A Pragmatic Analysis of Politeness Strategies in the Film 'Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery'

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how characters use politeness to navigate social interactions and manage face through language in the film Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery. Using Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987), the research fills a gap in film discourse analysis where politeness is often overlooked despite its narrative importance. An analysis of 24 purposively sampled film conversations was used in this qualitative study. Human coding and content analysis sorted each conversation utterance by the most common politeness strategy. Off-Record politeness was the most common, followed by Negative and Bald-on-Record. Positive politeness was the least common. These methods show the film's characters' emotions, power, and relationships. The study shows that politeness strategies layer character and tension into film dialogue, supporting politeness theory in media text analysis. This study also suggests ways for screenwriters and teachers to improve dialogue characterisation and authenticity. Future work may expand insight into gesture, intonation, cross-genre analysis, and phrase analysis to better understand genre specifics and pragmatics in cinematic discourse. Overall, this study contributes to pragmatics and film studies and shows how language shapes viewer perspectives and character behaviour.

Keywords: Politeness strategies, Film Discourse Analysis, Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory & Pragmatics in Media

INTRODUCTION

Politeness strategies are important communication tools that help people stay respectful, peaceful, and able to talk to each other well. To avoid conflict and keep social ties strong, these strategies often use indirect language, hedging, and showing empathy. Spencer-Oatey (2021) posits that politeness is intricately linked to rapport management, wherein speakers negotiate face concerns and relational objectives. Recent studies in sociolinguistics argue that politeness not only provides a linguistic option but is connected to cultural practice and the importance of social awareness (Afriana, 2023). Politeness strategies are especially important in interactions that invoke power and emotion. Thus, observing politeness as a conversational strategy reveals how people negotiate relationships and social practices in real time.

Films often use politeness strategies among characters in a way that parallels how people talk to each other in real life to instantiate relationships, emotions, and power dynamics. Characters use scripted language in dialogue to provide support, assert power, or maintain social distance by signalling through different pragmatic cues. As Spencer-Oatey (2008) points out, film discourse can parallel the complex negotiation of interpersonal behaviour that occurs in everyday communication. Dynel (2021) also argues that tactical productive elements of film, for example, politeness and impoliteness, are designed strategically to enhance character development and increase tension in the narrative. Afriana (2020) also shows how politeness in movie scripts can show cultural values and social roles. These films are great for studying how language works in social situations, especially in mystery or drama films.

In synthesis, politeness strategies serve both communicative and relational functions, whether in real life or fictional narratives. Films like *Glass Onion*: A Knives Out Mystery provide a compelling lens to study how language reflects and shapes human interaction through pragmatic choices. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the following research questions to ensure an in-depth and comprehensive outcome:

1. What types of politeness strategies are used in the film Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery?
2. Which politeness strategy appears most often in the characters' conversations and interactions in the movie?

Problem Statement

Although films are widely used to explore social relations and cultural values, the study of politeness strategies within cinematic dialogue remains underrepresented. Most film analyses do not pay much attention to pragmatic elements like politeness, but instead, focus more on narrative, genre, or character development. Spencer-Oatey (2021) emphasises that politeness is central to managing rapport and social interaction, yet its role in film discourse is rarely examined in depth. This gap limits our understanding of how fictional conversations reflect real-life communication. Thus, there is a need to investigate how politeness strategies function within filmic contexts to reveal deeper social meanings.

Furthermore, much of the present-day work in politeness strategy is based on formal models taken from literature or restrictive dialogues that ignore the variability of conversation in the wild or spontaneous talk. Watts (2019) critiques these models, asserting they take politeness and "reduce it to a set of canned phrases and formulas" rather than acknowledging that it is essentially a social behaviour. Similarly, Blitvich (2022) notes that scripted media still has a lot of merits with respect to the exploration of pragmatic choices when considered in context. However, by ignoring the need to investigate authentic interaction patterns, many media studies create a methodological gap which should be considered. This is why it is possible to investigate politeness in interaction, because it is situated between formalism and usage.

