

## THE POLITENESS STRATEGIES: MALE AND FEMALE POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN A GROUP DISCUSSION

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### Abstract

Politeness is a strategy used to have interaction in daily conversation. This study investigates the following questions: (1) What types of FTAs (Face Threatening Acts) and politeness strategies frequently used by females and males in a short interview's conversation?, and (2) Is there any effect of the relation of close friendship toward politeness?. The method used was qualitative research. The five participants are included in terms of 2 females and 3 males in the age of around 30 - 40 from different various ethnic groups, occupations, and status. The instrument used was a FGD (Focus Group Discussion) to collect the data from the participants' utterances as a source of data with the controversial topic. The procedures used to analyze the data were listening to the recorded utterances, transcribing the raw data and translating them into English, classifying the raw data of utterances into female and male section to find out the differences of their politeness and identifying the FTAs and analyzing the types of politeness strategies used. Based on the findings, female participants' dominance types of FTA are criticized, followed by complaining, which indicates an impolite degree. On the other hand, male participants' dominance types of FTAs used are confessing, which means a polite degree. Second, the close relation of friendship influences the degree of politeness, which produces the opposite result from the previous studies. In these findings, the data showed that females are less polite than males. Based on these factors, women may react less politely in the data, but according to the three elements, it must be taken into consideration that the impact is reasonable.

**Key words:** politeness strategies, male and female politeness

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### Introduction

Politeness is one of the essential aspects of communicative competence. Linguistic politeness has been the area of extensive research since the works of Lakoff in the 1975s about the relationship between politeness and gender. She was well known for her contribution in studying the characteristics of women talk, which explained the tendencies of women's speech (i.e., hedges, empty adjectives, and tag questions). Moreover, she claimed that women are likely to produce more tag questions and make their speech more polite. The vast amount of literature on politeness studies claimed that females linguistically speak more politely than males (Tannen, 1990; Climate, 1997, Brown, 1980; Lorenzo-Dus & Bou-Franch, 2003; Bacha, Bahous, & Diab, 2012; Alavi, Moradi, & Taggaddomi, 2013).

Lakoff (2004) said that politeness linguistically is concerned with verbal communication, and non-linguistically is involved with other aspects of communication such as body language. Verbal communication is such an important aspect to understand people's polite way of speaking. Brown and Levinson (1987) the pioneers of linguistic politeness research for years were concerned with the concept of the face taken from Goffman (1967), the image of the speaker and the hearer would like to maintain during the conversation process. Mills (2003) defined politeness as the expression of the speakers' intention to mitigate face threat carried by specific face threatening acts toward the listener. Yule (2006) also interpreted politeness as showing awareness of and consideration of another person's face.

There have been numerous studies investigating, analyzing, and examining FTAs (Face-threatening acts) (Keikhae & Mozzafari, 2012; Turker & Akbarov 2016) and also numerous studies investigating politeness strategies (Aliakbari & Moelami, 2015; Agies, 2012; Wagner, 2012) over recent decades using the theory of Brown and Levinson (1978). Turker and Akbarov (2016) investigated the FTAs of requesting and apologizing cross-culturally and cross-linguistically. The method used MDTC to collect the data, which is suitable to collect the data from different languages. The results showed that the strategies elaborated for request and apologies realization vary across cultures and gender. Wagner (2012) investigated the standard approach of politeness in the participants' apologies. A sample of two hundred naturally occurring apologies was collected and encoded. The result of the positive and negative politeness strategies revealed that negative politeness strategies were recognized as a strategy by the American speaker. However, it was accomplished on-record and a threat to the positive face of the Chinese woman's point of view. Off-record strategy and remaining silent were the other approaches the Chinese women used to protect the hearer's face. Agies (2012) investigated the effect of gender on the use of politeness strategies in a Turkish series. The data consisted of 761 utterances by males and females. They were classified based on politeness strategies. The results showed that males used negative politeness strategies in the workplace, while females used more positive politeness strategies.

Politeness is regarded as an essential strategy to be attended in a daily conversation. There are various types of face-to-face interaction in our regular basis, such as natural

more preferable to the members of Cuernavaca's speech community.

