

## Analysis of language politeness strategies in the film *The School for Good and Evil* (2022)

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### Abstract

This research is grounded in the importance of understanding language politeness in communication, particularly in fictional contexts such as films that reflect social values. This study aims to identify and analyze politeness strategies in the film *The School for Good and Evil* (2022), based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory as presented in Cutting and Fordyce (2020), and linked to the characteristics of politeness according to Leech (2014). A qualitative descriptive method was employed, using the non-participant observation technique to collect the data. The findings reveal five types of politeness strategies: on record-baldly, on record-positive politeness, on record-negative politeness, off record, and overlaps. These strategies are influenced by social relationships, power dynamics, and communicative goals. The findings also indicate that politeness not always reflect sincerity, but can be used strategically to influence the interlocutor. Politeness in this film plays a significant role in shaping character dynamics and the storyline.

**Keywords:** *Speech characteristic; politeness strategies; social relations*

### Introduction

All human activities cannot be separated from language that allows individuals to connect with each other. The ideal balance between a person's personality and the way they interact can influence the language they use (Kaloko & Efendi, 2025). Language plays an important role in communication between humans because it serves as a tool to convey a person's thoughts and feelings (Mailani et al., 2022). In this communication process, politeness is an important aspect that determines the success of an interaction. According to Cutting & Fordyce (2020), politeness refers to the way a person uses language to give freedom to others while showing friendship to them.

Politeness is seen as one of the basic social concepts in human communication. According to Wang (2014) as quoted in Imran et al., (2023), politeness functions as a system of interpersonal relationships designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict that is naturally present in every human interaction. In a politeness strategy, messages are designed to meet the

behavior expected of others (Kádár, 2017). The politeness strategy serves as an effort to maintain self-image (face) and avoid conflict in social interactions.

This study analyzes the politeness strategy based on the theory of Brown & Levinson presented in Cutting & Fordyce (2020), and relates it to the characteristics of politeness according to Leech (2014) quoted in Idawati (2023). Leech explained that politeness has several important characteristics, namely: (1) politeness is mandatory, (2) politeness has a level, (3) politeness is normative, (4) politeness is influenced by context, (5) politeness is asymmetrical, (6) politeness has a ritual and repetitive nature, (7) politeness does not always reflect sincerity, (8) politeness is dynamic and changes according to culture and time. According to Brown & Levinson in Cutting & Fordyce (2020), the politeness strategy is divided into five types, namely: (1) on record baldly, the strategy is delivered directly and openly without any effort to reduce the potential threat to the interlocutor's face; (2) on record-positive politeness, a strategy used to strengthen the relationship and show emotional closeness or

concern for interlocutor; (3) on record-negative politeness, a strategy used to maintain distance and show respect for the rights and freedoms of the interlocutor; (4) off record, a strategy used to convey the intention indirectly and give room for interpretation to the interlocutor; and (5) overlaps, a combined strategy between positive politeness and negative politeness that shows the complexity of conveying meaning politely and efficiently in one speech.

The key issues in this study are how politeness strategies are used by the characters to achieve communicative goals in various social context. The scope of the research is limited to the analysis of language politeness strategies in the dialog of the main characters and supporting characters who have an important role in the development of the story. Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich the study of pragmatics in the context of fictional media, while practically it can help movie viewers understand more deeply the dynamics of communication between characters.

One kind of visual communication medium is film, which shows a sequence of moving pictures ordered according to a pre-written plot or script (Hanum et al., 2022). Films as a form of fictional media is considered as a relevant object in pragmatic studies. One of the interesting films to study is *The School for Good and Evil* (2022), a fantasy film that presents the interaction between fictional teen characters from two different ideological school, namely good and evil through the character relationship between Agatha and Sophie. The film is an adaptation of Soman Chainani's fantasy novel of the same name in 2013, and then Netflix produced this film directed by Paul Feig in 2022. The characters use various politeness strategies through their dialogue, according to the social relationship, context of the conversation, and their goals.

