

## **An Analysis of Politeness Strategies Used by the Main Characters in the Intern (2015)**

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### **Abstract**

This research aims to analyze the use of politeness strategies used by the main characters in the movie *The Intern* (2015) based on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987). This study applies a qualitative descriptive method, and the data are taken from the movie dialogues. The data analysis focuses on four types of politeness strategies, namely bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. The findings show that all four strategies are used in the movie with different functions depending on the context and the relationship between the speakers. Bald on-record is mostly used in direct and urgent situations, positive politeness is used to build closeness and solidarity, negative politeness is applied to show respect in formal interactions, and off-record strategy is used to express meaning indirectly to avoid conflict. This study concludes that politeness strategies play an important role in creating effective communication in workplace interactions. This research is expected to contribute to the study of pragmatics, especially in understanding politeness strategies in professional communication.

**Keywords:** Politeness Strategies; Pragmatics; Movie Analysis; Workplace Communication; *The Intern*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Language is an important tool in human communication because it is used to express ideas, feelings, intentions, and social relationships. In everyday interaction, people do not only focus on delivering messages but also on maintaining good relationships with others. Therefore, politeness becomes an essential aspect of communication, especially in situations that involve social status, power, and professional interaction, such as in the workplace.

Politeness in communication is closely related to how speakers show respect, avoid conflict, and protect each other's self-image or face. In professional environments, the use of polite language is important to create harmonious relationships between superiors and subordinates, as well as among co-workers. Misunderstanding or impolite expressions can lead to conflict, discomfort, and ineffective communication.

One theory that explains politeness clearly is the politeness strategies proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987). They classify politeness strategies into four types: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. These strategies show how speakers choose certain ways of speaking to reduce face-threatening acts and maintain social harmony. This theory is widely used in linguistic studies, especially in analyzing communication in films.

Films are not only a form of entertainment but also a reflection of real-life communication. Movie dialogues often present natural interactions that show how people use language in different social situations. One film that contains many examples of workplace communication is *The Intern* (2015). This movie tells the story of a senior man who becomes an intern in a modern fashion company led by a young female CEO. The interactions between the boss and employees, as well as among co-workers, clearly show the use of politeness strategies in daily communication. Based on this explanation, this study focuses on analyzing the politeness strategies used by the main characters in *The Intern* (2015). This research aims to identify the types of politeness strategies used in the movie and to explain how these strategies function in maintaining effective and harmonious communication in the workplace.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Politeness in Communication**

Politeness is an essential aspect of human communication because it helps speakers maintain social harmony, show respect, and avoid unnecessary conflict. Politeness is not only expressed through polite words such as please, sorry, or thank you, but also through the way speakers choose appropriate language based on social relationships, power, and social distance (Yule, 1996). In everyday interaction, politeness plays an important role in ensuring that communication runs smoothly and comfortably for both speakers and hearers.

From a pragmatic perspective, politeness is closely related to the concept of face, which refers to a person's public self-image that they want to maintain during social interaction. Brown & Levinson (1987) state that every individual has two types of face: positive face and negative face. Positive face refers to the desire to be liked, appreciated, and accepted by others, while negative face refers to the desire to have freedom of action and not be imposed upon. Many speech acts such as requests, commands, criticisms, and refusals can potentially threaten the hearer's face. Therefore, politeness is used as a strategy to minimize these face-threatening acts.

Politeness is also influenced by social context, especially in formal and professional communication. In workplace settings, for example, speakers must carefully choose their words in order to show respect, maintain cooperation, and avoid misunderstanding between superiors and subordinates or among colleagues. Leech

(2014) explains that politeness functions to minimize expressions that may cause offense and to maximize expressions that maintain good social relations. Through politeness, speakers can achieve their communicative goals while still preserving harmonious relationships.

In addition, politeness is not only a linguistic matter but also a social and cultural phenomenon. Different communities may have different norms of politeness, depending on their cultural values and social expectations. However, the main function of politeness remains the same, which is to maintain balance in social interaction and to support effective communication.