Keikhae and Mozzafari (2012) investigated the politeness phenomenon which is common to all cultures. This aims to examine the impact of gender on politeness strategies to see whether females speak more politely than males. The method used a Discourse Complex Test, in the form of a questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to thirty females and thirty males. The result indicated that generally, women speak more politely to women than to men. Cheung (2009) investigated the role of culture in the use of politeness strategies. The data were based on a movie clip directed by Wayne Wang. The participants of the movie were from two different cultures (China and United Estate), and then politeness strategies were interpreted differently. The data revealed that damaging one's positive face was perceived as being polite in Chinese culture, though it was

conversation, interviews, public lectures, and classroom language are among the principal research varieties (e.g., Fraser 1990; Chen 2001; Watts 2003), which the communication between them can be the gap to examine the existence of politeness. Therefore, the focus of this study is to investigate the presence of politeness in a face-to-face interaction of an interview and to test the significant findings of the perspective of female politeness in a short interview conversation. This study investigates the following questions:

1. What types of FTAs (Face Threatening Acts) and politeness strategies frequently used by females and males in a short interview's conversation?
2. Is there any effect of the relation of close friendship toward politeness?

### Theoretical Framework on Politeness

Politeness study has been analyzed from many different perspectives such as sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and social language. The relation between politeness and gender has been the interest of many sociolinguists (Lakoff, 1975; Brown and Levinson, 1987; and Montgomery 1998). Lakoff has considered seminal work on politeness as the foundation work on modern politeness theory in the 1975s claimed that females' speech seems more polite than males. In the same sense, Holmes characterized female speech as more polite than male's (cited in Segal, 2004). Labov and Trudgill also supported this finding that females are more polite (cited in Segal, 2004). This phenomenon is also researched by Brown in 1980 who revealed that intuitively, it seems reasonable to predict that woman, in general, will speak more formally and politely, since female are culturally relegated to a secondary status relative to male and since a higher level of politeness is expected from inferiors to superiors (Brown, 1980).

Females' speech style is characterized by the use of elements such as "tentativeness, hedges, tag questions, hesitation, and indirectness." On the other hand, males' speech style is characterized as "forceful, direct, and confident" (Lakoff 1979, cited in Segal, 2004). Therefore, females' speech is recognized as more polite than males. However, they seemed to agree that politeness is a feature of language use, which refers to male and female distinction and social concepts discussed in the field of sociolinguistics. On the other hand, Mills (2003) criticized that such judgments are just general approximations. Moreover, she claimed that societies have changed and the relationship between males and females are different. There are many females

who speak impolitely to males and vice versa, however, this is considered just as stereotypes, not based on the fact.

In the field of politeness, Brown, and Levinson (1987)'s is the best known and most researched. They developed a fundamental theory of politeness based on three unrelated languages and cultures: English, Tamil (a Dravidian language), and (a Mayan language). In their work, they attempted to relate the following aspects of the face, which is based on Grice's cooperative principles of Goffman's idea in 1967. The concept of face is "the public self- image" that every member wants to claim for himself and that people cooperate maintaining face in an interaction. The face is a concept that should be paid attention to interactions. Everyone in society has a potential face (Brown and Levinson 1987, cited in Mills, 2003).

Brown & Levinson (1987), Subdivided face into two: in simple definition positive face is the need to be connected. While the negative face is the need to be independent or the underlying claim to territories, personal pressure, and right to distraction (Brown and Levinson, 1987), however, the notion of face is vulnerable during a conversation, and it can be lost. Therefore, Brown and Levinson related the aspect of face to acts that threaten face, and five general strategies of counterbalancing face threats with the specific linguistic approach. They proposed four FATs: 1) Acts which threaten the hearer's negative face: ordering, requesting, threatening, and warning, 2) acts which threaten the hearer's positive face: Complaining, expressing emotions, and criticizing, 3) acts which threaten speaker's positive face: Apologizing, accepting, complementing and confessing, and 4) acts, which threaten speaker's negative

face: Accepting an offer, accepting thanks, promising unwillingly (p.74).

The theory of Brown and Levinson' FTAs has been doubted because of the claim of 'universality,' as Brown and Levinson provide data from three countries by some linguists. They claimed that FTAs are only suitable for western culture and not to others (Kasper, 1990; Meier, 1995; Chen 2001, 2010; Burke and Kraut, 2008). In their work, Brown and Levinson do not involve a clear distinction between negative politeness and negative politeness. The fact that they categorized face threatening acts (Kasper, 1990). In a similar line, Meier (1995) said that any account of politeness has to deal with the fact from the politeness theories. On the other hand, Burke & Kraut (2008) stated that there are two essential criticisms of Brown and Levinson of politeness. First is ambiguous, overlapping in many different levels of communication, and the emphasis between speaker' perception and the hearer.

