

## **Applying Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory in Cross-Cultural Contexts: A Study of Indonesian and American Speech Acts**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to analyze the politeness strategies employed by Indonesian and American speakers in daily communication and to explain how cultural backgrounds influence their linguistic choices. Using Brown and Levinson's politeness theory as the theoretical framework, data were collected from transcripts of American reality TV shows and from natural conversations among Indonesian speakers observed in everyday settings. The analysis reveals that both cultures utilize the four main politeness strategies: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record with different approaches. American speakers tend to use low-context communication, delivering messages directly without identity markers. In contrast, Indonesian speakers employ high-context language, rich in implicit meaning, and consistently use identity markers to show respect toward elders or social hierarchy. These differences reflect underlying cultural values which individualism in American culture and collectivism in Indonesian society. This research contributes to the field of intercultural pragmatics and emphasizes the importance of cultural context in interpreting politeness strategies.

**Keywords:** Politeness Theory; Speech Act; Indonesian; American

### **INTRODUCTION**

Language and culture are inherently interconnected, forming the fundamental basis of human social life. It is not merely a tool for communication but also a profound reflection of the values, traditions, and worldviews inherent in a culture. According to Gao Bei et al. (2020), language unites a community by enabling the shared transmission of common values and norms (Gao et al., 2021). Within this framework, language functions not only as a medium for conveying information but also as a vital instrument for preserving identity and cultural heritage. Furthermore, humans tend to use language strategically to achieve specific communicative goals, where the utterances produced exhibit unique characteristics shaped by the cultural context from which they emerge. Maslova (1997) emphasizes that language reveals the distinctive mindset and attitudes that define a particular nation's culture (Maslova, 1997). In addition, Yule (1996) highlights that language serves to unify individuals within a group that communicates according to shared norms and conventions (Yule, 1996).

It is employed to accomplish various communicative objectives, as exemplified in the use of politeness strategies during daily interactions. Politeness plays a critical role in maintaining social harmony, expressing respect, and managing interpersonal relationships. However, the concept of what constitutes polite behavior can vary significantly across different cultural contexts. These variations are influenced by each community's unique norms, values, and social expectations. Understanding the operation of politeness across diverse cultural settings is therefore essential, especially in our increasingly globalized world, where intercultural communication is unavoidable. As Kramsch (2004) asserts, "when language is used in a context of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways" (Kramsch, 2004, p. 3). This statement underscores the inseparability of language and culture and highlights the complexity of interpreting politeness across cultural boundaries.

Politeness, as a linguistic phenomenon, has been widely explored by scholars worldwide, notably through the politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson. Their theory has provided valuable insights into the mechanisms by which speakers manage face and social relations through language. Nevertheless, it has also faced considerable criticism regarding its claim to universality and its applicability to non-Western cultures, particularly those in Eastern contexts such as Indonesian culture. Indonesia, with its rich and diverse cultural landscape, demonstrates how cultural variation deeply influences linguistic choices, including the ways politeness is expressed and perceived. This diversity impacts the implementation of politeness strategies in various social settings. This paper seeks to analyze the politeness strategies employed by both Indonesian and American people, examining how cultural backgrounds shape their linguistic behavior. Moreover, it aims to explore the relationship between culture and politeness, contributing to a deeper understanding of intercultural communication and the role of cultural values in shaping language use.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Language and culture have a very close and mutually influencing relationship (Bei Gao et al., 2020). Language is not only a means of communication but also reflects and symbolizes cultural values. Each language community has its own rules and norms influenced by their culture, including in expressing politeness (Kramsch, 2004). Therefore, it is important to understand that culture affects the level of politeness someone shows, depending on the rules and norms applicable in a certain region. In Indonesia, culture and language are inseparable; matters related to language are governed by the culture inherent in a particular community. Therefore, it is important for speakers to pay attention to cultural aspects of a society, including the politeness strategies practiced within that specific community. One of the strategies used to achieve harmonious relationships and communication goals is politeness, which involves adhering to certain rules to create good communication between speakers. Politeness was introduced by Lakoff, who pointed out that politeness is a system designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing potential

conflict in communication. In 1987, Brown and Levinson introduced the politeness theory, which focuses on the other's face, where they describe face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (Brown & Levinson, 2011). Furthermore, Ting-Toomey (1994) stated that face is "a claimed sense of self-respect in an interactive situation." Additionally, Yule proposed that politeness is a tool to acknowledge the importance of another person's face (LoCastro, 2003). According to Goffman (1967), there are two types of face: positive face, which refers to the desire to be accepted and appreciated by significant others, and the desire to "maintain autonomy and be unimpeded by others," which is known as negative face. This strategy is also used to avoid conflicts between individuals, which could escalate into larger-scale conflicts, such as those between groups or ethnic communities (Yassi, n.d.). Based on these statements, this strategy serves a social function; to maintain relationships and prevent them from breaking down or escalating into major conflicts.

