

POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN THE CHARACTERS' APOLOGIES IN THE WHALE MOVIE

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Abstract

This study aims to analysed politeness strategies in apology expressions in *The Whale* (2022). This research applied a qualitative method through case study design to explore how characters use language to convey apologies in different social and emotional contexts. The data were collected from documents with selected dialogues in the film containing apology expressions, which were then carefully examined and categorized. The researcher analysed the data based on Leech's politeness maxims, focusing on how each maxim is reflected in the characters' speech. The results show that the tact maxim is the most dominant strategy, followed by sympathy, approbation, and modesty maxims. These findings suggest that characters tend to minimize harm and show concern for others when apologizing. Furthermore, the study indicates that apology strategies play an important role in maintaining interpersonal relationships, expressing emotional conditions, and revealing deeper psychological states among characters in the film.

Keywords: *apology maxims; politeness strategy; pragmatics; The Whale*

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Introduction

Pragmatics is the study of meaning in context, focusing on how speakers convey meaning beyond the literal interpretation of words. One important aspect of pragmatics is politeness, which plays a significant role in maintaining social relationships. Politeness strategies are used to avoid conflict and create harmonious communication between individuals

Language plays an important role in communication, especially in expressing feelings and intentions. In social interaction, speakers are expected to use polite language to maintain good relationships. Therefore, understanding politeness strategies becomes essential in analysing how people communicate effectively in different contexts apology expressions in this movie.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the types of politeness strategies used in apology expressions in *The Whale* based on Leech's politeness maxims

Method

This research employed a qualitative method (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), which is suitable for analyzing language use in its natural context. The aim was not statistical generalization but to provide a clear description of how apology strategies were expressed by the characters in the film.

The object of the research was the film *The Whale* (2022), directed by Darren Aronofsky, chosen because it presents complex interpersonal relationships and frequent use of apologies in emotionally intense circumstances. The data consisted of 25 apology utterances, both explicit and implicit, produced by the main character Charlie as well as Liz, Ellie, Mary, and Thomas.

The data collection procedures were carried out in several stages: first, the researcher repeatedly watched the film to gain familiarity with the storyline and conversational context; second, all dialogues containing apology expressions were transcribed; third, the

transcriptions were reviewed to ensure that the selected utterances functioned as apologies; and fourth, the utterances were organized in a data table including the speaker, addressee, context, type of apology, and the politeness maxim involved.

The analysis of the data followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was done by carefully classifying utterances into explicit and implicit apologies and mapping them into Leech's (2014) six politeness maxims, ensuring that each instance was categorized consistently. Data display involved not only descriptive explanations but also tables summarizing the frequency and functions of each maxim, which provided a clearer visualization of patterns and tendencies in the film.

Finally, conclusion drawing was carried out by interpreting how the identified strategies functioned in repairing relationships and maintaining politeness in the film, with special attention to how emotional intensity influenced Charlie's choice of linguistic forms. This methodological framework ensured a systematic and valid analysis because it allowed the researcher not only to identify the forms of apologies but also to explain their pragmatic meanings within the emotional and relational context of the film, thereby strengthening the reliability of the findings and making the analysis both transparent and replicable.

The unit of analysis in this study is the utterances containing apology expressions produced by the characters in the film. To ensure the validity of the data, the researcher applied data triangulation by repeatedly reviewing the film and cross-checking the transcription with subtitles.

Result and Discussion

A total of twenty-five apology tokens were identified in *The Whale* (2022), consisting of sixteen explicit and nine implicit forms. The explicit apologies were realized through clear and direct linguistic markers such as "I'm sorry," "Forgive me," or "I apologize," which openly acknowledged fault and responsibility.

These straightforward expressions were most frequently found in Charlie's interactions with Liz, reflecting both the closeness of their relationship and his reliance on her as caregiver and confidant. By employing direct and unambiguous forms, Charlie revealed his strong desire to repair their bond, to reaffirm Liz's significance in his life, and to seek understanding during moments when his physical decline and emotional fragility were most evident.

Such apologies conveyed not only sincerity but also urgency, highlighting the depth of his remorse and the need to preserve trust where mutual care already existed. At the same time, the explicit nature of these apologies emphasized his dependence on sincerity as a communicative strategy, functioning as a means of reducing ambiguity, preventing further misunderstanding, and positioning himself as fully accountable.