However, the primary point of Brown and Levinson (1987)' s study focused on three social factors considered during interacting with each other. They are (1) power, (2) social distance, and (3) the degree of imposition. Power refers to the social status of both speaker and hearer. Social distance is defined as the factor that indicates the degree to which interlocutors are familiar with each other (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Leech (1983) Social distance between the addresser and addressee is the relation of bounding between the speaker and the hearer such as gender and cultural norms of a particular language. Kida (2011), as cited in Akbari (2015), stated that social distance could be expressed by using different linguistic forms to indicate "respect, deference, and politeness." Meanwhile, the degree of imposition shows the rank that a speaker can impose

the ideas and desires on others. This is congenial; Flor (2007) cited in Akbari (2015) argued that the degree of taxation is correlated to the way the speaker is able to impose his attention on the hearer. It is necessary to consider these social factors when expressing any speech appropriately according to the social context because they control the preferred linguistic forms used. Johnson (2010) claimed that to reach a high level of politeness, the potential threats of the communicative act are the key. He added that the factors involved in approximating face threats as proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) may cause the politeness strategies used to express specific FTAs (Face Threatening Acts).

Consequently, social norms play an essential role in determining the social strategies of politeness used to express the FTAs appropriately. Since every language has its way of conveying message, intention, and representing different FTAs, which may threaten the face positively or negatively, four politeness strategies were proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) to act as a guide that controls everyday threats of face with respect to social norms (as cited in Yule, 2006). These strategies are bald on record, negative politeness, positive politeness, and off record, (cited in Akbari, 2015).

- a. Positive Politeness: This strategy is oriented to enhance the positive face of the hearer. Positive face needs to be appreciated and accepted by others. It leads to achieving solidarity through offers of friendship. The strategy includes Strategy 1: (Notice, attend to hearer's interest, want, needs etc.), Strategy 2: Exaggerate (interest, sympathy, etc. with the hearer), Strategy 3: use in-group identity marker, Strategy 4: seek agreement and avoid disagreement, Strategy 5: assert speaker's knowledge of and

- concern for hearer's wants, Strategy 6: include both speaker and, Strategy 7: give hearer sympathy, understanding, cooperation, and Strategy 8: joke.
- b. Negative Politeness: this strategy is oriented towards a hearer's negative face. Negative face is the desire to have freedom of action, freedom of imposition and not to be impeded by others. Therefore, these automatically assume that there might be the same social distances or awkwardness 's in the situation. This strategy is tending to show be conventionally indirect, to show deference, emphasize the importance of others time or concerns, an apology for interruption, impersonalize S and H, State the FTA as a general rule, and even includes Nominalize.
  - c. Bald on-Record<sub>[SEP]</sub>(The most direct): This strategy provides no effort by speaker to reduce the impact of FTA's, the speaker will most likely the person whom he or she is speaking to, embarrass them, or make them feel a bit uncomfortable. The situation when a person directly addresses the other as a certain expression such as ask something, please, or commands. In addition, the use of direct command usually happens in emergency situations. This strategy tends to show in urgent situations, emphasizing maximum efficiency, non-cooperation from the listener, speaker cares about hearer, granting permission for the hearer, and even imperative.
  - d. Off record (indirect strategy): This strategy is the opposite of ball on record. This main purpose is to take some of the speaker's pressure off. The speaker is removing himself or herself from any imposing whatever. In cases where the risk is estimated as very high, the speaker realizes the act in a way that leaves a maximal option for deniability. In simple terms, off record realizes the act so indirectly. The strategy of off-record can be performed such strategy 1: Give hints, strategy 2: Give association clues, strategy 3: Presuppose, strategy 4: Understate, strategy 5: Overstate, strategy 6: Use tautologies, strategy 7: Use contradictions, strategy 8: Be ironic, 9: Use metaphors, strategy 10: Use rhetorical questions, strategy 11: Be ambiguous, strategy 12: Be vague, strategy 13: Over-generalize, strategy 14: Displace H (hearer can choose to do the act as a bonus free gift), and strategy 15: Be incomplete, use ellipsis.

## Methodology

The method used was qualitative research. According to Creswell (2009, p. 4), qualitative research concerns investigation and understanding of what individuals or organizations consider to be a social issue. It is used to better understand the mechanisms and causes of social phenomena.

The participants in this study were mixed gender groups consisting of two females and three males, aged between 30 to 40 years old from different various ethnic groups in Indonesia. The participants were native speakers with

varying backgrounds of occupation, and the status of all participants is married. Moreover, all the participants who are invited in this focus group discussion are all known to each other, and the social distance between the interviewer and interviewee is very close. For more information in detail of those participants are as follows:

- a. Maila (Pseudonym) is ethnically Palembangness, age is 32, and the status is married. Her occupation is businesswoman, individually as a franchisor of one brand of the

- famous mini market in Indonesia.
- b. Suzzane (Pseudonym) is ethnically Palembangness, age is 36, and the status is married. Her occupation is a licensed plastic surgeon.
  - c. Lauren (Pseudonym) is ethnically Sundanese, age is 32, and the status is married as the second wife. Lauren is one of the female participants who does not work, and she is a full-time housewife. But she is active as a socialite.
  - d. Ryan (Pseudonym) is ethnically Sundanese, age 35, and the status is married. He has been a Gynaecologist for more than five years.
  - e. Regi (Pseudonym) is ethnically Batakness, age is 37, and the status is married. His occupation is a lawyer of his firm.