Based on this explanation, politeness in communication is a crucial element in understanding how people interact in social and professional contexts. This concept is also highly relevant in analyzing movie dialogues, especially in films that portray workplace interaction such as *The Intern* (2015), where communication between a boss and employees reflects the real use of politeness strategies in daily professional life.

### **Bald On-Record Strategy**

Bald on-record is the most direct politeness strategy proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987). In this strategy, the speaker performs a speech act in a clear, direct, and unambiguous way without any effort to minimize the threat to the hearer's face. The main goal of this strategy is efficiency and clarity rather than politeness. Therefore, bald on-record is commonly used when the speaker considers that politeness is not the main priority in the interaction.

This strategy is usually applied in situations involving urgency, danger, or when the relationship between the speaker and the hearer is very close. Brown & Levinson (1987) explain that in emergency situations, speakers tend to use direct expressions such as "Help!", "Run!", or "Stop!" because saving time is more important than maintaining the hearer's face. In addition, bald on-record is also frequently used when the speaker has higher power or authority, such as in classroom instructions, workplace commands, or leadership contexts.

This theoretical explanation is strongly supported by Indonesian empirical studies. Wiranty & Ramaniyar (2023) found that bald on-record strategy frequently appears in interactions where the speaker has higher social status and needs to deliver clear and firm instructions. Their study shows that directness is often necessary to ensure effectiveness in communication. Similarly, Sarila et al. (2023) reported that bald on-record strategy is commonly used in situations that require efficiency and clarity, especially when social distance is low or when the situation demands immediate response.

In addition, a study by researchers in the field of EFL interaction in Indonesia found that bald on-record is often used by lecturers when giving instructions to students

in academic settings. The study reveals that direct commands are used to avoid misunderstanding and to maintain control in the learning process Sudewi et al. (2023). Furthermore, a more recent study on politeness strategies in digital media also shows that bald on-record frequently appears in content that emphasizes authority, instruction, and assertiveness, such as in YouTube monologues and public speech (Suryana et al., 2023).

Although bald on-record directly threatens the hearer's face, it does not always imply impoliteness. According to Brown & Levinson (1987), this strategy can also reflect seriousness, responsibility, and leadership. In professional settings, direct commands may be interpreted as a form of efficiency and authority rather than rudeness. Therefore, whether bald on-record is considered polite or impolite depends greatly on the context of the interaction.

In the context of film dialogue, bald on-record strategy often appears in scenes involving authority, conflict, and urgency. Characters who hold higher positions, such as managers or leaders, tend to use this strategy more frequently to give orders or express firm decisions. In *The Intern* (2015), this strategy is used by certain characters to show power relations and professional responsibility in the workplace. Thus, analyzing bald on-record strategy in this film helps reveal how direct communication reflects authority, efficiency, and situational urgency in professional interaction.

### **Positive Politeness Strategy**

Positive politeness is a politeness strategy proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987) that is oriented toward satisfying the hearer's positive face, which refers to the desire to be liked, appreciated, approved of, and accepted by others. This strategy is used to reduce social distance and to build closeness, solidarity, and cooperation between the speaker and the hearer. Positive politeness is commonly realized through various linguistic forms such as giving compliments, expressing agreement, showing attention to the hearer's needs, using jokes, and employing inclusive expressions such as the pronoun *we*. According to Brown & Levinson (1987), these strategies function to make the hearer feel valued and included in the interaction, thereby strengthening interpersonal relationships.

Indonesian empirical studies strongly support the use of positive politeness in educational and social contexts. A study by Zulianti & Nurchurifiani (2021) on EFL classroom interaction found that positive politeness strategies such as praise, encouragement, and inclusive expressions are frequently used by teachers to create a supportive learning environment and to motivate students. This indicates that positive politeness plays a crucial role in building emotional closeness and cooperation in formal interaction. Another study conducted at the junior high school level also found that positive politeness is dominantly used in classroom communication to maintain harmonious relationships between teachers and students (Maslucha et al., 2024). Teachers tend to use positive politeness strategies

to show empathy, appreciation, and friendliness in order to avoid tension and to encourage active participation in learning.