The politeness strategy itself aims to minimize face-threatening acts (FTAs) that may occur in interactions between individuals or groups. Brown and Levinson categorized politeness strategies into five types: Bald On Record, Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness, Off-Record, and Don't Do the FTA. However, there are significant cultural differences between Americans and Indonesians, particularly in the application of linguistic choices. Western culture tends to emphasize individualistic values, while collectivistic values are more prevalent in many Asian countries, especially in Southeast Asia. A person's way of communicating reflects their cultural background. In certain cultures, messages are expressed explicitly and directly. In Western cultures, one must deliver messages clearly and directly to avoid misunderstandings. In contrast, Southeast Asian cultures tend to convey meaning or intention through non-verbal cues such as gestures or tone of voice, as this is considered a better way to deliver the message. Nam, K.A. (2015) stated that "In low-context cultures, what is said is of primary importance, whereas in high-context cultures, how the message is delivered often matters more" (Nam, K.A, 2015, p. 378).

Research related to politeness and culture has been conducted by several scholars. One such study was conducted by Murni Mahmud (2013). The title of the research is "The Roles of Social Status, Age, Gender, Familiarity, and Situation in Being Polite for Bugis Society". The study focused on the politeness strategy of Bugis people influenced by several aspects such as social status, gender, age, familiarity, and situation. This research has similarities in analyzing politeness strategy used Brown and Levinson's theory and focuses on the role of gender in the politeness strategy used (Mahmud, 2013)

Another relevant study was conducted by Daud et al. (2018). The research title is "Politeness Strategies of Negation Used By English And Buginese". This study investigated the politeness strategies Buginese and American people used in using negation expression and the influence of social and cultural relationships toward the politeness strategy by Buginese and American people when using negation

expression. (Daud et al., 2018). This study found out that both American and Buginese applied three strategies in their daily interaction ; bald on record, positive, negative politeness which focusing on the negation

## **METHOD**

### **Design and Sample**

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze politeness strategies used by Indonesian and American speakers in everyday communication. The theoretical framework is based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which categorizes politeness strategies into Bald On Record, Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness, and Off-Record. The data sample consists of two sources: (1) transcriptions of spontaneous dialogues from several episodes of popular American reality television shows, representing informal American communication, and (2) naturally occurring conversations among Indonesian speakers, collected through participant observation and audio recordings in community settings such as familial and semi-formal environments. Participants were informed about the research purpose, and their anonymity was maintained to ensure ethical standards.

### **Instrument and Procedures**

Data collection involved two main instruments: transcription of American reality TV show dialogues and participant observation with audio recording of Indonesian everyday conversations. For the American data, episodes were selected for their authenticity in capturing unscripted, informal interactions. For Indonesian data, researchers immersed themselves in community settings to record natural speech influenced by social hierarchy, age, and communal norms. Ethical transparency was ensured by informing participants about the study's aims. The collected utterances were then categorized using Brown and Levinson's four politeness strategies framework. Contextual meaning, linguistic features, and sociocultural factors were examined, including identity markers, speech patterns, and forms of address.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis involved categorizing utterances according to the four politeness strategies and examining them for contextual meaning, linguistic features, and sociocultural implications. Comparative analysis was conducted between Indonesian indirectness and honorific usage and the more direct American speech style. To enhance credibility and reliability, data triangulation was performed by comparing findings with previous studies on politeness (e.g., Mahmud, 2013; Daud et al., 2018). Additionally, peer debriefing was employed to cross-check interpretations and minimize researcher bias. This methodological framework enabled a systematic investigation of politeness strategies across two culturally

distinct contexts, linking observational data with theoretical analysis to illuminate cultural influences on pragmatic communication.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data revealed several key findings regarding the use of politeness strategies by both American and Indonesian speakers. In both cultures, all four politeness strategies identified by Brown and Levinson (1987)—Bald On Record, Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness, and Off-Record—were utilized. However, the frequency, context, and application of these strategies varied significantly between the two cultures.

In the American context, the majority of the interactions leaned toward Bald On Record and Negative Politeness. American speakers, especially in reality shows, were found to favor direct communication with minimal use of identity markers. Bald On Record was the most prevalent strategy in instances where urgency or efficiency in communication was paramount, such as in task-oriented situations or when expressing personal opinions. For example, in one dialogue, a participant directly stated, “We should go out tonight,” without any face-threatening acts (FTA) being softened or mitigated. On the other hand, Negative Politeness emerged in situations where the speakers sought to mitigate social discomfort. In cases of potential conflict or awkwardness, Americans often employed indirect language, apologies, or hedging. For instance, in one conversation, a speaker apologized for potentially making things awkward by saying, “I don’t mean to be awkward, but I don’t think I’m going to get to say bye,” softening the impact of the message.

