

Politeness Strategies Used by Detectives in the Movies *Murder On The Orient Express and Knives Out*

Muhammad Zuhairi Shah Sazali¹, Elias S. Mohandas^{2*}

^{1 & 2} Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA

¹ zuhairishah23@gmail.com

² elias9154@uitm.edu.my

**Corresponding author*

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Abstract

Politeness strategies are known to be speech acts that express concern for others and minimise threats to face in social contexts. It is used not just in conversations but politeness strategies can also be used in written messages. Politeness strategies are important as they are used to maintain social order and its main use is to avoid conflicts. Politeness strategies are critical in verbal communications as impolite words and rude expressions which are used in communicating with other people would result in lack of cooperation and failure to obtain compliance particularly in negotiation. In this research, Brown and Levinson's concept of Politeness Strategies was employed as the main framework to execute the study. This study investigated the subject movies, "Knives Out" and "Murder on The Orient Express" to recognize the different kinds of politeness strategies utilised by the detectives in the movies and examine the likenesses and contrasts of politeness strategies utilised by the two main characters in the subject movies, from two different cultural backgrounds; American and Belgian. A qualitative method design was utilised for this research. The screenplay from both movies was transcribed and the scripts with politeness strategies will be chosen and utilised for analysis. Information from the research is gathered and dissected using descriptive and qualitative analysis. Hercule Poirot has found to be the most dominant in Positive Politeness Strategies, opposing his counterpart in this study, which is Benoit Blanc, who has the highest percentage committing Off Record Strategies in his role in knives Out. The findings of the study are hoped to give a better insight into using politeness strategies in interactions, the importance of being polite in communication and how politeness can help improve communication in daily social engagements.

Keywords: *politeness strategies, communication, intercultural communication, movies, content analysis*

Introduction

Politeness strategies are strategies used in conversations to prevent violations of the hearer's face. The term politeness means taking hearers' feelings and desires into consideration when speaking and acting (Al-Duleimi, 2016). It is a valid strategy to be used in both verbal and non-verbal acts. In other words, the politeness could be expressed, for example, through dressing appropriately, and using appropriate "facial expressions, gestures or bodily postures" (Ashizuka et al., 2015, p. 1) The origins of the English term 'polite' can be traced back up to the 15th century. The word polite originated from the Latin language which is 'politus', which means 'polished' or 'made smooth'. In the seventeenth century, a polite person was defined as 'one of refined courteous manners', according to the Oxford dictionary of etymology (Shahrokhi, 2013).

Numerous researchers have examined politeness strategies in various parts of communication and interactions, yet very few have used movies as their subject of study. Politeness strategies can be utilised in

communication to gain compliance and cooperation in obtaining data. It is likewise a pattern that is utilised while communicating to avoid conflicts and achieve common ground between the speaker and hearer. This research centred around the analysis of politeness strategies in movies before continuing to clarify the subtleties, for example, the different types of politeness strategies utilised and how it influenced communications decidedly. The movies that would be the subject of this research are *Knives Out* and *Murder on The Orient Express*, with the broad centre being coordinated towards the primary characters of the films which are Benoit Blanc and Hercule Poirot.

Brown and Levinson (1987) outlined five main types of politeness strategies: bald on-record, negative politeness, positive politeness, off-record, and saying nothing (Krisnoni, 2013). Firstly, bald on-record. Bald on-record is a straight-to-the-point of saying things without minimalising for it to be as direct and concise as possible. Meanwhile, negative politeness is used by showing deference in the intention of avoiding offending. Negative politeness strategies include hedging, disagreeing to give opinions and also questioning. The inverse of negative politeness is positive politeness. The positive politeness strategies utilised featured benevolence. This incorporates sharing common ground, utilising jokes and monikers, discourse markers, and furthermore uncommon languages. To end, off-record which likewise can be sorted as the indirect strategy. This strategy promotes utilising indirect language and clears out the capability of the speaker to impose. The strategy depends on pragmatic adjustments to deliver a message.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), cited by Mu (2015), the theory incorporates fifteen positive politeness strategies and ten negative politeness strategies with some of them have specific functions to be used in any form of communication. Some of the strategies that consist of the long list are in-group identity markers, assert common ground and minimising imposition. These applications can potentially deal great help to speakers in having better conversations and achieve in-conversation goals.