Social relationships are an important factor that determines how a person communicates and chooses a politeness strategy in their interactions. The way individuals speak can be influenced by distance, hierarchy, and power seen in one's social relationships. In the film *The School for Good and Evil* (2022), the social relationships between one character and another show differences of opinion

and habits in their communities. Holt-Lunstad (2018) stated that close relationships also involve elements of social control, namely conscious or unconscious efforts to influence the behavior of others for a specific purpose. Relationships between individuals not only have an emotional impact, but also have complex social consequences that are very important in the formation of communication patterns and daily social relationship.

According to Yule (2017), social context is the environment or social situation that affects the way language is used and understood in human interaction. In the film *The School for Good and Evil* (2022), the social context is influenced by the dynamics of social status and power relation between characters. Pollastri et al., (2018) stated that social context greatly influences emotional expression and self-adjustment, especially in adolescents, also especially in environments that shape expectations regarding gender behavior and social norms. In this film, the main characters, who are mostly teenagers, try to adjust to their new environment while facing pressure from social structures that limit themselves to their new environment. Therefore, the social context is conceptualized as a complex element not only interpersonal relationships but also the underlying moral frameworks, power dynamic, and value system that shape the language use of the characters within the film.

Previous studies have explored politeness strategies in a variety of filmic and social context, including research by (Leuisa & Hidayatulloh, 2024; Fitri, 2022; Purnama & Sukarto, 2022; Dzikriyah, 2018; Safitri & Ambalegin, 2022). Another previous research that has similar topic is *Politeness Strategies in Enola Holmes 2 Movie Script: An Analysis* (Imama & Shofiyuddin, 2024). The research finding four strategies of politeness that focusing primarily on the frequency and function of each strategy within realistic and relational context. Despite these contributions, here remains a lack of focused research on politeness strategies in fantasy films, such as *The School for Good and Evil* (2022). This research focuses on the social relationships between characters in the two school factions, as well as the emotional context of their use.

## Methods

The research method provides a systematic relationship between theory and evidence through the use of agreed standards to maintain rigor and include the logical steps from formulating the research problem to reaching a conclusion (Tan, 2022). This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach as the main method has a function to describe and reveal the data taken. According to Rosmita et al. (2024), a qualitative approach is suitable to be used in comprehensively understanding language phenomena in a given context. This approach provides flexibility for researchers to dig into data in depth speech or dialogue that occurs between characters.

The research data consists of utterances containing language politeness strategies in the film *The School for Good and Evil* (2022). The data source is taken from the dialog transcript of the main characters, Agatha and Sophie, as well as supporting characters who have significant interactions with them. The character selection focused on characters directly involved in the development of the conflict and the resolution of the story, ensuring that narratives analyzed had communicative weight relevant to the research focus.

The analysis integrates Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness strategy as reformulated by Cutting & Fordyce (2020), including on record baldly, on record-positive politeness, on record-negative politeness, off record, and overlaps. In addition, Leech's (2014) eight characteristics of politeness such as non-obligatory, asymmetrical, strategic, and culturally dynamic aspects are also applied to deepen the interpretation of utterances, as cited in Idawati (2023). The analytical methods used are padan and agih methods retrieved from Sudaryanto (2015), which consider both linguistic structure and contextual influences. Dialogues were analyzed not only linguistically but also in relation to social roles, communicative goals, and moral ideologies. This study supports the idea that politeness in fictional speech is influenced by both pragmatic demands and narrative functions by arguing that it is strategically employed in the

movie to reflect shifting power relation and character alignments.

Widyastuti et al. (2024) stated that data presentation is an important part of the research process and serves as evidence. Data presentation in this study uses an informal method by presenting the results of the data analysis that has been described. This technique was chosen because it aligns with the descriptive qualitative approach, where data is presented thru written explanations about how these strategies are used and their connection to the influence of social relationships on each character's choice of politeness strategy.

