies, the key points about politeness are easier to understand because we can witness them directly without having to imagine them. Thus, we can choose what is good or not good for us to apply in our daily lives. In addition, Geoffrey Leech (1983) developed politeness principles in the form of maxims, such as the maxims of wisdom, generosity, praise, humility, agreement, and sympathy. These principles are complementary to understanding how politeness is expressed through language structures and choices in various social contexts.

Social media has changed the way humans communicate, from previously private to increasingly public and open. Within the framework of Habermas’ (1989) public sphere theory, social media such as Facebook can be seen as a discussion arena where individuals are free to express opinions, form opinions, and influence social discourse. Facebook, in particular, has evolved from a mere social networking platform into a dynamic discursive space, covering social, political and cultural issues (Lim, 2013). In this context, the interactions that take place on Facebook often reflect the power relations, ideologies and social values of a society. Therefore, language use including politeness strategies on social media cannot be separated from the socio- cultural context and communicative goals of users.

Online communication has its own characteristics that distinguish it from face-to-face communication. According to Crystal (2006), communication on the internet tends to be short, fast, and often informal. The anonymous nature and openness of this digital space can affect users’ linguistic behavior, including in terms of politeness. Some studies show that despite the tendency to violate politeness norms on social media, many users still apply mitigation strategies such as the use of emoticons, warning phrases (“sorry in advance”), or indirect forms of speech (Herring, 2010; Sifianou, 2012). In the Indonesian context, the phenomenon of active netizens in Facebook comments is interesting to analyze, given the diverse social backgrounds of users and the dynamics of the issues discussed. Several previous studies (Misrawi, 2020; Fitriani, 2021) have observed that although digital public spaces in Indonesia are often characterized by hate speech, there are also many language practices that show efforts to maintain politeness and social harmony

Methodology

This research applies a descriptive qualitative approach that aims to map and analyze the forms of language politeness strategies used by Facebook users in the realm of public interaction, especially in the comments section that responds to social issue-themed posts. This approach was chosen because it is considered capable of revealing linguistic phenomena in a social context thoroughly and deeply, in accordance with the characteristics of qualitative research (Creswell, 2014).

The data sources in this study are posts and netizen speech (comments) contained in Facebook pages and comment columns on public Facebook accounts that discuss social or cultural issues. Researchers chose fan pages that have quite a lot of interaction (10 comments per post) and discussions that are controversial or provoke discussion. Posts and Comments taken as data must meet the following criteria: (1) Contain opinions or responses to the content of the post, (2) Contain expressive elements (praise, criticism, satire, sarcasm), (3) Written in Indonesian or mixed with regional/local language, and (4) Does not contain spam content or only emojis.

Data was collected using the documentation method, which involved taking screenshots or copying the comments contained in the Facebook comment section. Comments that were spam, irrelevant, or contained only emoticons without text were excluded from the data. The data were analyzed using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which includes four main strategies: (1) Positive politeness, (2) Negative politeness, (3) Off-record (indirect), (4) Bald-on-record (direct without mitigation). The analysis was conducted in several stages such as identification of utterances in posts and comments that contain elements of politeness or impoliteness, classification of politeness strategies based on Brown and Levinson's theory and interpretation of the social context of the use of these strategies, including consideration of social relations, issues discussed, and the user's communication style.

Findings and Discussion

An analysis of Facebook users' interactions using Brown and Levinson's politeness theory reveals that Indonesian social media users apply various politeness strategies to convey their messages. Each strategy is chosen based on the emotional context, social relationships, and the communicative goals of the message sender. This following table express about the Facebook data in social media.

Image	Politeness Strategy	Post/Soucve Description	Features
	Positive politeness	Birthday wish for "bestie"	Friendly address ("bestie"), blessings, warmth

Image	Politeness Strategy	Post/Soucve Description	Features
 Juwya Sidabutar bersama Sutrisani dan Lia Safitri. 5 jam · 🌐 Congratulation ya atas gelar S.Kep nya Sukses ke depannya sayangku 🥰 21 21 2	Positive politeness	Graduation congratulation using "my dear"	Affectionate term, support, pride
 Koh Willie Salim · Ikuti Rekomendasi postingan · 1 hr · 🌐 Selamat buat mas nya karena selalu absen 🎉 Setelah absen jangan lupa ambil tiket 🟢 absen terus ambil tiket ternyata dikirim beneran 🙏 3.645 5,7RB komentar 13 kali dibagikan	Positive politeness	Congratulating someone for regularly checking in on social media	Appreciative, casual tone, polite reminder ("jangan lupa klaim tiket")