Movies will be the central attention for this research as they are a source of audio and visual entertainment. Quoting Mahanani (2019), movie tells the viewers a story with visual and sound, that makes the viewer understands easily and also makes the viewer feels what happen in the movie. The widespread of movies being a primary source of entertainment alongside with music and social media, making it one of the biggest influences in the 21st century. Everything that happens in movies namely fashion trends, slangs, utterances or even in this particular case scenario, politeness strategies can set a shockwave throughout the audience that can make it credible to be adapted into their lifestyle. Therefore, the adaptation of Politeness Strategies in movies that is starred by big names in the entertainment industry can pave the way of the normalisation of the culture of being polite towards audiences and many more. This research bears the intention of providing sufficient and concise information to provide readers on how it is best to know how, when, where and to whom we should use Politeness Strategies with.

Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to analyse the politeness strategies used by Hercule Poirot and Benoit Blanc, the inspectors in the subject movies. To achieve this main purpose, these objectives are formulated:

1. To identify the types of politeness used by the inspectors/Hercule Poirot and Benoit Blanc in the movies *Murder on The Orient Express* and *Knives Out*.
2. To compare the politeness strategies used by the inspectors in *Murder on The Orient Express* and *Knives Out* from two different cultural backgrounds; American and Belgian.

Problem Statement

Communication between two people should be clear, direct, and consist of one or two ways in the interaction. Being in a situation which consists of a speaker and a hearer, for example, a superior and a subordinate in a classroom or an office, the nature of the environment should be one who talks and the other listens and vice versa for it to be two-way communication. With the provided situation happening, learning in classes or working with people at various workplaces could be done smoothly and with so much ease.

However, the situation above can end up in a different way when one party or another participating in a social engagement such as superiors or colleagues in respective environments decides to act in a less-friendly manner such as scolding, having aggressive behaviour or giving orders using non-appropriate language. This can happen internally and externally at workplaces and even at educational institutions which internally indicates that the poor communication is exhibited in a colleague-to-colleague interaction or student-to-teacher meanwhile externally through worker-client interaction.

This can cause insubordination and lack of cooperation and compliance which later leads to failed communication. Failure in communication can result in a big number of negative results such as developing stress, work performance declining and frustration when receiving orders. All these results can have a very negative impact on the long term in life and this should not be taken lightly. Failed communication must be amended as soon as possible to have a more positive way of life.

Additionally, the general public is quite unaware of the need to be polite in day-to-day conversation. Most people would assume that it is just better to speak directly to be perfectly clear and to get the message sent as easy as possible. Although it is true that speaking directly conveys the message intended quicker but there is nothing wrong with taking alternatives to save face of other people.

Thus, it is proposed to apply politeness strategies into daily uses to effectively teach or give orders. As supported by a stance by Zhang (2009), to promote student compliance in classrooms, it is advisable for teachers, in spite of their role-related legitimate power over students, to be very polite in their compliance-gaining requests and to avoid the use of forceful, controlling, and face-threatening language. Such politeness

in request can arouse positive emotions, such as happiness, from students, which lead to compliance and other desired outcomes. Politeness strategies can be exemplified with the polite use of words and friendly gestures.

Movies are chosen as the primary subject of the study. The main reason why is because of the large total number of viewers that movies attract. Movies are becoming major influencers in setting trends in fashion, slang and even utterances. Politeness adapted into movies is perfect to influence movie-watchers to adapt politeness strategies into their daily lives.

Literature review

According to Al-Duleimi (2016), the term politeness means taking hearers' feelings and desires into consideration when speaking and acting. People that consider using politeness while having conversations with other people often think about the right words to be chosen before they speak. This is so that the other parties participating in the conversation feel welcomed and more engaged to be joining in a particular situation. According to Thomas (1995, p. 158) as cited by Al Duleimi (2016), politeness plays an effective role in interaction because it controls cooperative behaviour in conversation. With politeness, the friction that is restraining a conversation to be smooth and easy flowing are absent. The reason behind the perceived welcoming nature of individuals who employ politeness methods is in their kind demeanour and avoidance of imposing on others. This quality enhances the appeal of the speaker's chosen words, making them more inviting for others to participate in the conversation.