Furthermore, a study on politeness strategies used by university students in Indonesia revealed that positive politeness is frequently applied in peer interaction to express solidarity, agreement, and shared identity (Susanto & Yahmun, 2023). This finding proves that positive politeness is not only important in teacher–student interaction but also in horizontal relationships among students. In professional contexts, positive politeness is also widely used to maintain teamwork, reduce conflict, and create a comfortable working atmosphere. Compliments, expressions of appreciation, and friendly language help strengthen cooperation among colleagues. In *The Intern* (2015), positive politeness is reflected in the way characters use friendly expressions, supportive comments, and shared activities to maintain good relationships between superiors and subordinates. This strategy helps create a harmonious workplace environment and supports effective communication. Thus, positive politeness strategy functions not only as a linguistic device to convey meaning but also as a social strategy to build intimacy, solidarity, and mutual respect. Its frequent use in both educational and professional settings proves its important role in maintaining harmonious social interaction.

### **Off-Record Strategy**

Off-record strategy is a politeness strategy in which speakers express their intentions indirectly through hints, irony, satire, metaphor, or ambiguous expressions. By using this strategy, speakers do not state the face-threatening act explicitly, so the interpretation of meaning is left to the hearer. This indirectness allows speakers to avoid direct responsibility for their utterances while still conveying the intended message. In professional communication, indirect expressions are commonly used to reduce imposition and maintain politeness, particularly in business interactions (Afriana et al., 2023).

In academic settings, politeness and indirectness are also frequently applied. Sudar et al. (2025) found that students often use indirect utterances when making requests, asking for permission, or expressing disagreement with lecturers to show respect and avoid threatening the lecturer's face. This shows that off-record strategy plays an important role in maintaining hierarchical relationships in educational communication. In digital communication, off-record strategy is widely used to express criticism and opinions indirectly. Silitonga & Pasaribu (2021) revealed that Indonesian social media users frequently apply off-record strategy in the form of satire, sarcasm, and implied criticism to avoid direct confrontation. Similarly, Rakhmawati & Sulistyorini (2021) found that speakers in Indonesian television talk shows often use humor and figurative language to deliver sensitive messages indirectly. Thus, off-record strategy functions as an effective tool to maintain politeness, reduce conflict, and protect the hearer's face across various communication contexts.

## **METHOD**

This research applies a qualitative method because the data are in the form of words, sentences, and conversations taken from the movie *The Intern* (2015). Qualitative research is chosen because this study focuses on understanding meaning, context, and language use in social interaction rather than measuring numerical data. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research aims to explore and interpret social phenomena by understanding how individuals construct meaning from their experiences. Therefore, this approach is considered appropriate for analyzing politeness strategies, since the object of this research is spoken language that requires contextual interpretation.

The data source of this research is the movie *The Intern* (2015), directed by Nancy Meyers. The data are taken from the utterances spoken by the main characters in their daily interactions, especially in workplace situations. The researcher focuses on dialogues that contain politeness strategies such as bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies based on Brown & Levinson's theory (1987). These strategies are analyzed to understand how the characters maintain social relationships and express politeness in communication.

The data collection process was conducted through observation and documentation techniques. First, the researcher watched the movie several times to understand the storyline and the context of each conversation. Then, the researcher wrote down and transcribed the utterances that contain politeness strategies. After that, the selected data were carefully examined and classified based on the types of politeness strategies. This step was important to ensure that only relevant data were included in the analysis.

After the data were collected and classified, the data analysis was conducted using a descriptive qualitative technique. The researcher analyzed each selected utterance by identifying the type of politeness strategy used, interpreting its meaning, and explaining its function based on the context of the conversation. The analysis was carried out systematically to show how each politeness strategy is used by the characters in different situations. The results of the analysis are presented in descriptive form to clearly explain the findings of this research.

