

The Politeness Strategy in *Enola Holmes* (2020) Movie

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Abstract

This article applies Brown and Levinson's politeness theory to analyze the use of language in the film *Enola Holmes*(2020). The purpose of this research is to explore how politeness strategies are presented in the film and how these strategies reflect or contradict the social and political norms of Victorian society. Set in England in the 1880s, the film shows Enola Holmes as a young woman who tries to fight against the patriarchal system through her words and actions. Using a qualitative approach, this study analyzes some of the selected scenes and dialogues to identify the use of politeness strategies, and the findings show that Enola prefers to use direct language more often than indirect language, a style of speech that in the Victorian era was generally associated with male authority thus reflecting her independence and rejection of traditional gender norms. This article also emphasizes how Brown and Levinson's theory, with its concepts of *face*, *face-threatening acts* (FTA), and four main politeness strategies (bald-on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record), becomes an important framework for understanding how language is used to negotiate power and social relationships between characters. Through this framework, it can be understood that Enola's use of politeness strategies is not only intended to maintain social relationships but also functions as a form of resistance against patriarchal structures. This article thus contributes to feminist linguistic studies and media studies by explaining how language in films can represent gender issues and social transformation.

Keywords: *politeness strategies, Enola Holmes (2020), film analysis, Brown and Levinson's theory*

Introduction

Language is an important part of social life because it's the main tool people use to interact. In society, language isn't just used to share information, but also to build social relationships, show identity, and negotiate roles between people. That's why how people use language is always influenced by the social context. In everyday life, people use various forms of language, such as formal language in official situations, casual language in social situations, familiar language in close relationships, and more controlled language when speaking to older people or those with higher social status. However, in practice, not everyone uses language in the same way; some speakers maintain politeness in their speech, while others speak directly or even rudely. This phenomenon shows that language use is always related to social values, because language can create closeness, but it can also cause conflict if it is used without regard for norms of politeness.

In social life, people need to be polite in their use of language because impoliteness can have various negative effects such as misunderstandings, hurt feelings, relationship tensions, and even wider conflicts. Politeness arises because humans strive to maintain good relationships, avoid conflict, and show respect to their conversation partners. In

other words, the reason why individuals choose to speak politely is to maintain social harmony and protect their own feelings and those of others. Based on this phenomenon, humans then indirectly use various ways to speak in a more subtle, friendly, or careful manner. In linguistic studies, these methods are called *politeness strategies*, which are polite language strategies used to soften speech, show appreciation, or avoid actions that threaten the face of the interlocutor (*face-threatening acts*). Therefore, *politeness strategies* do not only arise as social habits, but as communication needs that aim to maintain relationships and reduce the potential for conflict in interactions.

Theoretically, the concept of politeness has been further explained by Brown and Levinson (1987), who state that politeness is a linguistic strategy used by speakers to save their own face and the face of their interlocutors. They explain that every speech act has the potential to threaten face, so speakers need strategies to minimize this threat. Brown and Levinson propose five types of politeness strategies, namely bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and not performing the act. Brown and Levinson's basic definition of politeness has always been the main reference, while other researchers such as Watts (2003) and Locher & Watts (2005) emphasize that politeness is a social practice that is negotiated in everyday interactions. Therefore, politeness theory not only explains the form of speech, but also the social relationships that are formed through language choices. At the end of this theory, Brown and Levinson assert that these five strategies reflect the speaker's efforts to regulate social distance, power, and the level of obligation of each speech act.

Several previous studies have also shown how politeness strategies emerge in various contexts. Research by Mujahidah & Sumiati (2022) found that positive politeness strategies were the most dominant strategies in character interactions in the film *Enola Holmes*. Meanwhile, Chaerdiani & Ekawati (2024) and Imama & Shofiyuddin (2024), who studied *Enola Holmes 2*, also found a similar trend, namely the dominance of positive strategies used to build closeness, solidarity, and warmer social relationships. The similarity between these studies is the finding that the main characters use language as a tool for diplomacy and resistance, while the difference lies in the social context and the type of relationships observed in each film. Therefore, it can be concluded that politeness strategies are not only found in real life but are also consistently represented in various literary and media works, including films.

