

An Analysis of Politeness Strategies Used in the Grey's Anatomy Series of Season 1

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses politeness strategies used in the first season of Grey's Anatomy. The study seeks to identify the types of politeness strategies, the factors that influence the use of politeness strategies, and explore the underlying reasons and motivations for the use of different politeness strategies in specific interactions in the Grey's Anatomy series of the first season in different episodes by employing Brown & Levinson's politeness strategies theory (1987). The design of the study used a qualitative content analysis where selected excerpts were extracted from different episodes of the first season available on Netflix. Nevertheless, it is important to state that this research has several limitations. This study only covers one season of Grey's Anatomy, which may mean that advances in character development are not entirely explored and generalisations may be restricted. The qualitative analysis is more of an interpretation and can be biased, although a comprehensive evaluation can be done to overcome these drawbacks. The study suggests that further studies should be conducted under this topic's study for a better understanding of the relationship between the types, factors, and most used politeness strategies.

Keywords: Brown & Levinson's politeness strategies, Grey's Anatomy, TV Series

INTRODUCTION

Politeness is a fundamental aspect of human communication, shaping how individuals maintain social harmony and manage interpersonal relationships. Within the field of pragmatics, politeness is understood as a strategy to preserve the interlocutor's "face" and mitigate potential threats during interaction (Yule, 1996; Herman, 2019). Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory categorises these strategies into four types: positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record. These strategies are not only evident in real-life conversations but also in scripted dialogues, where they reflect social norms and cultural values. Television series, as cultural artefacts, provide a rich context for examining how politeness strategies are represented and interpreted. This study focuses on Grey's Anatomy Season 1, a medical drama renowned for its complex character dynamics and hierarchical settings, to explore how politeness strategies are employed in high-stakes professional and personal interactions.

Previous research has extensively examined politeness strategies in educational, conversational, and media contexts (Sari et al., 2015; Ayuningtyas, 2012; Indahsari & Surjowati, 2021). However, there remains a notable gap in studies addressing how these strategies are portrayed in television series, particularly in long-running dramas where character development and social hierarchies evolve over time (Culpeper & Olateju, 2020). Grey's Anatomy, as one of the longest-running medical dramas, offers a unique opportunity to investigate these strategies within a narrative that blends professional urgency with personal relationships. Analysing Season 1 provides a foundational perspective on how politeness strategies are introduced and negotiated among characters in a high-pressure environment. This research aims to bridge the gap by examining the types of politeness



strategies used, the factors influencing their application, and the motivations underlying their use in specific interactions.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the representation and function of politeness strategies in Grey's Anatomy Season 1, focusing on their role in shaping character relationships and reflecting social hierarchies. The analysis is grounded in Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework and employs qualitative content analysis of selected excerpts from the series. Based on this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

What are the types of politeness strategies used by the characters?

What factors influence the use of politeness strategies by the characters?

What are the underlying reasons and motivations for the use of different politeness strategies in specific interactions?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

TYPES OF POLITENESS STRATEGIES	APPLICATION
Positive Politeness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Noticing or attending to hearer - Avoiding disagreement - Seeking to create agreement - Promising
Negative Politeness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Being conventionally indirect - Giving deference - Minimising imposition
Bald on Record	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In the case of urgent situation - Giving advice - Direct communication
Off Record	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Giving hints - Giving association clues - Indirect communication

Figure 1: The Theoretical Framework Used for This Study

Politeness strategies are rooted in the field of pragmatics, which studies how meaning is conveyed and interpreted in social interaction. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory remains the most influential framework in this area. Their model introduces the concept of "face," referring to an individual's self-image, and categorises politeness strategies into four types: positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record. These strategies are employed to mitigate face-threatening acts and maintain social harmony. Positive politeness seeks to strengthen solidarity, while negative politeness respects autonomy and minimises imposition. Bald-on-record strategies prioritise clarity and efficiency, often in urgent contexts, whereas off-record strategies rely on indirectness and ambiguity (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Despite its wide application, the theory has faced criticism for its claim of universality, as cultural variations influence politeness norms (Al-Duleimi et al., 2016; Al-Hindawi & Alkhazaali, 2016). Nevertheless, its detailed sociological variables; power, distance, and imposition, make it suitable for analysing scripted dialogues in media.

Brown and Levinson's framework is complemented by earlier contributions such as Lakoff's (1973) Politeness Principle, which emphasises reducing conflict through strategies like deference and camaraderie. However, Lakoff's model has been criticised for its lack of cultural specificity and conceptual clarity (Reiter, 2000). In contrast, Brown and Levinson's theory provides a more systematic approach, incorporating sociological factors that influence language use. These elements are particularly relevant in hierarchical and high-stakes

environments, such as hospitals, where communication must balance authority, urgency, and interpersonal sensitivity. This theoretical foundation underpins the present study, guiding the identification and interpretation of politeness strategies in Grey's Anatomy Season 1.