In this research, the main instrument is the researcher herself, who plays an important role in collecting, selecting, classifying, and analyzing the data. To support the research process, several tools such as the movie script, notebook, and laptop are used to help in data transcription and analysis. By using this method, the researcher expects to provide a clear and valid description of the use of politeness strategies in the movie *The Intern* (2015).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This chapter presents the results of the research and the discussion of the findings related to the use of politeness strategies in the movie *The Intern* (2015). This chapter focuses on how the main characters apply politeness strategies in their daily

communication, especially in workplace interactions. The data analyzed in this chapter were taken from the selected dialogues that contain politeness strategies.

Based on the analysis conducted by the researcher, it was found that the characters in *The Intern* (2015) use various types of politeness strategies in their conversations. These strategies are used depending on the situation, the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, and the purpose of communication. The use of politeness strategies also shows how the characters maintain social relationships, express respect, build closeness, and avoid conflict in their interactions.

The findings show that there are four types of politeness strategies used by the main characters in the movie, namely bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. Each of these strategies has different functions and appears in different communicative situations. The detailed explanation and discussion of each strategy are presented in the following sub-chapters.

### **Bald On-Record Strategy**

Bald on-record strategy is identified when the speaker produces an utterance in a direct, clear, and straightforward manner without attempting to minimize the face-threatening act. This strategy is marked by the absence of politeness markers and indirect expressions.

#### **Data 1**

Jules: "Get this done before the meeting."

Employee: "Okay."

This utterance is categorized as a bald on-record strategy because the speaker delivers a direct command without using mitigating devices such as please or could you. The structure of the utterance is imperative, indicating that the speaker prioritizes clarity and immediacy. The hearer responds briefly, which shows acceptance of the instruction without negotiation.

#### **Data 2**

Jules: "Move faster, we're behind schedule."

Staff: "Yes, ma'am."

This utterance is also identified as a bald on-record strategy. The speaker issues a direct instruction followed by a justification related to time pressure. The absence of softening elements indicates that the speaker emphasizes urgency. The formal response "Yes, ma'am" suggests recognition of authority and acceptance of the command. The analysis of these data shows that bald on-record strategy appears in interactions where directness is required to deliver instructions clearly. The strategy is realized through imperative sentences and the omission of politeness markers.

### **Positive Politeness Strategy**

Positive politeness strategy is identified when the speaker uses expressions that show friendliness, closeness, and solidarity toward the hearer. This strategy is marked using supportive language and inclusive expressions that reduce social distance.

#### **Data 1**

Ben: "You did a great job with that presentation."

Jules: "Thank you, Ben."

This dialogue is categorized as positive politeness strategy because the speaker gives a compliment to the hearer. The compliment functions as a supportive expression that makes the hearer feel appreciated. The response indicates acceptance of the positive evaluation and maintains a friendly interaction.

#### **Data 2**

Jules: "We're a great team, right?"

Staff: "Yes, we really are."

This utterance is identified as positive politeness strategy because the speaker uses inclusive language through the pronoun we. This choice of wording emphasizes togetherness and group identity. The hearer's response shows agreement, which reinforces solidarity in the interaction. The analysis of these data shows that positive politeness strategy is realized through compliments and inclusive expressions. These linguistic forms are used to express friendliness and reduce social distance between the speaker and the hearer.

### **Negative Politeness Strategy**

Negative politeness strategy is identified when the speaker attempts to reduce the level of imposition toward the hearer by using polite and indirect expressions. This strategy is marked using apologizing expressions, modal verbs, and formal language that show respect for the hearer's autonomy.

#### **Data 1**

Employee: "Excuse me, may I ask you something, ma'am?"

Jules: "Yes, what is it?"

This utterance is categorized as negative politeness strategy because the speaker uses a polite opener (excuse me) and a modal verb (may) to soften the request. These linguistic elements function to reduce the imposition and signal respect toward the hearer. The response indicates that the request is accepted in a formal and respectful manner.

#### **Data 2**

Employee: "I'm sorry to bother you, but could you check this file?"

Jules: "Sure, I'll look at it."