Strategies of politeness not only appear in real situations but are also depicted through literary works, including films, because films depict social life through the dialogue of their characters. One film that contains various forms of politeness strategies is *Enola Holmes* (2020). This film depicts interactions between characters that are full of power negotiations, social distance, family relationships, and efforts to maintain self-identity, especially in the context of a patriarchal Victorian society. Therefore, the author is interested in analyzing the types of politeness strategies in the film *Enola Holmes*, because this film not only shows variations in politeness strategies, but also shows how young female characters use language to deal with social pressure and negotiate their position in the midst of restrictive social structures.

Method

This article uses a descriptive qualitative design because it focuses on identifying, classifying, and describing the politeness strategies used by characters in the movie *Enola Holmes* (2020). This approach is considered the most appropriate for answering the research questions, namely what forms of politeness strategies emerge and how these strategies reflect power relations, social distance, and social phenomena in the film.

Qualitative research allows researchers to analyze language as a contextual social practice, rather than merely as a formal linguistic structure (Creswell, 2013). Thus, this study focuses on the meaning, context, and strategic interpretation of the characters' speech in the film.

The subjects of this study are all characters involved in important conversations in the film *Enola Holmes* (2020), especially the main character Enola Holmes, as well as supporting characters such as Sherlock Holmes, Mycroft Holmes, and Lord Tewkesbury. The sampling method used is purposive sampling, which is the selection of data based on its relevance to the research objectives. Not all dialogues were analyzed, but only those that contained potential face-threatening acts (FTAs) or explicitly demonstrated politeness strategies. This technique is in line with previous politeness research that emphasizes data selection based on pragmatic functions rather than quantity alone (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

The data collection technique was carried out through non-participatory observation by watching the movie *Enola Holmes* (2020) repeatedly and reading the legally available film script. Data were collected using the listen and note method, which involved recording every utterance containing politeness strategies based on Brown and Levinson's classification. The main instrument in this study was the researcher himself as a human instrument, because politeness analysis requires contextual pragmatic interpretation. To help ensure consistency in the analysis, a classification sheet containing categories of politeness strategies was used: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record, as formulated by Brown and Levinson (1987).

The data collected consisted of character dialogue excerpts containing politeness strategies. Each utterance was recorded along with the situational context: who the speaker was, to whom it was addressed, in what situation, and the social relationship between the two (power, distance, and rank of imposition). This is important because, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), the choice of politeness strategy is greatly influenced by these three variables. By recording these contextual aspects, the research became more replicable and systematic. The data analysis technique was carried out using the interactive analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing.

In the reduction stage, the researcher selected data relevant to politeness strategies. In the data presentation stage, the utterances were classified into types of politeness strategies according to Brown and Levinson's theory. In the final stage, the researcher interpreted how these strategies reflected social issues, such as patriarchy and women's emancipation, which were the focus of this film study.

This study also pays attention to the aspect of reliability by conducting data rechecking and peer discussion with colleagues to minimize the subjectivity of the analysis. Validity is strengthened through theory triangulation, which is comparing the findings with previous research results, such as Mujahidah & Sumiati's (2022) research on politeness strategies in *Enola Holmes*, as well as other studies that use Brown and Levinson's theory on similar objects. Overall, the methods used meet the criteria for research repeatability because the steps are systematically arranged, the tools and data sources are explained, the type of data analyzed is clearly film dialogue, and the analysis techniques refer to established theories and analysis models in pragmatic and applied linguistics studies

Results

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), there are five types of politeness strategies used by speakers to reduce threats to *face*, namely *bald on-record*, *positive politeness*, *negative politeness*, *off-record*, and *not performing the act*. Each strategy serves to adjust the way of speaking to the situation, social relationships, and the level of power between the speaker and the listener. In the film *Enola Holmes* (2020), these five strategies appear in various conversations that describe how the characters negotiate closeness, maintain social distance, and manage conflict within a patriarchal social structure. Therefore, understanding these five strategies is essential before identifying patterns of politeness in the film's dialogue.