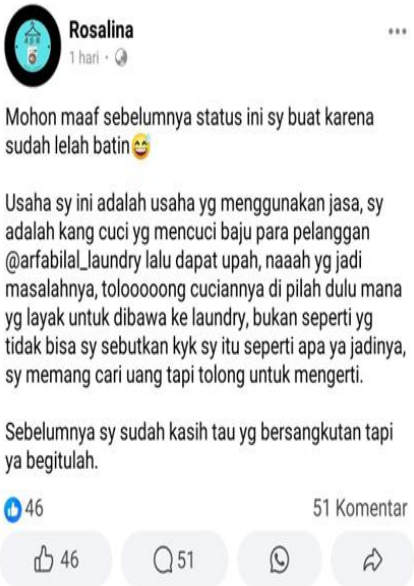
Image	Politeness Strategy	Post/Soucve Description	Features
 Rosalina 1 hari · 🌐 Mohon maaf sebelumnya status ini sy buat karena sudah lelah batin 😊 Usaha sy ini adalah usaha yg menggunakan jasa, sy adalah kang cuci yg mencuci baju para pelanggan @arfabila_laundry lalu dapat upah, naaah yg jadi masalahnya, toloooooong cucianya di pilah dulu mana yg layak untuk dibawa ke laundry, bukan seperti yg tidak bisa sy sebutkan kyk sy itu seperti apa ya jadinya, sy memang cari uang tapi tolong untuk mengerti. Sebelumnya sy sudah kasih tau yg bersangkutan tapi ya begitulah. 46 51 Komentar	Negative politeness	Rosalina complains about laundry customers	Apology, indirect request, appeal for understanding, maintaining business relationships.
 KBS : Korean Base Shitposting Jaemin Na · 3 jam · 🌐 Anjir ini serius ?? 🙏 sory TEUM Nctzen gk bisa bantu Nctzen masi waras ikut campur war kalian sma Enjin Lwan sendiri aj sno 🤡 NCT sndiri aj korban haters tiktok yg nameng NCT njirrr qyz 🤡 @BumbelGeyz · 4h gan bawa2 Stay dan fandom lain, kalo sana war sendiri men banget cari backingan dua @heerckstar · 18h O UNSERIOUS JWJDS IM WEAK hanadol @mimogealgeol ak moa,nctzen,teume sama stay wainya ini pertenggaran teume san re karna teume udh kesel sampai nya naikin ht trus ngajak kita2 buat n ht aka post -23/04/25- 101 Views sya @hjsmjs · 12h ngapain ngajak ngajak, ogahhhhh 4/22/25 · 2.5K Views 33	Off-record	KBS comment on K-pop fandom conflicts	Casual tone, irony, sarcasm, screenshots, avoids direct confrontation

Image	Politeness Strategy	Post/Soucve Description	Features
	Off-record	Sarcastic comment about a "monitor lizard" statue	Subtle government criticism, humorous tone, indirect complaint.
	Off-record	Satirical post about "ngerem langsung berhenti berharap"	Playful metaphor, humorous tone, visual satire, no direct confrontation

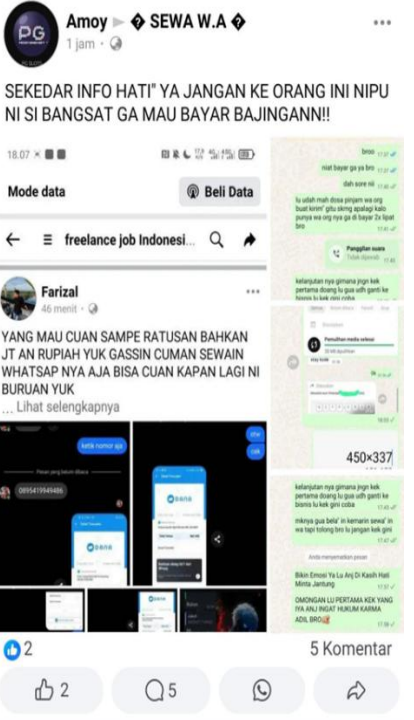
Image	Politeness Strategy	Post/Soucve Description	Features
	Bald on-record	Lubis Junior's blunt political criticism	Direct opinion, no softening, confrontational
	Bald on-record	Public accusation in WhatsApp account scam	Harsh words, name-calling, screenshot evidence, high emotional outburst.