This dialogue is also identified as negative politeness strategy. The speaker begins the request with an apology (I'm sorry to bother you), which functions to acknowledge potential inconvenience. The use of the modal verb *could* further minimizes the force of the request. The hearer's response shows willingness to comply, indicating that the request is successfully delivered without causing discomfort. The analysis of these data shows that negative politeness strategy is realized through apologizing expressions, polite modal verbs, and indirect requests. These forms are used to minimize imposition and maintain respectful interaction between the speaker and the hearer.

### **Off-Record Strategy**

Off-record strategy is identified when the speaker conveys the intended meaning indirectly without stating the face-threatening act explicitly. This strategy is marked by the use of hints or statements whose meaning must be inferred by the hearer based on context.

Data 1

Jules: "It's very quiet in here today."

Staff: "Oh, I'll start working on it right now."

This utterance is categorized as off-record strategy because the speaker does not directly state a command or request. Instead, the speaker makes a comment about the situation, which functions as a hint. The hearer interprets the implied meaning and responds with an action, showing successful understanding of the indirect message.

Data 2

Ben: "The files are still on the table."

Employee: "I'll take care of them immediately."

This dialogue is also identified as off-record strategy. The speaker does not explicitly instruct the hearer to organize the files. The statement only describes the condition of the files, allowing the hearer to infer the intended meaning. The immediate response indicates that the hearer understands the implied request. The analysis of these data shows that off-record strategy is realized through indirect statements and contextual hints. These forms require shared understanding between the speaker and the hearer to interpret the intended meaning.

The findings show that bald on-record strategy is frequently used in workplace situations that require efficiency, urgency, and clear authority. In *The Intern* (2015), this strategy mainly appears in interactions between superiors and subordinates, reflecting unequal power relations. The directness of this strategy helps avoid misunderstanding and ensures that tasks are completed quickly. Although bald on-

record strategy may threaten the hearer's face, its use is considered appropriate in professional environments where time pressure and productivity are prioritized.

Positive politeness strategy in the movie functions to create solidarity and reduce social distance among characters. The frequent use of compliments, inclusive language, and expressions of appreciation shows that workplace communication is not only task-oriented but also relationship-oriented. This strategy helps build trust, teamwork, and emotional support among coworkers. The use of positive politeness reflects an effort to maintain a friendly and cooperative working atmosphere despite hierarchical differences.

Negative politeness strategy is used to show respect and professionalism, particularly in interactions involving social distance or unequal power. The findings indicate that junior employees tend to use this strategy when speaking to superiors to minimize imposition and protect the hearer's negative face. The use of indirect requests, apologies, and polite modal verbs demonstrates awareness of hierarchy and workplace ethics. This strategy helps maintain formal and respectful communication while avoiding potential conflict.

Off-record strategy is used to convey meaning indirectly in order to avoid confrontation and protect both the speaker's and hearer's face. In *The Intern* (2015), this strategy appears in situations where direct commands or criticism may cause discomfort. By relying on hints and contextual understanding, the speaker allows the hearer to interpret the message voluntarily. This strategy reflects a high level of pragmatic competence and sensitivity toward interpersonal harmony in workplace communication.

## CONCLUSION

This research analyzed the use of politeness strategies used by the main characters in the movie *The Intern* (2015) based on Brown & Levinson's theory (1987). The findings show that four types of politeness strategies are applied in the movie, namely bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. These strategies are used differently depending on the situation, the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, and the purpose of communication.

Bald on-record strategy is mostly used in direct and urgent situations in the workplace. Positive politeness strategy is commonly used to build closeness, solidarity, and friendly relationships among the characters. Negative politeness strategy is applied to show respect and minimize imposition, especially in formal interactions. Meanwhile, off-record strategy is used to convey suggestions or criticism indirectly in order to avoid conflict.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that politeness strategies play an important role in creating effective communication in workplace settings. The movie *The Intern* (2015) shows how these strategies are used naturally in

professional interactions. Therefore, this study is expected to help readers better understand the use of politeness strategies in daily and professional communication. Future researchers are encouraged to conduct similar studies using different objects to gain broader perspectives.

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