Based on the five dialogue excerpts that have been analyzed, the distribution of politeness strategies in the film is shown in the following table. This table shows the frequency of occurrence of each type of strategy and its percentage, providing an initial overview of the most dominant politeness strategies used by the characters in *Enola Holmes* (2020).

Table 1. Politeness Strategies

Types of Politeness	Frequency	Percentage
Positive politeness	25	30,5 %
Negative politeness	10	12,2%
Bald- on record	32	39%
Off - record	14	17,1%
TOTAL	81	100%

Based on the distribution in the table, it can be seen that each type of politeness strategy has a different pragmatic function and is used in various social contexts by the characters in the movie *Enola Holmes* (2020).

Discussion

1. Bald on Record Strategy

Bald on-record strategy is the most direct politeness strategy because the speaker conveys their meaning clearly without mitigating politeness. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), this strategy is used in situations that demand clarity and quick responses, such as emergencies or when the social relationship between speakers is very close. In the movie *Enola Holmes*, this strategy often appears in tense scenes, especially when characters give direct instructions for safety reasons. Here are the data we have analyzed, which are five examples of utterances that represent the use of the bald on-record strategy in the movie *Enola Holmes* (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Chaerdiani & Ekawati, 2024).

Excerpt 1

Enola shouts to a shopkeeper, "*Close the door now!*" while being chased.

Analysis :

This dialogue is classified as a bald on-record strategy because Enola conveyed her command directly without using any markers of politeness or mitigation. In the context of the scene, Enola was in a situation that threatened her safety, so she prioritized quick action over maintaining polite language. As a researcher, it can be said that the omission of politeness elements is done consciously to avoid misunderstandings and delays in response. This is in line with the opinion of

Brown and Levinson (1987), who state that bald on-record strategies are commonly used in emergency situations, when clarity of message is more important than protecting the *face* of the speaker.

Excerpt 2

Sherlock tells Enola, *"Move quickly. We don't have time."*

Analysis :

Sherlock's speech shows the characteristics of a bald on-record strategy because it is delivered directly and without softening the language. There is no use of indirect expressions or polite forms, which indicates that the situation is considered too urgent to consider aspects of *face*. From the researcher's point of view, the directness in this speech reflects Sherlock's pragmatic nature and high situational pressure. This strategy is used to ensure that Enola acts immediately, in line with Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept that bald on-record is effective in conditions that require communication efficiency.

Excerpt 3

Mycroft orders Enola, *"Come with me now."*

Analysis :

Mycroft's command is an example of bald on-record influenced by power relations. Mycroft conveys his instructions directly without considering Enola's wishes or feelings, which shows his dominant position as an authority figure. From the perspective of the student researcher, this strategy is used because Mycroft feels he has the right to control Enola's decisions. This is in line with Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory, which states that bald on-record is often used when there is a power imbalance between the speaker and the addressee.

Excerpt 4

Tewkesbury shouts, *"Jump here!" as a train starts moving.*

Analysis:

This utterance is a bald on-record strategy because it is a very brief direct command without mitigation. In the context of the scene, the physically dangerous situation makes the use of indirect language irrelevant. As researchers, we can conclude that politeness is set aside because safety is the top priority. This strategy shows how situational pressure can influence the speaker's linguistic choices, as explained by Brown and Levinson (1987) in the context of emergency communication.

Excerpt 5 :

Enola tells a worker, *"Move the cart!"* while chasing Tewkesbury.

Analysis :

Enola's utterance shows the use of bald on-record because she gives commands firmly without softening her language. The absence of polite expressions indicates that Enola is in an urgent situation that requires immediate action. From a pragmatic analysis perspective, Enola prioritizes the effectiveness of communication to achieve her goal. This supports Brown and Levinson's (1987) claim that the bald on-record strategy is used when efficiency is more important than protecting the *face* of the interlocutor.