Politeness Strategies

Politeness strategies serve as mechanisms for managing interpersonal relationships and mitigating potential conflict during interaction. Positive politeness strategies aim to enhance the hearer's positive face by expressing solidarity, offering compliments, or showing interest (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For example, characters may use humour or informal language to create rapport in less hierarchical contexts. Negative politeness strategies, on the other hand, prioritise the hearer's autonomy and minimise imposition through indirectness, hedging, or apologetic language. These strategies are common in professional settings where respect for authority and social distance is essential. Bald-on-record strategies involve direct, unmitigated speech acts, typically employed in urgent situations where clarity outweighs politeness. Conversely, off-record strategies rely on hints, ambiguity, or figurative language, allowing the speaker to avoid explicit responsibility for the act.

The selection of these strategies is influenced by contextual factors such as power relations, social distance, and the ranking of imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For instance, subordinates often employ negative politeness when addressing superiors, while authority figures may use bald-on-record strategies to assert control in high-pressure scenarios. These dynamics are evident in media narratives, where scripted dialogues mirror real-life communication patterns. Understanding these strategies provides insight into how language constructs social relationships and reflects cultural norms, making them a critical focus for this study.

Politeness Strategies in Television Series

Television series offer a valuable context for examining politeness strategies, as they depict diverse social interactions within structured narratives. Previous studies have explored how politeness operates in popular sitcoms and dramas, revealing its role in shaping character relationships and audience perceptions (Rongrong, 2020; Khosravizadeh et al., 2017). For example, research on Friends and The Big Bang Theory found that gender and personality influence the choice of strategies, with male characters often favouring directness and female characters employing positive politeness to maintain rapport. Similarly, studies on How I Met Your Mother highlighted the use of negative politeness to manage conflicts and preserve social harmony. These findings underscore the adaptability of politeness strategies across genres and cultural contexts.

In the context of Grey's Anatomy, politeness strategies are particularly significant due to the interplay of professional hierarchy, emotional intensity, and cultural diversity. The series portrays interactions in a high-stakes medical environment, where communication must balance authority, empathy, and efficiency. This makes it an ideal case for analysing how politeness strategies function in complex social settings. Moreover, television narratives can influence viewers' perceptions of communication norms, reinforcing or challenging societal expectations (Gerbner, 1980; Sitti et al., 2022). By examining politeness strategies in Grey's Anatomy Season 1, this study contributes to understanding how media representations shape and reflect real-world communicative practices.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically content analysis, to examine politeness strategies in Grey's Anatomy Season 1. Qualitative content analysis enables systematic interpretation of textual data by identifying patterns, themes, and meanings beyond mere word counts (Hsieh & Shannon, 2019; Schreier, 2019). This approach is suitable for exploring how politeness strategies are embedded in scripted dialogues, as it allows for contextual interpretation of language use within social and professional settings. The analysis is grounded in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which provides a framework for categorising strategies into positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record. This design facilitates an in-depth understanding of how these strategies function in hierarchical and emotionally charged environments, such as

those portrayed in the series. The study focuses on identifying the types of strategies used, the factors influencing their selection, and the motivations underlying their application in specific interactions.

Data Collection and Sampling



Figure 2: The Research Flow Chart

The data for this study were drawn from selected excerpts of Grey's Anatomy Season 1, available on Netflix. A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure that the chosen scenes represented diverse social contexts, character hierarchies, and clear examples of politeness strategies (Shaheen et al., 2019). Four excerpts from different episodes were selected based on their relevance to the research objectives, particularly interactions that illustrate variations in power dynamics and emotional intensity. The dialogues were transcribed using AI-based transcription tools and subsequently validated by a language expert to ensure accuracy. This process enhanced the reliability of the transcripts and minimised potential errors. The sampling criteria included the presence of face-threatening acts, hierarchical relationships, and conversational exchanges that reflect the use of politeness strategies. This targeted approach ensured that the data captured the complexity of communication within the series' professional and personal settings.

Data Analysis and Validation

The analysis involved coding the transcribed dialogues according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies framework. Each excerpt was examined to identify the type of strategy employed, the contextual factors influencing its use, and the underlying motivations. The coding process was iterative, allowing for refinement of categories as patterns emerged. To enhance validity, the analysis was cross-checked with previous studies and reviewed by experts in pragmatics. Reliability was further ensured through peer discussions and supervisor feedback, which helped confirm the consistency of interpretations. The study acknowledges the limitations of qualitative analysis, including potential researcher bias; however, these were mitigated through triangulation and expert validation (Maxwell, 2019; Noble & Smith, 2015). This rigorous analytical process provided a comprehensive understanding of how politeness strategies operate within the narrative structure of Grey's Anatomy, offering insights into their role in shaping character interactions and reflecting social norms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Overview

The data for this study were derived from four selected excerpts across different episodes of Grey's Anatomy Season 1. These excerpts were chosen to represent varied social contexts, hierarchical relationships, and emotional intensities within the hospital setting. The characters involved include senior surgeons such as Dr. Bailey, Dr. Burke, and Dr. Webber, alongside interns like Meredith Grey, Cristina Yang, George O'Malley, and Izzie Stevens. This diversity allowed the analysis to capture a wide range of politeness strategies influenced by factors such as authority, urgency, and interpersonal dynamics. The interactions examined occur in both professional and informal contexts, reflecting the dual nature of relationships in the series. By focusing on these dialogues, the study provides insights into how politeness strategies are adapted to maintain professional decorum while negotiating personal connections in a high-stakes environment.