Multiple concepts are revolving around the definition of politeness strategies, by several notable scholars such as Lakoff (1973), Leech (1983) and also Brown and Levinson (1987), with Brown and Levinson focusing on the face as their main subject on the politeness theory. Brown and Levinson (1987), as cited by Longcope (1995), defined face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself". In other words, the face is a positive self-claim that needs to be taken care of. The face can, later, be divided into two categories, which are the Positive face and Negative face. According to Yevheniia Korneliaieva (2019), Positive Face is the positive consistent self-image or "personality" (crucially including the desire that this self-image is appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants meanwhile negative face is the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction, i.e., the freedom of action and freedom from imposition. In easier words, the positive face is desired to be appreciated and favoured and the negative face is the desire to not be intruded on or imposed upon. These two aspects are considered as the basic needs in social interaction as cooperation and engagement are needed to maintain the participants in an interaction's faces.

Moving on to Lakoff's concept of politeness theory, she defines politeness as a form of behaviour that has been developed in societies to reduce friction in personal interaction (Margetan, Ratih, & Ratri, 2014). Robin Lakoff prioritised three maxims in her politeness theory which are, "Don't impose or Distance", "Give option or Deference", and lastly "Make the audience feel good". It is critical to make sure that not only the message that speakers are trying to convey is delivered clearly but it is also a priority to take into consideration the effects of the speakers' words towards the hearers. Hence, why Lakoff's maxims are important in communication.

Lastly is Leech's politeness principle. According to Leech (1983, p. 23), the key role of politeness is avoiding disruption and maintaining social equilibrium and friendly relations. In support of his politeness principle, he listed six maxims: tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy.

According to Brown and Levinson (1978), cited by Hamuddin and Mohd Noor (2015), Politeness strategies can be divided into four main strategies namely: bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness and off-record politeness strategies.

The bald-on record strategy can be recognised as one who doesn't diminish or soften the threat to a listener's face. It is a method of making statements as direct as could reasonably be. Bald-on record strategies are regularly used by individuals that have close associations, for example, friends or family. Such examples can be pointed out when using a bald-on record strategy, such as when in desperation, speakers tend to say, "Watch out!" or when stating offers. Speakers who are using the bald-on record strategy tend to say "Leave it there! I'll do it later".

Contrary to bald-on record, positive politeness could be defined as an involvement-based approach made by the speaker for understanding, approving of, and admiring the positive image of the hearer (Nurmawati, 2019). In simpler words, speakers who use positive politeness strategies will in general consider and limit the imposition that can threaten the positive face of hearers. It is utilised to make listeners feel great about themselves and keeping up the positive self-image of listeners. Some of the situations where positive politeness strategies can be used are when speakers are attending to hearers wants or needs. For example, "You look tired, is there anything that I can help?" or when speakers are using in-group identity markers, such as "Hey bro, can help me out with this?".

Moving on to its counterpart, negative politeness strategies. A negative face refers to one's desire to be left free to do whatever he likes, or he is freed from various obligations (Abdurahman & Manaf, 2018). In the negative politeness strategies, it is more towards the listener's negative face and the strategy is centred more around forcing less towards listeners. Examples can be given in situations where the speaker is using hedges, in that situation sentences like "Could you please hand me a piece of bread?" or when the speaking using plural pronouns, sentences like "From our behalf, we are sorry for your loss" could be uttered by the speaker.

Lastly, the off-record politeness strategies. Off record is giving hints, clues and the utterances are ambiguous as opposed to bald-on record without redressive action (Maros & Rosli, 2017). Indirect language and removal of the speaker from being imposing are practised in this strategy. This strategy focuses on pragmatic to convey the actual meaning while trying to avoid losing face. One of the examples of the usage of off-record politeness strategies are sentences like "Is there any seat left at the table?"