### *Politeness Strategy applied by American*

*A : Thank you for coming out, dear.  
B : Yeah, I love it out here, I know right where the pretzels are.  
(Data 1)*

The conversation started when his step daughter entered his house, the utterance “thank you for coming out, dear” is categorized as politeness markers which identity marker. The utterance “Yeah, I love it out here, I know right where the pretzels are” is considered as off-record; give association clue. The speaker mentions something associated with either precedent addressee’s experience or mutual knowledge of other interpretation experiences’. In this strategy, S tries to mention a clue to the H that is well-known by H.

*A : Sorry.. I don’t mean to be awkward, but I don’t think that I’m going to get  
to say bye to Rob and Khloe  
B : What do you mean?  
A : Please, just tell them I love them  
B : Yeah.. of course  
(Data 2)*

The conversation above contains negative politeness, the step brother's utterance "I don't mean to be awkward, but I don't think that I'm going to get to say bye to Rob and Khloe" is considered as apologize. The situation in the place became uncomfortable and the step brother tried to giving a apologize and wanted to leave the place. The word "please" is soften the imperative sentences and convey the speaker's humble attitude towards the hearer (Phuc, n.d.)

*A : We should go out tonight.*  
*B : I have a date tonight with Lamar.*  
*A : I mean, you guys are really going to leave me alone ?*  
*B : Honestly, you can't be so needy. You really got to start dating.*  
 (Data 3)

The conversation above is considered as off record which "give hints". The utterance " I have date tonight with Lamar" means that she can not go out with her sister. The sister says something that is not explicitly relevant, she invite the hearer to search for an interpretation of the possible relevance (Brown & Levinson, 2011).

*A : Kylie, let's go. Gotta get to Kim's, I don't wanna be late.*  
*B : All right.*  
 (Data 4)

The conversation above is classified as bald on record; maximum efficiency. She didn't want to be late to her daughter's party. She uttered the utterance directly and explicitly without ambiguity. The face redress is not required, in case of great urgency of desperation, redress actually decrease the communicated urgency. (Brown & Levinson, 2011)

#### *Politeness Strategies applied by Indonesian*

*A : Lan, bisa potongin kue nya tidak, nak?*  
*(Lan, can you cut the cake, dear?)*  
*B : Ditaruh dimana, ma?*  
*(Mother, where is the cake?)*  
*A : Di kulkas bagian belakang nak*  
*(They are in refrigerator, dear)*  
*B : Iya ma*  
*(Yes mom)*  
 (Data 1)

The conversation above is the interaction between a mother and a daughter, the mother wanted to ask for help and give choices to her daughter. She chose to using phrases and sentences that contextually unambiguous meanings that are different from the literal meaning. The utterance "Lan, can you cut the cake, dear?" is considered as negative politeness; be conventionally indirect. The daughter used 'iya' as agreement to help her mother.

*A : aku agak bingung dengan situasi dirumah  
(I'm also confused about the situation at home)  
B : perubahan agak menyulitkan, iya kan?  
(The so-called change is hard, isn't it?)  
(Data 2)*

The interaction between two people who have casual conversations above is considered as positive politeness. The utterance “The so-called change is hard, isn't it??” is containing tag question. In order to draw his cousin's attention into the conversation, he employ a politeness strategy in form of a tag question. He apply positive politeness; intensify interest to H.

*A : siapa lagi yang belum selesai bacaannya?  
(who else hasn't finished their reading?)  
B : saya pak, saya sibuk LPPP.  
(Me, sir. I've been busy with LPPP.)  
A : kan ini organisasi penulis , artinya harus sering membaca. untuk masalah membaca. ini bukan urusan saya tapi beda lg dengan urusan nilai saya tidak bisa dibohongi denngan alurnya tokohnya karena semua buku itu saya baca semua.  
(but, this is a writers' organization, which means you have to read regularly. When it comes to reading, that's not my responsibility but when it comes to grades, that's a different matter. You can't fool me with the plot or the characters, because I've read all those books myself.)  
(Data 3)*

This conversation took place between a lecturer and students in a classroom setting, where the context is formal. It can be observed that the utterances delivered by both parties are low-context. One of the factors contributing to this is the limited duration of the class, which requires communication to be more effective and efficient. The politeness strategy applied in this conversation is *Bald On Record*, specifically through sympathetic advice and warnings, as the lecturer gives a kind of reminder or warning to the students to read the assigned books.