Despite the popularity of crime films and TV shows, there is also limited research on how politeness strategies are used within this genre. Crime narratives often involve tension, deception, and power struggles, making them rich grounds for pragmatic analysis. Blitvich (2022) highlights that genre-specific discourse, especially in conflict-driven media, can reveal unique patterns of politeness and impoliteness. Yet, most studies focus on general genres like drama or comedy, leaving crime largely unexplored. This lack of genre-specific analysis restricts our understanding of how politeness adapts to different narrative contexts.

In summary, the current body of research overlooks the pragmatic richness of film dialogue, especially in crime genres, and relies too heavily on formal models that do not reflect real conversational dynamics. These gaps highlight the need for a focused study on politeness strategies in crime films like *Glass Onion*: A Knives Out Mystery, where language plays a crucial role in shaping relationships and advancing the plot. By addressing these challenges, the present research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of politeness in media discourse

LITERATURE REVIEW

Politeness Strategies

In non-linguistic communication, politeness strategies are important mechanisms for managing face, maintaining relationships, and showing social sensitivity. Searching through Brown and Levinson's (1987) sociopragmatic framework of politeness strategies will uncover 4 types of politeness strategies: positive politeness, negative politeness, off record, and bald on record. These strategies represent both linguistic expressions and social and psychological intents. In many contexts, including academic discourse (Al-Natour, Banikalef, & Alomari, 2025) and expressions of apologies (Banikalef, Maros, & Aladdi, 2015), politeness strategies can assist speakers in negotiating socially sensitive issues, power imbalances, and cultural dynamics. The strategic use of politeness strategies demonstrates both personal identity and serves the social norms of society, and represents an important area of study in discourse analysis.

Film Discourse Analysis

Film discourse analysis examines how language in scripted media reflects real-life communication and social interaction. In film, for example, a certain type of politeness strategy is utilised to construct relationships between characters and establish a depth of emotion toward one another or to guide conflict. Afriana (2020) examined how the use of the conversational maxims allowed the director to create or intensify suspense in film dialogue, not only depicting the character's developmental details, but also that Odebunmi (2021) expressed that politeness or face management can still occur for characters even while engaged in character-driven emotional exchanges. Thus, films as scripted texts indicate that the dialogue in film is more than a scripted text spoken by actors repeating scripted lines, and instead serve as another type of performative communication, a type of pragmatics, that communicates the actor or character's pragmatic choices for the development of the narrative and story. Furthermore, examining politeness in films enables the analysis of social behaviour, which is exactly the intention of the analysis of films as a context for the analysis of pragmatics.

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory remains a foundational framework in pragmatics, offering a systematic approach to understanding face-saving acts in communication. The theory's relevance extends beyond everyday conversation into institutional, intercultural, and media contexts. Brown (2019) emphasises the multimodal nature of politeness, showing how nonverbal cues such as gestures and tone contribute to pragmatic meaning. Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (2021) expand the theory through rapport management, linking politeness to broader relational goals across cultures. These show how the theory can be useful and still relevant to be used in analysing complex social interactions, especially in scripted and performative media.

Pragmatics in Media

Pragmatics in media examines how language is used in digital and film contexts in ways that reflect social norms, emotional indicators, and power relations. Blitvich (2022) asserts that users are engaged in acts of impoliteness and moral emotions in online contexts, facilitated by the genre of discourse and socially regulated conduct. Del-Saz-Rubio (2023) indicates that political actors use language to control how the statements might be interpreted in the public sphere. Dynel (2021) highlights that communication in media also incorporates multimodal meaning-making to include memes, visual images, tone, and other linguistic resources that shape pragmatic meaning. Put together, these perspectives illustrate that media discourse is a 'living' intercultural space where pragmatic means are employed, not only for the sake of making sense, but also strategically for various purposes, such as persuasion, identity work, or sociopolitical commentary.

Past Studies

Previous studies on genre-based film dialogue claim that politeness strategies and pragmatic violations are utilised to create character relations and narrative tension. For example, in Enola Holmes, Enola uses off-record strategies and flouts Grice's maxims, particularly relevance and quantity, to show Enola's intelligence and independence (Afriana, 2020). Again, these violations were not errors but merely tools employed by the protagonist to create suspense or empower the protagonist. Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory was utilised to show how Enola used positive politeness to resist authority, though the research also mentioned some limitations with the theory not capturing non-verbal aspects (Brown, 2019).