The instrument used in this study is a focus group discussion (FGD) originally developed to collect participants' utterances as a source of data of this present study. The participants are instructed to give an opinion of a topic given, and also respond to the view of other participants

### Findings and Discussion

In this part, the data compiled through the interview are presented in tables. There are two separate tables of females and males' findings. Each table consists of the FTAs or speech acts used by females or males and the politeness

in case of agreeing or disagree besides full explanation. The topic given to the participants is a controversial topic of polygamy, to analyze the politeness reaction in responding to such a controversial topic. Moreover, this topic was assigned to investigate the politeness strategies used by each participant in responding to their opinion to close friends. The length of FGD was around 30 minutes of natural conversation, and the language of the communication was using Bahasa Indonesia.

There are five steps of procedures in analyzing the data: First, the researcher listened to the recorded utterances. Second, the researcher transcribed the raw data and provided the English translation version. Third, the researcher classified the raw data of utterances into females and males' section, and this aimed to see the different politeness between them. And the fifth, the researcher identified the FTAs (Face-threatening acts or speech acts) and analyzed the types of politeness strategies used.

strategies used by the participants. These tables are essential to be presented as evidence of the existence and the dominance types used of politeness between the participants.

**Table 1.** The politeness utterances of female participants

Degree of Politeness	Types of FTAs	Frequenc y	Strategy	Frequency
Polite	Confession	5	Off record	3
	Acceptance	2		
Impolite	Expressing emotion	4	Positive politeness	10
	Criticizing	6	Bald on record	10
	Complaining	4		
	Warning	3		

Based on the results from the above table, it is found that females used the criticizing types of FTAs (Face threatening Acts) the most, which was followed by complaining, expressing emotion, and warning. And the strategies of politeness used by female participants are bald on record followed by positive politeness and off record. From the table above, it seems that females are less polite than male participants. It is seen from several samples of data, for instance, in question 1 requested to give their opinion of what they know about polygamy?

**Data F2:** “No...no...no... I don’t want to hear about this”. (*Uttered in minutes 3.19*)

Suzzane performed this utterance to reject the first the question given, to give opinion about polygamy. The utterance of Data F2 indicated an expression, which the word ‘No’ has repeated several times. This rejection is classified as FTAs in the form of expressing emotion. In this situation, Suzzane used bald on record’s strategies in responding to the hearers, which confirms her disapproval of the question. Further, in the terms of saying ‘No’, she speeded her talk and gave a loud answer as the form of her disagreement. However, in this situation, even Suzzane spoke loudly, but her ethnic background is originally from Palembang. That is, it seems normal in their community when they speak louder than other ethnic.

**Data F7:** “This is allowed, but I still cannot accept that. Because why my does the husband have to marry another woman? I am still alive! Am I not worth anymore? Where is the loyalty, I question where the side of his humanity is? So, no...no...no...!”. (*Uttered in minutes 9.12*)

Data F7 presented above is the utterance performed by Maila, when she was requested to answer the question of her agreement of being polygamy. In this situation, Maila stated her knowledge

about polygamy according to her religion. At first, the statement of the first sentence is usual, but she gave a signal in performing this utterance, which showed dislike/ disagreement, even though she knew that in her religion is allowed. The next sentence, she started complaining in the form of a question. These sentences are categorized as speech acts of complaining. In this situation, Maila used positive politeness strategies, which started with giving a courtesy at the beginning, followed by complaints in the form of questions. These complain issues in this situation. Maila is seeking the agreement from the hearers if what she uttered was right.