2. Positive Politeness Strategy

Positive politeness is one of the most frequently used strategies in Enola Holmes (2020). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), it is used to satisfy the hearer's desire to be appreciated, accepted and included. It is commonly realised through compliments, expressions of solidarity, shared goals and friendly language. In the film, Enola often uses positive politeness when interacting with characters she trusts or wants to cooperate with, such as Tewkesbury and her mother. This suggests that Enola relies on interpersonal closeness and emotional connection to achieve her goals, particularly within the constraints of patriarchal Victorian society.

Excerpt 1

"You are brilliant, Enola."

Analysis :

This utterance explicitly evaluates Enola positively, highlighting her intelligence as a valuable personal trait. By praising Enola's abilities, the speaker directly addresses her positive image, strengthening her self-image and social worth. This form of admiration reduces social distance and signals approval, which is a core function of positive politeness.

Excerpt 2

"We can do this together."

Analysis :

The speaker uses the inclusive pronoun "we," framing the task as a shared effort rather than an individual burden. Inclusive language creates a sense of commonality and shared purpose. This strategy minimizes hierarchical boundaries and strengthens solidarity, which is central to positive politeness because it emphasizes cooperation and shared engagement.

Excerpt 3

"You did very well."

Analysis :

This statement provides direct positive feedback on the listener's performance. Expressing approval assures the listener that their actions are valued and successful. Such validation supports the listener's desire for appreciation, thereby maintaining social harmony and strengthening interpersonal closeness.

Excerpt 4

"I understand what you mean."

Analysis :

The speaker signals cognitive and emotional alignment with the listener's perspective. Showing understanding serves as a positive politeness strategy by acknowledging the legitimacy of the listener's thoughts. This reduces potential tension and affirms mutual respect, strengthening the cooperative nature of the interaction.

Excerpt 5

"You're not alone."

Analysis :

The utterance reassures the listener of emotional and social support. By emphasizing presence and support, the speaker fulfills the listener's need for belonging and acceptance. This directly enhances a positive image by affirming that the listener is socially valued and emotionally supported.

3. Negative Politeness Strategy

Negative politeness strategy is a strategy of politeness focused on respecting *negative face*, which is the desire of the speech partner not to have their freedom restricted. Brown and Levinson (1987) explain that this strategy is usually manifested through indirect expressions, apologies, or certain forms of mitigation to reduce the burden on the speech partner. In the movie *Enola Holmes*, this strategy appears when Enola interacts with characters who have higher social status or certain authority, such as Mycroft. Using this strategy shows that even though Enola defies Victorian social norms, she still shows respect in certain contexts. The following is the data we have analyzed, namely five examples of utterances that represent the use of negative politeness strategies in the film *Enola Holmes* (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Chaerdiani & Ekawati, 2024).

Excerpt 1

"Sorry to bother you."

Analysis :

The speaker begins with an explicit apology before engaging in a potentially disruptive action. The apology acknowledges that the speaker is intruding on the listener's time or space. This acknowledgment mitigates the self-esteem-threatening action by demonstrating sensitivity to the listener's negative self-esteem, namely the desire to remain undisturbed.

Excerpt 2

"If you don't mind..."

Analysis :

This phrase serves as a preliminary request that lessens the impact of what is to come. By explicitly giving the listener the option to decline, the speaker avoids coercion. Offering options is a key characteristic of negative politeness, as it preserves the listener's freedom of action and autonomy.

Excerpt 3

"May I ask a question?"

Analysis :

The speaker asks permission before making a request for attention or information. Asking permission demonstrates differentiation and respect for personal boundaries. Rather than assuming compliance, the speaker minimizes coercion, which aligns directly with negative politeness strategies.

Excerpt 4

"I may be wrong, but..."