In the 17 Again film, positive politeness dominated scenes involving family and friendship, reflecting emotional closeness and generational gaps (Saleem, 2022). Negative politeness and bald-on-record strategies appeared in tense or emotional moments, while off-record strategy were used for humour and sarcasm (Al-Natour, Banikalef, & Alomari, 2025). These findings demonstrate that politeness varies according to context and intention. Politeness also helped manage conflict and maintain face in key scenes (Odebunmi, 2021).

In addition, the film The Danish Girl showcases the interaction of negative politeness, which demonstrates emotional vulnerability and reverence in terms of personal struggles and social contexts (Del-Saz-Rubio, 2023). With references to off-record strategies for addressing sensitive matters such as gender identity systems

(Blitvich, 2022), positive politeness virtual transmission of intimacy, and bald on-record strategies accompanying confrontation illustrate that the politeness strategies contain both personal and societal important points of tension (Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021). In general, politeness strategies in film dialogue examples, such as off-record politeness, positive politeness and negative politeness, serve an intentional purpose to demonstrate character relationship structures and emotional depth and societal norms, as well as engage with power dynamics and the evolving tension across a variety of films.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore politeness strategies in the film *Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery*, because qualitative methods enable in-depth interpretation of language and social interaction in context and are well-suited to uncovering nuanced patterns in pragmatic competence and face management (Taguchi, 2018; Yin, 2018). Using content analysis, the research systematically examined 24 purposively selected conversations and coded each utterance according to Brown and Levinson's framework. This is because content analysis is an established approach for analysing communication data, and Brown and Levinson's model provides the strategy typology (Krippendorff, 2018; Brown & Levinson, 1987).

In this study, human coding served as the primary instrument, allowing manual identification and classification of Off-Record, Bald-On Record, Negative Politeness, and Positive Politeness strategies; this approach aligns with best practice in qualitative content analysis, where trained coders interpret contextually embedded meanings (Krippendorff, 2018). Data collection involved viewing the film, reviewing the script, extracting relevant dialogues, and cleaning the dataset by removing incomplete or irrelevant segments. Each utterance was then analysed to determine its dominant strategy, and frequencies were calculated to describe patterns. To ensure validity, the study used triangulation by cross-checking codes with theoretical categories and scene context, reflecting recommendations to employ multiple analytic perspectives in order to enhance interpretive credibility (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). For reliability, Krippendorff's alpha was applied to assess coding consistency, following guidance that it is a general reliability coefficient suitable for content analysis with human coders (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007).

RESULTS

Findings for RQ1: What types of politeness strategies are used in the film Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery?

The analysis of 24 dialogues from the film reveals the presence of four main politeness strategies: Off-Record (OR), Bald-On Record (BO), Negative Politeness (NP), and Positive Politeness (PP). In this study, "U" refers to an utterance, which is a specific line of dialogue taken from the film and used as a unit of analysis. Firstly, Off-Record strategies appear in utterances such as "This can't be Shazam. It's a lamp" (U01) and "You got a flat tyre there" (U03), where speakers imply meaning indirectly rather than stating it explicitly. Next, Bald-On Record strategies are evident in direct statements like "Did you two stay at the hotel last night?" (U02) and "I'll pay you one billion dollars to tell me which one of them tried to kill me" (U14), which show straightforward communication without mitigation. In addition, Negative Politeness occurs in polite requests or apologies, such as "If there's any role, you'd like me to play… I'd be more than happy to oblige" (U04) and "I'm sorry. I'm very confused" (U05), reflecting attempts to minimise imposition. Positive Politeness on the other hand is seen in friendly or considerate remarks like "My dear, would you do me a favour?" (U13) and "I think maybe you should lie down" (U20), which aim to build rapport. These examples indicate that characters use a mix of strategies to manage relationships and maintain social harmony throughout the narrative.

Findings for RQ2: Which politeness strategy appears most often in the characters' conversations and interactions in the movie?

Table 1: Frequency of politeness strategies in the analysed dialogues

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Off-record (OR)	9	37.5%

Bald-on record (BO)	6	25.0%
Negative politeness (NP)	6	25.0%
Positive politeness (PP)	3	12.5%
Total	24	100%

Note. Percentages are calculated from N = 24 utterances.