In this way, Charlie's explicit apologies served not merely as linguistic markers of regret but as reflections of his guilt, self-blame, and deep longing for connection, showing how language itself became his primary resource for negotiating care, forgiveness, and dignity in the midst of his declining circumstances.

In contrast, the nine implicit apologies were expressed in more subtle ways, often through compliments, empathetic statements, or offers of restitution that implied regret without explicitly naming it. For example, when Charlie tells Ellie, "You look beautiful," the

utterance operates pragmatically as an apology through the approbation maxim.

Although not a direct acknowledgment of guilt, it functions to reduce hostility, soften conflict, and create space for reconciliation. This indirect form of apology occurred more frequently in Charlie's conversations with Ellie, indicating his awareness that overt admissions of guilt might be rejected or even worsen their fragile relationship. Implicit strategies therefore highlight his caution and emotional sensitivity, as he balanced his desire to repair bonds with the need to avoid confrontation.

Taken together, the distribution of explicit and implicit apologies reveals how Charlie adjusted his politeness strategies depending on the interlocutor and the relational context, reflecting not only linguistic variation but also the psychological weight of guilt, empathy, and strained family ties at the heart of the film.

Table 1. Distribution of Apology Tokens According to Leech's Politeness Maxims

Politeness maxim	Frequency
Tact maxim	11
Generosity maxim	2
Approbation maxim	4
Modesty maxim	3
Sympathy maxim	4
Agreement maxim	1
Total	25

The predominance of the tact maxim (11 tokens) indicates Charlie's strong tendency to reduce the burden of his interlocutors and avoid creating new difficulties for those around him. In many scenes, his apologies placed more emphasis on the feelings of others than on himself. This corresponds with Charlie's psychological struggles,

particularly his lingering sense of guilt over the past and his desire not to inconvenience those who still cared for him, especially Liz. For instance, in his interactions with Liz, Charlie repeatedly expressed regret in ways that highlighted her feelings rather than focusing on his own mistakes. This demonstrates that the tact maxim was his most consistent strategy, serving both as a means of maintaining harmony and as a reflection of his guilt-ridden character.

The sympathy maxim appeared four times, showing Charlie's awareness of the suffering of others, particularly Ellie. Through empathetic utterances, he attempted to position himself in alignment with Ellie's emotions, even though she often rejected his efforts. Sympathy in this context underscores Charlie's role as a father who, despite a fractured relationship, continued to seek emotional connection with his daughter. The presence of this maxim illustrates that his apologies were not merely about addressing personal faults but also about bridging emotional distance, thus functioning as an attempt at relational repair.

The approbation maxim also occurred four times. In these instances, Charlie combined apology with compliments or positive evaluation. By calling Ellie "beautiful" or praising Thomas, he softened the interaction and indirectly acknowledged his mistakes. Although indirect, this strategy worked effectively in fragile relationships where explicit acknowledgment of guilt might have been too overwhelming. In this way, the approbation maxim served as an emotional cushion that eased tension while preserving the dignity of the other person.

The modesty maxim was found three times and reflected Charlie's willingness to lower himself in order to rebuild broken trust. Utterances such as "It's my fault" illustrated his readiness to

accept blame without offering any defense. This aligns with his characterization as someone consumed by regret and self-blame. By employing modesty, Charlie deliberately placed himself in a lower position, which enhanced the sincerity of his attempts at reconciliation.

The generosity maxim appeared twice. In these cases, Charlie attempted to repair relationships by offering restitution or compensation, as seen in his utterance “*Charlie feels guilty for troubling Liz to come to his apartment*” Unlike modesty, which emphasizes accepting responsibility, generosity highlights readiness to act in favor of others as part of the apologizing process. This illustrates the active dimension of apology, where Charlie not only acknowledges his fault but also demonstrates a willingness to take corrective measures.

The agreement maxim occurred only once, when Charlie told Ellie, “*You’re right, I was too harsh.*” The rarity of this strategy indicates that direct agreement was not Charlie’s preferred way of apologizing, perhaps because it limited his ability to explain his perspective in conflicts. Nevertheless, this single instance remains important because it shows his willingness to lower his ego, when necessary, even if only briefly.