Analysis :

Analysis: The speaker lowers the level of certainty by providing a cautious statement. This cautious statement reduces the risk of imposing an opinion or appearing authoritative. By reducing certainty, the speaker protects the listener's negative image, allowing space for disagreement without social pressure.

Excerpt 5

"Could you please step aside?"

Analysis :

The request is phrased as a question and includes the politeness marker "please." The indirectness and formality soften the commanding nature of the request. This structure maintains a respectful distance and minimizes interruption, making it a clear example of negative politeness.

4. Off-Record Strategy

Off-the-record strategies are indirect communication methods that give listeners the opportunity to interpret messages without the speaker explicitly taking actions that could threaten their self-esteem. Brown and Levinson (1987) explain that this approach is used to reduce responsibility and minimize the potential for loss of face, especially in contexts involving social distance or power differences. In Enola Holmes (2020), Enola often uses this strategy to convey criticism, disagreement, or resistance through hints and implied meanings rather than direct confrontation. This reflects Victorian social norms that required women to speak politely and indirectly. As a result, the off-the-record strategy serves as a linguistic tool for managing power relations, maintaining social harmony, and subtly challenging patriarchal authority.

Excerpt 1

"It's a bit cold in here"

Analysis :

The utterance is framed as a factual comment rather than a request. By not explicitly asking for action, the speaker leaves the interpretation to the hearer. This indirectness minimizes imposition and gives the hearer autonomy in deciding whether and how to respond, a defining characteristic of off-record politeness.

Excerpt 2

"Some people value freedom"

Analysis :

The statement is generalized and avoids direct reference to any specific individual. This indirect formulation allows the speaker to convey evaluation or criticism without openly confronting the target. The ambiguity protects both the speaker and the hearer from direct face threat, aligning with off-record politeness strategies.

Excerpt 3

"An interesting behavioral choice"

Analysis :

The speaker conveys criticism implicitly, relying on the hearer to infer the negative assessment. Because the judgment is not explicitly stated, the speaker maintains plausible deniability, which is central to off-record politeness.

Excerpt 4

"One might wonder why."

Analysis :

The impersonal subject one distances the speaker from the implied criticism. This construction avoids direct responsibility for the evaluative stance, allowing the speaker to question an action without openly challenging the hearer. Such strategic ambiguity exemplifies off-record politeness.

Excerpt 5

"Not everyone follows the rules."

Analysis :

The statement is broad and nonspecific, with no explicit addressee. By implying disapproval without direct accusation, the speaker reduces confrontation while still communicating criticism. This indirect signaling preserves social harmony and fits the off-record politeness framework.

5. Not Performing the Act

Not performing the act is an idea from Brown and Levinson's 1987 Politeness Theory. This approach means avoiding any action that could threaten someone's face, which refers to their need for independence and not being forced into something. Instead of trying to soften a face-threatening act, the speaker simply doesn't do it at all—like not asking for something or not pointing out a problem. This helps keep things peaceful by avoiding possible disagreements.

Excerpt 1

Early in the film, Enola discovers clues about her father's disappearance but chooses not to directly confront her mother, Eudoria, about the truth, instead observing quietly to avoid emotional imposition.

(Enola, whispering to herself while examining a clue)

"I won't ask her yet. Not now."

Analysis :

In this case, "not performing the act" means Enola chooses not to start a direct conversation that might make her mother uncomfortable by making her share painful secrets. This is a thoughtful and caring decision that creates tension in a gentle way without causing a big fight. It makes Enola's character seem more understanding and clever. Brown and Levinson argue that avoiding the FTA entirely minimizes risk to the hearer's face, as seen in this scene where Enola prioritizes relational harmony over immediate confrontation

Excerpt 2

During the train chase, Enola and Tewkesbury are trying to escape, but Enola doesn't directly ask him to put himself in danger by jumping or fighting. Instead, she lets him offer to help on his own.