The frequency analysis shows that **Off-Record (OR)** is the most frequently used strategy, appearing in 9 instances (37.5%). This suggests that characters often rely on indirect hints and implied meanings to communicate, which aligns with the film's mystery-driven plot. Both **Bald-On Record (BO)** and **Negative Politeness (NP)** occur 6 times each (25%), indicating a balance between directness and politeness in conversations. **Positive Politeness (PP)** is the least frequent, with 3 occurrences (12.5%), showing that explicit attempts to build solidarity are less common. Overall, the dominance of **Off-Record** strategies reflects the film's emphasis on subtlety, ambiguity, and strategic dialogue, which are essential elements in maintaining suspense and character dynamics.

DISCUSSION

RQ1: What types of politeness strategies are used in the film Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery?

The results for RQ1 revealed that the characters in Glass Onion utilised a variety of politeness strategies, which included Off-Record (OR), Negative Politeness (NP), Positive Politeness (PP), and Bald-on-Record (BO) strategies while managing face and engaging in social interaction. This was consistent with Brown and Levinson (1987) theory of politeness strategies, including how speakers choose from a repertoire of strategies based on the dimensions of social distance, power, and the degree of imposition. The nature of the OR strategies, for example, the use of indirect hints, hedges, vague, and ambiguous references, suggests the characters were selective in their use of OR strategies in narrative contexts that were emotionally sensitive and problematic. This finding connects to Dynel's (2021) discussion about how the dialogues in film captured conversational speech acts marked by layers of pragmatic meaning. Furthermore, as noted by Spencer-Oatey (2021), politeness is a way to manage relational rapport, which was evident in Blanc's character as he engaged in both NP and PP strategies to encourage or signal his neutrality upon entering the scene, as well as his intention to create or build rapport and trust. All of these findings are linked to Afriana's (2020) exploration of cinematic and pragmatic strategies, including characters' intentions and social roles. Taken together, the film's nuances of politeness strategies contribute to the layers of meaning in narrative and character depth.

RQ2: Which politeness strategy appears most often in the characters' conversations and interactions in the movie?

The RQ2 analysis revealed that the Off-Record (OR) strategy was the most frequently used politeness strategy with 37.5% of all instances, indicating a preference for indirectness used in dialogues, which indicated the speaker's meaning in conversations in the film. This is consistent with Blitvich's (2022) view that the discourse is often indicative of asymmetrical power relations in which clarity is sacrificed for emotional restraint. Characters in Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery? use OR strategies to counter disagreement, add vagueness, and present criticism indirectly, particularly in scenes invoking deception or manipulation. These results align with Brown (2019), who claims that politeness in scripted media illustrates multimodal and contextual sensitivity as characters seek to navigate disagreement or criticise through subtle means. The use of OR for politeness was also justified by the genre of the film, as the genre of mystery and suspense is suited to having characters withholding or being vague. The results support the assertion that pragmatic strategies are not only linguistic choices, but pragmatic strategies can be part of a character's narrative repertoires, or illustrate thematic content that resonates with secrecy, tension, and interpersonal difficulty.

CONCLUSION

The research shows that Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is still useful for studying dialogue in scripted media, especially in more complex genres like crime. The results show that Off-Record & Negative Politeness strategies dominate, and expressions of politeness are context-sensitive and contribute to social relations. In addition to theoretical implications, the study provides additional benefits to practitioners such as screenwriters, teachers, and discourse analysts, demonstrating how pragmatic strategies contribute to character development and narrative tension.

Future research should broaden the scope by incorporating multimodal elements such as tone, gesture, and facial expression, as well as applying mixed methods like conversation analysis for richer insights. Furthermore, the literature review should be updated with recent, critically engaged sources, while also addressing ethical transparency and reflexivity. On the methodological front, expanding the dataset, clarifying sampling criteria, and including coding manuals with reliability statistics are essential for rigour. Comparative studies across genres and investigations into the intersections of gender, power, and cultural identity would further refine our understanding. Lastly, by integrating sociolinguistics, media studies, and pragmatics, future work can deepen theoretical perspectives and provide actionable tools for crafting authentic and impactful dialogue in media narratives.

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