## Findings and discussion

The analysis was conducted on 5 conversation data points representing five types of politeness strategies: on record-positive politeness, on record-negative politeness, on record baldly, off record, and overlaps. Each piece data was purposefully selected because it contained elements of interaction that demonstrated the application of politeness strategies in a specific social context.

The findings of this study show that politeness strategies are not only influenced by the form of speech used, but also by social factors such as the relationship between the speakers and listener, status differences, and communication goals. In this film, the conversational situations filled with conflict, friendship, and differences in power status serve as the backdrop influencing the character's choices of politeness strategies. The discussion structured by detailing each piece of data starting with the conversational context, dialog quotes from the corpus, identification of the politeness strategies used, and their analysis based on relevant theory.

The analysis results show that on record-positive politeness are often used by characters with close emotional relationships to build solidarity, while on record-negative politeness frequently appears when speakers want to offer advice or criticism without restricting the listener's freedom. Meanwhile on record baldly is used more frequently in situations requiring direct and assertive instruction, especially by figures with high authority. Off record strategy is employed to express intentions implicitly to avoid the risk of rejection, and overlaps are used to

combine positive and negative politeness simultaneously.

### On record-positive politeness

**Context:** Sophie is fully under the control of Rafal's magic and turns into an evil figure. Agatha tries to revive her best friend's good side by offering help and emotional support, but Sophie firmly rejects it by calling Agatha a nemesis which mean rival.

- (1) Agatha: *Sophie, stop. Whatever's happened, I can help you. I'm your friend.*
- (2) Sophie: *No Agatha, you're my nemesis. Which means our story can't end with one of us is destroyed.*  
(01:48:53-01:49:05)

Agatha's utterance (1) shows the use of on record strategy with positive politeness. Although she directly rejects or stops Sophie's action-which can be perceived as a threat to Sophie's positive face-Agatha does so with an emphatic approach. The phrase "I can help you" is an offer of help that is not only straightforward, but also full of genuine concern. The characteristic of positive politeness reflected in the speech is the effort to build and maintain familiarity and show solidarity by having the same goal (Idawati, 2023). As a result, Agatha is able to deliver a powerful message without directly ending the relationship.

In Leech's perspective as cited in Idawati (2023), Agatha's speech reflects two characteristics of politeness. First, the degree of politeness can be seen from how Agatha not only conveys requests, but also involves emotional elements and personal closeness. Second, social context influences word choice; in the midst of conflict and tension, Agatha chooses words of support and empathy over verbal attacks. This strategy shows that even in stressful situations, politeness can be an effective tool to reduce conflict while maintaining social values in communication.

**Context:** The head master questioned Sophie

and Agatha's reasons for wanting to leave school. Sophie was starting to feel comfortable in her new school, while Agatha still believed their presence there was a mistake.

- (3) Head Master: *Guess that's why I'm so confused as to why the two of you want to leave.*
- (4) Sophie: *She wants to leave. I don't.*
- (5) Agatha: *Sophie, I have to get you out of here.*  
(00:44:15-00:44:24)

Agatha's utterance in (5) demonstrates an on-record strategy with positive politeness, characterized by direct expressions filled with care and empathy. This happens when speakers want to show that they care and want to build a closer relationship with their interlocutor (Cutting & Fordyce, 2020). The utterance is a direct statement that doesn't try to be disguised but is full of a sense of responsibility to protect his friend from potential danger. Agatha positions herself as a protector ready to take action for the safety of her friend, even at the risk of clashing with Sophie's desire. In this case, Agatha prioritizes Sophie's safety above her own interest, thus strengthening their friendship.

This interaction also contains an element of tension influenced by social status within the conversation. The head master, as a figure of authority, maintained politeness but used language to control the direction of the conversation. Sophie showed a firm attitude in defending her choice, while Agatha yielded to the authority of head master but still tried to persuade Sophie. According to Leech as cited in Idawati (2023) this condition exhibits the fifth characteristic, namely politeness is asymmetrical and highly influenced by social hierarchy. In unequal relationships such as teacher-student or superior-subordinate, the choice of politeness strategies will follow the power structure, so the form of politeness used will also adjust to the goals and positions of each speaker.