A study conducted by Maros and Rosli (2017) entitled *Politeness Strategies in Twitter Updates of Female English Language Studies Malaysian Undergraduates* is an example of a research that implemented the same theoretical framework as this research. The analysis of the findings was done with the help of the theories of Politeness Strategies by Brown and Levinson (1987). They found that the participants applied the most Positive Politeness Strategies in their Twitter updates. Positive politeness is believed to be used the most because of the nature of CMC which promotes interpersonal communication and expression among its users (Maros & Rosli, 2017).

Another study that takes the same approach as this research is *A Politeness Strategy Analysis on The Main Characters' Dialogues of The Movie Pirates Of The Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* by Muhammad Ihsan Fauzi (2010). The research investigated the use of Politeness Strategies by the main characters in the subject movie. Similar to the previous research, this study applied Brown and Levinson's *Politeness Theory* (1987) in accomplishing the Research Objectives and analysing the findings.

Methodology

The research intended to analyse the cultural differences of politeness strategies used by the detectives in the movies *Knives Out* and *The Murder on The Orient Express*. Therefore, this study adopted the qualitative research method. The researcher is playing the part of an observer in collecting the data needed for this study and analysing it. A non-probability sampling method is used for the study which is the purposive sampling method in which it analysed certain lines from two different movies, *Murder on The Orient Express* and *Knives Out*. For this research, the researcher acquired audio-visual materials which are the subject movies that are available online. The movies are then transcribed to fully maximise the procurement of politeness strategies in the chosen scenes. The data obtained from the transcription were analysed to fit the requirement of the research. The data is analysed in sequential order. Firstly, they transcribed the subject movies that were selected for the research. Scenes that contained politeness strategies are later on highlighted to keep track of the scenes that are suitable for analysis. Then, scenes that contained politeness strategies were classified into types of Positive Politeness Strategies, Negative Politeness Strategies, and Off Record Strategies. The types of politeness strategies were modeled after using Brown and Levinson's Politeness Strategies. A comparison of the application of politeness strategies by both of the detectives are then done by looking into

the native cultural background of the detectives. To justify further on the comparison between the two detectives' cultural background, the Hofstede's Cultural Dimension was then cited to solidify the stance to justify the comparison.

Findings

Based on the total data collected, three Politeness Strategies classifications were collected from the movies, *Knives Out* and *Murder on The Orient Express* as shown in the table below:

Table 1: Politeness Strategies found in the subject movies

| No. | Types of Politeness Strategies | <i>Knives Out</i> (%) | <i>Murder on The Orient Express</i> (%) |
|-----|--------------------------------|-----------------------|---|
| 1. | Positive Politeness Strategies | 31.6 | 50 |
| 2. | Negative Politeness Strategies | 31.6 | 31.6 |
| 3. | Bold Off-Record Strategy | 36.8 | 18.4 |

Table 1 shows that Benoit Blanc from the movie *Knives Out* contains the most dominant type of Politeness Strategy is the Bold Off Record Strategy with the score of 36.8%. Meanwhile in the movie *Murder on The Orient Express*, Hercule Poirot utilised 38 Politeness Strategies, with the most being the Positive Politeness Strategies with a total of 50% from the classification.

Table 2: Positive Politeness Strategies in *Knives Out* and *Murder on The Orient Express*

| No. | Types of Positive Politeness Strategies | <i>Knives Out</i> | <i>Murder on The Orient Express</i> |
|-----|---|-------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. | Notice, attend to the hearer | 13, 16 | 5, 9, 29, 30 |
| 2. | Exaggerate | | 5 |
| 3. | Intensify interest to the hearer | 16 | |
| 4. | Use in-group identity markers | | 12 |
| 5. | Seek agreement | | 7 |
| 6. | Avoid disagreement | 1 | 1, 8, 10 |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------|---|---|------------|
| 7. | Presuppose, raise, or assert a common ground | | 15, 21, 23 |
| 8. | Joke | | |
| 9. | Assert or presuppose the speaker's knowledge of and concern of hearer's wants | 3 | |
| 10. | Offer, promise | 2 | 14 |
| 11. | Be optimistic | | |
| 12. | Include both speaker and hearer in the activity | | 11, 26 |
| 13. | Give or ask for reasons | | |
| 14. | Assume or assert reciprocity | | 14, 34 |
| 15. | Give gifts to the hearer | | |
| Total no. of occurrences | | 6 | 18 |