Types of Politeness Strategies

The analysis revealed that all four politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) were present in the selected excerpts: positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record. Positive

politeness was frequently employed to build rapport and reduce social distance, as seen in Derek's compliments to Meredith, which fostered trust and solidarity. Negative politeness appeared in hierarchical interactions, where interns used indirect language and hedging to show deference to superiors, such as Meredith's cautious phrasing when addressing Dr. Bailey. Bald-on-record strategies were dominant in urgent or authoritative contexts, particularly in Dr. Bailey's direct instructions to interns during high-pressure situations. Off-record strategies, often involving humour or ambiguity, were used to soften sensitive topics, as illustrated by Derek's playful remarks to Meredith. These findings indicate that the choice of strategy is context-dependent, reflecting the interplay between relational goals and situational demands.

Factors Influencing Strategy Use

The selection of politeness strategies was strongly influenced by three sociological variables identified by Brown and Levinson (1987): power, social distance, and ranking of imposition. Power dynamics were evident in the authoritative tone of senior surgeons, who frequently employed bald-on-record strategies to assert control and ensure efficiency. Conversely, interns demonstrated negative politeness to acknowledge hierarchical boundaries and avoid face-threatening acts. Social distance also shaped communication, with closer relationships encouraging positive politeness through humour and informal language, while distant or formal relationships prompted more cautious and deferential speech. The ranking of imposition further affected strategy choice, as requests involving significant effort or responsibility were mitigated through indirectness and hedging. These findings align with previous studies that emphasise the role of contextual factors in determining politeness behaviour (Hutahuan et al., 2021).

Underlying Motivations

The motivations behind the use of politeness strategies were linked to relational management, professional obligations, and emotional regulation. Positive politeness was often employed to strengthen interpersonal bonds and create a supportive environment, particularly in emotionally charged situations. Negative politeness served to maintain professionalism and respect hierarchical norms, reducing the risk of conflict in sensitive interactions. Bald-on-record strategies prioritised clarity and urgency, reflecting the high-stakes nature of medical settings where efficiency can be life-saving. Off-record strategies allowed characters to address delicate issues indirectly, preserving harmony and avoiding confrontation. These motivations demonstrate the adaptability of politeness strategies in balancing task-oriented goals with relational considerations. The findings underscore the relevance of Brown and Levinson's framework in explaining how language choices are shaped by both social structures and individual intentions within fictional yet realistic contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the use of politeness strategies in Grey's Anatomy Season 1 through the lens of Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework. The analysis identified four main strategies: positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record. Positive politeness was frequently used to foster rapport and solidarity, while negative politeness appeared in hierarchical interactions to maintain respect and minimise imposition. Bald-on-record strategies were dominant in urgent or authoritative contexts, reflecting the high-pressure nature of medical settings, whereas off-record strategies were employed to address sensitive topics indirectly. These findings demonstrate that politeness strategies are context-dependent and influenced by social roles, situational urgency, and relational goals. The study confirms the applicability of Brown and Levinson's theory in scripted media, highlighting how fictional dialogues mirror real-life communication patterns in professional and personal domains.

The findings also revealed that the choice of politeness strategies is shaped by three key factors: power, social distance, and ranking of imposition. Authority figures such as senior surgeons often used direct and unmitigated speech to assert control, while interns relied on indirectness and hedging to show deference. Social distance influenced the degree of formality, with closer relationships encouraging humour and informality, and distant relationships prompting more cautious language. The ranking of imposition determined the level of mitigation applied to requests or directives. These patterns align with previous research on politeness in media and real-life contexts (Hutahuan et al., 2021), reinforcing the role of sociological variables in shaping communicative

behaviour. The study underscores the adaptability of politeness strategies in balancing efficiency, authority, and interpersonal sensitivity within complex social environments.

This research contributes to the understanding of how politeness strategies function in media narratives and their potential influence on audience perceptions of communication norms. By analysing a popular television series, the study bridges the gap between linguistic theory and media representation, offering insights into the interplay between language, power, and culture. However, the study is limited to one season of Grey's Anatomy and relies on qualitative interpretation, which may restrict generalisability. Future research could extend the analysis to additional seasons or explore audience interpretations of politeness strategies in media. Despite these limitations, the findings provide a valuable reference for scholars in pragmatics and media studies, as well as for content creators seeking to portray authentic and socially nuanced interactions in scripted narratives.

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