### On record-negative politeness

**Context:** Sophie is in vulnerable state after her relationship with Tedros deteriorates. Rafal reappears and tries to get emotionally close, giving his opinion on Tedros while showing concern for Sophie.

(6) Rafal: *And besides, that prince wasn't good for you anyway.*

(7) Sophie: *You're back? But I thought...*

(8) Rafal: *I'd left you? Never.*

(01:40:19-01:40:26)

Rafal's utterance in (6) contains an on-record strategy with negative politeness. Although he implicitly criticizes Sophie's personal choice, Rafal wraps it as a personal observation, not an order. According to Cutting & Fordyce (2020), negative politeness is a strategy used by the speaker when he wants to convey something that has the potential to harm or threaten the self-image of the interlocutor, while still trying to respect the independence and privacy of the listener. With this approach, Rafal maintains the harmony of his social relations with Sophie by not interfering in Sophie's personal decisions openly while showing his emotional concern for Sophie. Therefore, he chooses a form of politeness that keeps Sophie's feelings so that his words are accepted emotionally without creating a manipulative impression and increases her faith in Rafal.

In addition, this speech shows the seventh characteristic of politeness according to Leech (2014, in Idawati, 2023), which is politeness that does not always reflect sincerity. Despite sounding polite and caring, Rafal actually has a hidden purpose to influence Sophie's decision to return to his side. This demonstrates that being courteous is not just a sign of genuine empathy but may also serve as a persuasive communication strategy.

**Context:** Agatha had to make a difficult decision to protect Sophie, even though that decision could potentially make her best friend feel betrayed. Sophie, who is pursuing her ambition to become a student at the school for good, considers the situation a positive thing,

but Agatha sees it as a dangerous threat.

(9) Sophie: *No. No, Aggie, what was happening was a good thing.*

(10) Agatha: *I'm sorry, Sophie. I couldn't take the chance.*

(00:16:44-00:16:50)

Agatha's utterance in (10) demonstrates on record strategy with negative politeness, which focuses on protecting the hearer's negative face. (Yule, 2017) stated that efforts to maintain a negative image of someone will reflect concern about the possibility of perceived coercion or pressure. Agatha began her statement with an apology before explaining the reasons for her actions. This strategy serves to reduce potential emotional conflict and shows that he understands Sophie's disappointment. The phrase "*I couldn't take the chance*" confirms that his decision was based on safety concerns, not a personal rejection of Sophie's plan.

The use of this strategy also reflects sixth characteristic according to Leech in Idawati (2023), namely politeness has a ritualistic and repetitive nature. The expression of apology here serves not only as a sign of politeness but also as a means of maintaining social relationships in tense situations. However, his also relates to the seventh characteristic, where politeness doesn't always reflect sincerity. Although Agatha verbally expressed regret, her primary focus remained on maintaining her decision. Thus, negative politeness in this utterance serves as a communication strategy to mitigate emotions, maintaining relationships, and avoid conflict escalation, without sacrificing the speaker's primary goal.

### **On record-baldly**

**Context:** When the situation comes to a head and Sophie disappears under the influence of Rafal's dark magic. Realizing the urgency of the situation, the head master immediately orders Agatha to attend the Evers Ball in order to find

Sophie.

(11) Head master: *And Agatha, go to the Evers Ball. Sophie may very well show there. If she does, bring her to me. Now, go.*  
(01:43:36-01:40:44)

This data contains a on record baldly in the form of direct commands or imperative sentences addressed to others (Idawati, 2023). The head master ordered Agatha firmly because he had the highest status and power in the school without trying to reduce the threat to Agatha's face. As a result, the speaker prioritizes completing the task over formally maintaining harmonious relationships.