*A : Dek, pakaiannya kalau tidak dijemur akan berbau.  
(Sister, the clothes will smell if they are not dried)  
B : Sudah Kak ai tadi.  
(I dried them this morning, Sister)  
A : Oh, sudah ya? saya kira belum.  
(Really? I think they have not been dried)  
(Data 4)*

The interaction above is the conversation between two friends yang memiliki usia yang berbeda, he used identity marker *Dek* (Sister) as a politeness marker. The other used identity marker *Kak* (Sister) to show deference. The friend begin the

conversation with soft and indirect utterance. She employs off record; give hints, he invites the hearer to search the possible relevance.

The findings from this study provide valuable insights into the role of culture in shaping politeness strategies. As observed, both American and Indonesian speakers utilize all four politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), but the ways in which these strategies are deployed reflect deeper cultural values. One significant cultural difference lies in the emphasis on individualism in American culture versus collectivism in Indonesian culture. American speakers, who are more individualistic, tended to prioritize clarity and directness in their communication. This approach aligns with the Bald On Record strategy, where speakers articulate their messages with minimal consideration for the potential threat to the listener's face. In contrast, Indonesian speakers, who place a higher value on social harmony and community, often employed Positive Politeness and Off-Record strategies to avoid confrontation and maintain group cohesion.

The use of Bald On Record in American interactions often signaled an urgency or a casual tone, which is typical in low-context cultures like that of the United States. Americans prefer to get straight to the point without unnecessary elaboration. For example, in the reality show dialogues, speakers openly expressed opinions or requests without hedging. This could be interpreted as a reflection of the American cultural norm that values individual expression and self-assertion. On the other hand, Indonesian speakers' frequent use of Positive Politeness strategies, such as indirect requests or offering sympathy, highlights the importance of maintaining face and showing deference in relationships. The role of identity markers, which are rarely used in American interactions, also underscores the hierarchical nature of Indonesian society. In Indonesia, the act of addressing someone with a title or term of respect is a fundamental component of polite speech, signaling the speaker's acknowledgment of the listener's social status and role within the community.

Another interesting finding was the use of Negative Politeness in both cultures. While Americans employed this strategy primarily in situations that involved conflict avoidance or apology, Indonesians also used Negative Politeness to express humility or deference. The slight difference in application can be attributed to the distinct ways each culture perceives the concept of social distance. In Indonesia, showing deference, even in casual conversations, is critical to maintaining social harmony, while in America, the use of Negative Politeness was more situational and less frequent.

The role of Off-Record strategies in both cultures also merits further exploration. Indonesians relied on this strategy to hint at their intentions without direct confrontation, which aligns with the high-context communication style prevalent in many Asian cultures. The indirectness allows speakers to navigate potentially face-threatening situations without explicitly addressing sensitive topics. In contrast, American speakers used Off-Record strategies sparingly, typically in less formal or



emotional contexts where indirectness provided a more nuanced form of communication.

Additionally, the findings of this study contribute to a growing body of literature on intercultural communication and politeness theory. By highlighting the ways in which high-context and low-context communication styles influence politeness strategies, this research builds on existing studies that have explored similar themes in cross-cultural settings. The study underscores the importance of understanding cultural values when interpreting politeness strategies. The differences between American and Indonesian communication styles reflect broader societal norms and expectations, and these cultural distinctions have significant implications for effective intercultural communication. The findings of this research can help educators, linguists, and intercultural communicators develop strategies for navigating cross-cultural interactions with greater sensitivity and awareness.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the use of politeness strategies in everyday communication among American and Indonesian speakers, utilizing Brown and Levinson's politeness theory as a framework. The analysis revealed that both cultures employed all four politeness strategies—Bald On Record, Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness, and Off-Record—albeit with different frequencies and in varying contexts. The results highlighted the distinct cultural influences that shape these linguistic choices, reflecting deeper societal values of individualism and collectivism. In American culture, characterized by its individualistic orientation, directness and clarity were dominant, with American speakers primarily utilizing Bald On Record and Negative Politeness strategies. These strategies facilitated efficient communication, especially in contexts where urgency or personal autonomy was emphasized. On the other hand, Indonesian speakers, whose culture places a high value on social hierarchy and community, relied heavily on Positive Politeness and Off-Record strategies. These strategies helped navigate social dynamics and maintain harmony, with an emphasis on indirectness, respect, and deference toward others. The study's findings underline the importance of cultural context in shaping communicative behavior. While both cultures employed similar politeness strategies, the cultural foundations that drive these choices were distinct. Americans leaned toward explicitness and individual expression, while Indonesians used politeness as a tool for maintaining group cohesion and respect for social roles. Overall, this research contributes to the field of intercultural pragmatics by emphasizing the role of culture in understanding and interpreting politeness in communication. By examining these cultural differences, the study enhances our understanding of how politeness functions across various cultural settings and offers valuable insights for improving intercultural communication in an increasingly globalized world. The findings can also inform future research on cross-cultural communication, politeness theory, and the social functions of language.

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