Enola: *"We need to get off this train."*

(Tewkesbury responds without prompting: *"I'll handle the guards."*)

Analysis :

Not performing the act means Enola doesn't ask Tewkesbury directly, so she doesn't interfere with his freedom. This helps keep his sense of independence, or "negative face," intact. It builds respect and kindness naturally between them, instead of sounding bossy or forced, which helps their friendship grow. Levinson's idea is that not doing something directly makes it less pushy. Enola's silence lets Tewkesbury make his own choices, which supports the idea that being indirect helps keep relationships strong, especially when things are risky.

Excerpt 3

In a bustling street scene, Enola is disguised as a boy but is spotted by the inspector. Instead of defending herself or denying it, she simply continues on her way, ignoring the implication.

Inspector Lestrade: *"Miss, you look suspiciously like that runaway girl from the posters."*

Enola: *(She adjusts her hat and walks past without acknowledging the comment.)*

Analysis :

Here means Enola doesn't speak up or argue when someone accuses her. She avoids saying anything that might challenge the inspector's authority or make him feel bad about himself. This shows how smart and resourceful she is, letting her stay free without causing more conflict. This keeps the story calm and gives her a sense of power. Brown and Levinson say that not responding is the safest way to

handle situations where there's a big power difference, like between someone in authority and someone who's escaping. By staying quiet, Enola avoids making things worse and keeps things peaceful, which fits with the idea that avoiding conflict is better than trying to fix it.

Excerpt 4

During a tense family meeting at the Holmes estate, Mycroft attempts to lecture Enola on societal expectations. Enola listens briefly but shifts focus to something else, avoiding direct rebuttal or agreement.

Mycroft: *"A young lady of your station should not be gallivanting about unsupervised."*

Enola: *(She nods vaguely and begins examining a nearby object, diverting her attention.)*

Analysis :

This strategy means Enola avoids directly arguing or refusing Mycroft's advice, which helps protect his image as a wise and experienced person and also keeps her own sense of independence. It's a quiet way of showing resistance that shows Enola's cleverness without being openly rebellious. This makes her character feel more real and relatable to today's audiences who appreciate personal freedom. Levinson's theory supports this by saying that not taking action can reduce conflict in unequal relationships, as Enola's choice to change the subject stops a possible confrontation that might harm Mycroft's standing. This matches real research in politeness studies, which shows that staying quiet or redirecting the conversation can help keep family relationships balanced during disagreements.

Excerpt 5

In the film's action-packed chase through London, the antagonist mocks Enola's efforts. She hears it but continues her pursuit without retorting or engaging.

Villain: *"You think you're clever, but you'll never outsmart me."*

Enola: *(She quickens her pace and focuses on escaping, ignoring the taunt entirely.)*

Analysis :

This shows not performing the action by not making a verbal response or challenge, which helps avoid an FTA that might hurt the villain's positive image (their competence) or make the physical fight worse. This choice keeps the scene exciting and focused on action instead of talking, showing Enola as calm and in control under pressure. This makes her stand out as a strong heroine in a genre where male characters are usually the main focus. The idea behind this is that not responding directly can be a good way to handle conflicts without making things worse. Enola's silence here keeps her dignity while stopping the villain from getting the reaction they want. Levinson's examples of indirect ways to handle conflict back this up, proving that avoiding confrontation can reduce tension without losing respect.

Conclusion

This article looked at the main types of faces and politeness methods used in selected conversations from the movie Enola Holmes. The analysis found that Positive Face and Positive Politeness were the most common. This suggests that the characters often try to build friendly connections, show support, and keep positive relationships throughout the film. At the same time, there were also instances of Negative Face, Off-Record Politeness, and Bald-on-Record, showing that characters sometimes use more indirect or direct ways of speaking depending on the situation, like when they need to

protect their independence, hint at something, or give important instructions. Overall, the results show how politeness strategies affect the emotional feel and how characters interact in the film. The research also shows that dialogue in movies can reflect real-life language use, especially when people try to manage their social wants and deal with relationships. This analysis helps us better understand how politeness works in modern media and conversations.

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