The urgent situation and the hierarchical relationship between the head master and Agatha (superior-subordinate) reinforce the reason for using direct speech style. The first characteristic according to Leech in Idawati (2023) is also reflected here, namely that politeness is not obligatory and can be ignored for the sake of communication effectiveness. Thus, this strategy confirms that politeness is flexible and depends on purpose, social position, and situational needs.

### Off record

**Context:** Tedros was beginning to open his heart, and Sophie tried to attract his attention at the School for Good. The two became close with Agatha's assistance, which develop a closeness and created friendly and pressure-free interactions.

(12) Tedros: *Do you wanna hang out?*  
(13) Sophie: *I don't know. With who?*  
(14) Tedros: *Just some prince who wants to get to know you better.*  
(01:27:59-01:28:04)

The dialogue that occurs above is indicated using an off-record strategy. Off record is a strategy that is conveyed in a vague form and is used to reduce the pressure or burden felt by the

listener when speech is delivered (Safitri & Ambalegin, 2022). Sophie relied indirectly or implicitly so that the message she conveyed was not immediately received by Tedros but also did not want to refuse. Sophie's response in utterance (13) transforms a question into a reaction, demonstrating interest without fully accepting or rejecting Tedros's request. Therefore, Sophie will not be directly bound by the speaker's invitation and will retain control over her action.

The statement Tedros made in utterance (14) also uses the same strategy; he uses light humor as an off-record form to convey interest without appearing pressured. This strategy creates a relaxed atmosphere and shows respect for Sophie's positive face. This humor does not intimidate the speaker's partner, but tries to make Sophie feel comfortable.

The politeness in this dialog aligns with the norms of romantic communication, which avoids a frontal speaking style. According to Leech's third characters, this form is considered normative because it is more socially acceptable. The seventh characteristic is also reflected because politeness does not fully reflect sincerity, but is used strategically to build an image and avoid rejection. Thus, off record here serves to maintain interpersonal relationships while conveying hidden intentions.

### Overlaps

**Context:** It happens in the village of Gavaldon when Agatha suggests Sophie to try to step beyond of her comfort zone and read more serious novels. Despite her intention to give advice, Agatha maintains their good relationships by using lighthearted language.

(15) Agatha: *Okay, this might sound crazy, but you ever think about branching out of your comfort zone? Maybe, like, stop reading little kid's books?*  
(16) Sophie: *aww. To The Blood of the Homunculus? I'm good, thanks.*  
(00:11:04-00:11:15)

This dialog contains overlaps strategies, which is the combination of two forms of politeness in a single utterance. Cutting & Fordyce (2020) stated that positive politeness and negative politeness can be used together to show attention and respect the listener's boundaries. Negative politeness is evident in the phrase "Okay, this might sound crazy" which serves as a form of mitigation, signaling that Agatha is aware her suggestion might sound unusual. At the same time, Agatha also practiced positive courtesy by showing care and concern for her friend's self-development. The advice to "branching out of your comfort zone" isn't just criticism, but form of support that emphasizes a close relationship and shared goals.

Sophie's relaxed response allows this form of communication to be considered normal and not offensive. A close friendship allows this criticism to be accepted as a form of caring, not as a personal attack. This aligns with the fourth characteristic of politeness according to Leech (in Idawati, 2023), which is that politeness is influenced by social context. The overlap in strategies within this data proves that a combination of negative and positive politeness can be used effectively to convey critical messages without damaging interpersonal relationship.

## Conclusion

Based on the analysis results, it can be seen that the application of politeness strategies in the film *The School for Good and Evil* (2022) varies greatly among the main characters and is used for various pragmatic purposes. This study concludes that the films feature all five linguistic politeness strategies according to Brown and Levinson as cited in Cutting and Fordyce (2020), whose application is influenced by the characters' social relationships, emotional context, and communicative goals. The application of these strategies aligns with the several characteristics of politeness from Leech in Idawati (2023), proving the flexible and adaptive nature of politeness. More broadly, the results of this study confirm that linguistic

politeness in film can be an effective medium for reflecting social interactions in the real world.

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