Image	Politeness Strategy	Post/Soucve Description	Features
	Bald on-record	Offensive comment about short men	Vulgar, offensive, emotionally hurtful language, no effort to soften message.

Based on the table above, we can explain about the Facebook data related to the findings, such as:

1. Positive Politeness

This strategy is used to build warm relationships and strengthen closeness. Examples such as birthday greetings and congratulatory messages on graduation reflect emotional intimacy. The use of words like “bestie” and “my dear” shows affection and a desire to please the recipient. Replies like “Aamiin, thank you” demonstrate appreciation and reinforce harmony in the interaction. Another example of positive politeness can be seen in a congratulatory post directed to someone who consistently checks in. The sentence “Congrats to this guy for always checking in” shows informal recognition of someone's effort, creating a friendly and appreciative tone. The reminder “Don’t forget to claim your ticket” is also expressed politely, aiming to engage the audience without sounding forceful. This shows how positive communication encourages engagement and inclusivity in social media settings.

2. Negative Politeness

This strategy is used when the speaker wants to express criticism or a request while still maintaining the audience’s feelings. A post by Rosalina about her laundry business shows her frustration toward customers who fail to sort their laundry, but she begins with an apology and uses a careful tone. Phrases like “Mohon maaf sebelumnya...” (“First of all, I apologize...”) and “tolong untuk mengerti” (“please try to understand...”) show her effort to avoid direct confrontation.

3. Off-Record

Off-record strategy is marked by indirectness, sarcasm, or humor. One example comes from the KBS account, which uses irony and humor to comment on conflicts between K-pop fandoms. The use of casual language and emojis shows criticism delivered implicitly without naming anyone directly. Another example is a sarcastic remark about a lizard statue, subtly criticizing a government-funded monument project without pointing fingers—expressing dissatisfaction in a humorous and indirect way. Another off-record example uses a playful metaphor: “Info pengereman yang sekali ngerem langsung berhenti berharap” (Braking info: One sudden brake and you instantly stop hoping). This compares a sudden brake to the abrupt end of a hope or expectation. The humor and accompanying image of someone falling from a motorcycle add visual satire. Although no specific target is named, the message is understood by the audience. This example reflects how off-record communication can deliver criticism without open conflict while still being entertaining.

4. Bald on-Record

This strategy involves delivering messages bluntly, without softening. A political comment by Lubis Junior stating that Indonesia is like a “beggar country” directly criticizes the government. Another example includes an angry user accusing someone of scamming in a WhatsApp rental transaction using harsh language like “SI BANGSAT GA MAU BAYAR” (THIS BASTARD WON’T PAY). A further example comments rudely on men’s height, using offensive language with no concern for politeness or emotional impact.

Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate that Indonesian Facebook users utilize a diverse set of politeness strategies to navigate online communication, each strategy reflecting particular communicative purposes and social relationships. Positive politeness is frequently employed to affirm solidarity and offer encouragement, especially in supportive or celebratory contexts. In contrast, negative politeness emerges in more sensitive situations where users aim to deliver critiques or make requests cautiously to avoid offending others. Off-record strategies, often indirect or humorous, enable users to express criticism subtly, relying on satire and innuendo to convey messages. Meanwhile, bald on-record strategies involve straightforward and often harsh language, typically used in emotionally intense or confrontational discussions.

These findings suggest that despite the perceived anonymity and freedom of expression on social media-platforms, many users still adhere to norms of politeness and emotional consideration. Nevertheless, instances of impolite or aggressive behavior persist, particularly in the context of contentious issues. This points to an ongoing negotiation between the desire for open expression and the need for social cohesion in online environments. The study highlights how cultural context and interpersonal awareness influence digital communication styles and stresses the potential for fostering more respectful interaction through a better understanding of online politeness strategies.

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