Taken together, the findings reveal that Charlie most often relied on strategies that minimized harm (tact), displayed empathy (sympathy), and elevated others through positive evaluation (approbation). Explicit apologies dominated his interactions with Liz, reflecting their closeness and trust, while implicit apologies were more frequent with Ellie, emphasizing the fragility of their father–daughter relationship. These patterns suggest that Charlie’s apology strategies were not only linguistic choices but also

reflections of his emotional struggles, psychological burden, and efforts to repair broken bonds.

Furthermore, the distribution of these maxims distinguishes this research from previous studies. While Afriana (2024) and Angelita (2023) identified the dominance of positive politeness strategies in adventure or fantasy films, this study highlights the centrality of tact and sympathy in an emotionally intense drama like *The Whale*. This reinforces the idea that genre and thematic focus significantly influence the selection of politeness strategies. Thus, the findings of this study contribute not only to the analysis of politeness strategies in film discourse but also to broader understandings of how linguistic politeness functions in contexts of psychological conflict and relational repair.

The findings reveal that the tact maxim dominated the apologies in *The Whale*, with eleven instances out of twenty-five. This pattern reflects Charlie’s psychological burden and his consistent effort to avoid imposing on others, which is in line with Leech’s (2014) description of the tact maxim as minimizing cost to others and maximizing benefit. Charlie’s declining health condition and overwhelming sense of guilt pushed him to communicate in ways that reduced the weight of his presence on those around him, especially Liz and Ellie.

For example, his repeated admissions of fault to Liz were framed in ways that emphasized her feelings rather than his own suffering, showing a conscious effort to protect her emotional state. At the same time, the balance between explicit and implicit apologies illustrates how context shapes linguistic choices. Charlie employed explicit apologies with Liz, who was supportive, trustworthy, and willing to listen, while he relied on implicit ones with Ellie,

whose relationship with him was fragile and filled with resentment. Compliments and empathetic statements such as “*You look beautiful*” or “*I understand how painful this is*” reveal that he used indirect strategies as cautious attempts to reconnect without provoking further resistance.

Beyond tact, sympathy and approbation also played important roles, with Charlie frequently acknowledging Ellie’s emotional struggles or praising her in order to soften the harshness of their interactions. These patterns show that apologies in the film are not fixed formulas but flexible pragmatic tools, strategically adapted depending on who the addressee is, the level of relational damage, and the degree of trust still present in the interaction.

Compared with previous studies, these results underline the distinctive nature of apologies in emotionally heavy narratives. Angelita (2023) observed positive politeness as dominant in *Cruella*, Afriana (2024) found positive politeness stronger than negative politeness in *The Princess Diaries*, and Novitasari (2022) reported bald-on-record as dominant in *Onward*. All three studies analyzed films that leaned toward humor, fantasy, or action, where direct or friendly strategies are appropriate. In contrast.

The Whale reveals the predominance of tact, sympathy, and approbation strategies that prioritize sensitivity, empathy, and emotional repair over directness or efficiency. This difference suggests that genre and narrative tone strongly influence the choice of politeness strategies. From a character perspective, Charlie’s heavy reliance on tact, sympathy, and approbation demonstrates his struggle between guilt and his hope for forgiveness. Liz’s responses confirm her role as a caretaker who accepts direct admissions of guilt, while Ellie’s rejection of implicit apologies highlights

the limits of politeness when trust has been deeply broken. Mary and Thomas, though less central, further illustrate how apologies can function as situational tools of reconciliation or acknowledgment of past mistakes.

Taken together, these insights confirm that apologies in *The Whale* are not only expressions of politeness but also acts of psychological survival and relational negotiation, revealing how language becomes a vehicle to cope with guilt, repair fractured bonds, and seek human connection within emotionally charged contexts.

Conclusion

This study concludes that tact maxim is the most dominant politeness strategy used in apology expressions in *The Whale*. Other maxims such as sympathy, approbation, and modesty are also identified, although less frequently. The use of these strategies reflects the emotional conditions and interpersonal relationships between the characters. Therefore, apology expressions play an important role in maintaining and repairing social relationships in the film. These findings contribute to the study of pragmatics, particularly in understanding politeness strategies in film discourse.

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