Table 2 shows that the characters from *Knives Out* and *Murder on The Orient Express* have committed Positive Politeness Strategies consisting of the attending to hearer, exaggerating, intensifying interest to the hearer use of in-group identity markers, seeking agreement, avoiding agreement, asserting common ground, presupposing the speaker's knowledge of and concern of hearer's wants, promising, including speaker and hearer in the activity and asserting reciprocity with the score of 6 and 19, respectively.

Table 3: Negative Politeness Strategies in *Knives Out* and *Murder on The Orient Express*

| No. | Types of Negative Politeness Strategies | <i>Knives Out</i> | <i>Murder on The Orient Express</i> |
|-----|---|-------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. | Be conventionally indirect | 15 | |
| 2. | The question, use hedges | | 13, 15, 20 |
| 3. | Be pessimistic | 11 | |
| 4. | Minimize the imposition | 13, 14 | |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------|---|------|-----------------------|
| 5. | Give deference | | 32, 33 |
| 6. | Apologize | 5, 9 | 6, 17, 22, 24, 28, 31 |
| 7. | Impersonalize speaker and hearer | | |
| 8. | State the face threat act as a general rule | | 16 |
| 9. | Nominalize | | |
| 10. | Go on record as incurring debt, or as not indebting hearer | | |
| Total no. of occurrences | | 6 | 12 |

As can be seen from Table 3, the acts of being indirect, questioning and using hedges, being pessimistic, minimising the imposition, giving deference, apologising, and stating the face threat act as a general rule was committed by both Benoit Blanc and Hercule Poirot. In negative politeness, the speaker aimed to fulfil the 20 negative-face wants of the hearer. Thus, negative politeness is characterised by self-effacement, formality and restraint, attention to restricted aspects of the hearer's self-image, and for the hearer's desire to be unimpeded.

Table 4: Off-Record Strategies in *Knives Out* and *Murder on The Orient Express*

| No. | Types of Off-Record Strategies | <i>Knives Out</i> | <i>Murder on The Orient Express</i> |
|-----|--------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. | Giving Hints | | |
| 2. | Giving Association Clues | | |
| 3. | Presupposing | | |
| 4. | Understating | | |
| 5. | Overstating | | 4 |
| 6. | Using Tautologies | | |
| 7. | Using Contradictions | | |
| 8. | Being Ironical | | |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------|---------------|
| 9. | Using Metaphors | 4 | 18 |
| 10. | Using Rhetorical Questions | 6, 7, 10, 12 | 2, 19, 25, 27 |
| 11. | Being Ambiguous | | |
| 12. | Being Vague | 8, 17 | |
| 13. | Over-Generalising | | 3 |
| 14. | Displacing Hearer | | |
| 15. | Being Incomplete and Using Elipsis | | |
| Total no. of occurrences | | 7 | 6 |

In Table 4, the Off-Record Strategies committed in *Knives Out* and *Murder on the Orient Express* are the acts of overstating, metaphors, rhetorical questions, being vague, and over-generalising. This strategy is often used by the speaker who wants to commit face threatening acts without taking the full responsibility for doing it. Under this strategy, the speaker violates the maxim of relevance, maxim of quantity, maxim of quality, and maxim of manner.

Discussion

Based on the data presented, there is a total of 19 and 38 Politeness Strategies committed by Benoit Blanc and Hercule Poirot, respectively. The Politeness Strategies committed is later on stretched out into three classifications that follow the theory of Brown and Levinson (1978) which are Positive Politeness Strategies, Negative Politeness Strategies and Off Record Strategy. According to the data that has been classified into the three types of Politeness Strategies, Benoit Blanc has committed 6 Positive Politeness Strategies, 6 Negative Politeness Strategies and 7 Off Record Strategies. For Hercule Poirot, 19 Positive Politeness Strategies, 12 Negative Politeness Strategies and 7 Off Record Strategies have been committed by the Belgian.