**Data F-15:** “Polygamy is not as smooth as you think Regi, sometimes man cannot be fair to his wife. This is the fact! The fact is in front of you! At first...first...when I was officially his second wife, I did not really think what his first wife’ feeling. I juts felt a winner. Now after my husband married to his third wife, I feel polygamy is not a wise choice, but it is heart full. This affects not only to me, but also my family. In the term of being fair to all his wives, how can I measure that? I feel abandoned by him all the time, either my children, because he has to take around to his other wives. This is what you have called ‘fair’?” (*Uttered in minutes 22. 01*)

Lauren uttered the data F15 presented above. This utterance is a respond toward Regi (Pseudonym), as a claim against Regi’s opinion if polygamy is not as difficult as women think. In this situation, Lauren responded to give some information about what she has been experiencing. The data uttered is categorized as FTAs in the form of confessing. In this situation, Lauren stated her opinion using positive politeness strategies, which showed her narratives to assert the hearer’s knowledge that must be concerned. In the end, the speaker questioned the hearer to see the effect of the confession she made toward the hearer. At the end

of this utterance, the speaker also showed bold on record strategies, which

show no face maintenance toward the hearer.

**Table 2.** The politeness utterances of males participants

Degree of Politeness	Types of FTAs	Frequency	Strategy	Frequency
Polite	Confession	8	Off record	2
	Acceptance	2		
Impolite	Criticizing	4	Positive politeness	11
	Complaining	3	Bald on record	5

Based on the results from the above table, it is indicated that males participants use different types of FTAs than females participants. In this situation, males use the confessing types of FTAs (Face threatening Acts) the most, followed by accepting types. And the strategies of politeness used by male participants are positive politeness strategies followed by bold on record and off record. From the table above, it showed that male participants seem more than females participants. The dominance types of FTAs used by males is confessing, as seen in this data sample:

**Data M3:** "As a Muslim, we all know that polygamy is allowed. This is a special offer to only performed by men. If I able to provide justice among them and get the approval from my first wife, so yeah..."(Uttered in minutes 1:04)

Data M3 presented above is the utterance performed by Regi, when he was requested to give an opinion of his thought of polygamy. In this situation, Regi gave his agreement of polygamy in the form of confessing. The statement that he uttered was obvious, no loudness, and with no speed talk, which showed

the speaker's calm expression. This utterance in data M3 is categorized as a type of FTAs of confessing. The strategy used by the speaker in data M3 is positive politeness, which shows an informative explanation to give an understanding of hearer needs. This type of politeness strategy is neutral in the term of politeness degree.

**Data M5:** "I agree with polygamy, I know it sounds taboo in our society, but as a man it would be better to think of the feeling of our wife first. So for the next, there won't be an issue". (Uttered in minutes 04.19)

Ryan (Pseudonym) uttered the data M5 presented above. This utterance is a response to give his agreement on polygamy. In this situation, Ryan stated his approval, with one exception. The statement uttered is categorized as FTAs in the form of accepting. In this situation, Ryan gave his opinion using positive politeness strategies, which showed his narratives, to notice the hearer's expected information. Ryan's utterance is just a neutral statement according to his opinion.

## Conclusion

In this part, the significant findings of males and females's politeness acts affect the strategies of all participants used in stating their utterances are discussed. First, to answer the first question, female participants' dominance types of FTA are criticized,

followed by complaining, which indicates an impolite degree. On the other hand, male participants' dominance types of FTAs used are confessing, which means a polite degree. Second, the close relation of friendship influences the degree of politeness,



which produces the opposite result from the previous studies. In these findings, the data showed that females are less polite than males. However, according to Brown and Levinson (1978), three factors may influence the degree of politeness, which is the power between the speaker and the hearer, social distance between the speaker and the hearer, and the cultural ranking of speech acts.

From this explanation, it can be concluded that according to the data, the significant finding of this present research is that females are less polite than males. However, this result is the reflection of the effect from three factors, as Brown and Levinson (1987) said. First, the power between the speakers and the hearers, their social distances between them are very close. The participants in this present research are close friends, so this close-bound may take effect the politeness degree when they speak to each other. It also can be seen from the politeness strategies used by female's participants, and mostly they used bold on record strategy, which is no face maintenance during the conversation. It clears that close-bound affects the way speakers, and hearers speak to each other. Second is the

cultural ranking of speech acts. These participants are coming from different backgrounds of cultures; there are two Sundanese, two Palembangness, and a Batakness. Various cultures can be modified in the way each culture decodes the utterances. For instance, Sundanese is a well known ethnic in Indonesia, which is famous for people who speak soft-spoken. Soft-spoken may work among the Sundanese community, but not to Batakness or Palembangness. On the other hand, the topic given for the focus group discussion (FGD) is also challenging and controversial. Polygamy is sensitive and taboo in the females' point of view, especially in Indonesia.

Therefore, based on these factors, women may react less politely in the data, but according to the three elements, it must be taken into consideration that the impact is reasonable. The findings are corresponding to the three factors of Brown and Levinson (1978). For future research to collect more realistic responses, it may be better to add the number of participants with different kinds of associations or different types of occupation that can be observed and considered.

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