Hercule Poirot is seen to be more dominant in the Positive Politeness Strategies with 19 committed in the classification while Benoit Blanc scored the highest in Off-Record Strategy with a total of 7. According to Brown and Levinson (1978), Positive politeness refers to the act of addressing the addressee's positive face, which pertains to their inherent desire for their wishes, activities, acquisitions, or values to be perceived as desirable. As stated by Brown and Levinson (1987), off record is a communicative act that is done

off record if it is done in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act (Brown & Levinson, 1978).

It is notable that the Belgian and American community are not particularly the same in the aspects of their business cultures, Cultural Dimension Insights and also the upbringing of the politeness value in their respective cultures. Talking from a business culture, the Americans are deemed to be more casual. Citing from an article from ("American Culture - Business Culture", 2021), they often cultivate a casual business environment that makes partners feel comfortable enough to trust them and share their position. However, while they are often very warm and welcoming, Americans do necessarily seek to build personal relationships with business partners. Contrary to how the Americans work, the Belgians do not address people from the outset by their first name or ask personal questions ("Belgium", 2021). This implies that it is a norm that the Belgians tend to keep a distance in business, explaining on how polite Belgians are with their clients. In discussing about the use of politeness strategies by the people Belgium, their choice of language plays a critical role in determining the level of politeness that is utilised by Belgians. In the article Politeness in Belgium (Danblon, De Clerck, & van Noppen, n.d.), it is in principle for the speaker to adopt the hearer's language in order to save the hearer's negative face.

Besides than the application of multiple languages into the society in Belgium, the standardisation of politeness in Belgium is also present at the young age. Forms of first-order politeness are taught to children at an early age and affect subsequent behaviour to the extent where foreign visitors (and even some Belgians themselves) comment on their fequent, almost compulsive use in everyday service exchanges (Danblon, De Clerck, & van Noppen, n.d.).

According to Hofstede's Insights.com (2021), the United States of America scored 91 in Individualism and 40 in Power Distance. This shows that America is a country that values pride and dignity, while put achieving equality in high importance. For Americans, face is the individual consciousness of his or her public image (Jiang and Liu, 2019). Hence in establishing this image, Americans converse, act and behave in ways that are consistent with the expected self-image of hers or his. According to Watts (2003), because of an individualism centered culture, American politeness is normally based on personal autonomy and how one maintains conversation etiquette. The American trait of achieving equality is largely motivated by the American Dream. People believe that American Dream is revealed through the Declaration of Independence. It is a normalised culture to treat everyone equally in America.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research is to study the types of Politeness Strategies used in the subject movies. This is to know the types of Politeness Strategies that are suitable to use in the right context in certain situations. Based on the findings, excerpts of the findings have been classified into Positive Politeness Strategies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Vol. 7, No. 4, 2023

Negative Politeness Strategies and Off Record Strategy and extracted to elaborate on how the main characters utilised the Politeness Strategies to their advantage so that it can show readers how the Politeness Strategies can be used in real-life situations. The findings will benefit future researchers that circle their focus of their study around the use of Politeness Strategies by Belgians and Americans. It can be simplified that the Hercule Poirot has a higher command in use of Politeness Strategies than Benoit Blanc that can imply that Belgians is a more polite community compared to Americans. In general, understanding how and when to use Politeness Strategies is important in communication as it can help preventing speakers from committing offense towards the hearer.

Author contributions

Conceptualisation, M.Z.S.S and E.M.; methodology, M.Z.S.S and E.M.; software, M.Z.S.S and E.M.; validation, M.Z.S.S and E.M.; formal analysis, M.Z.S.S and E.M.; investigation, M.Z.S.S.; resources, M.Z.S.S and E.M.; data curation, M.Z.S.S and E.M.; writing—original draft preparation, M.Z.S.S.; writing—review and editing, M.Z.S.S and E.M.; visualisation, M.Z.S.S and E.M.; supervision, E.M.; project administration, E.M.; funding acquisition, M.Z.S.S and E.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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