

BROWN AND LEVINSON'S POLITENESS STRATEGY USED TO ANSWER SENSITIVE QUESTIONS BY INDONESIAN YOUNG ADULTS

By

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Abstract: When people speak, they must carefully select words and expressions that will clearly communicate their intentions and meanings. Some topics, particularly certain types of questions, can be sensitive and make the listener feel uncomfortable. This study explores how Indonesian young adults handle such situations when they are asked sensitive questions. The research is based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory which involves various strategies that people use to maintain social harmony in conversation. The data was collected through interviews with participants to understand how they manage these sensitive interactions. The findings reveal that the participants certain politeness strategies when responding to uncomfortable questions that are considered sensitive. These included Bald on Record, where the speaker directly addresses the issue without much concern for the listener's feelings; Positive Politeness, where the speaker tries to decrease the discomfort by showing friendliness or solidarity; and Negative Politeness, where the speaker acknowledges the imposition and tries to minimize it. The choice of strategy often depends on several social factors, including the setting of the conversation, the relationship between the people involved, and the cultural context in which the interaction takes place. For example, respondents were more likely to use Negative Politeness with older or more authoritative figures, showing respect and deference to avoid offending them. This study highlights the importance of understanding cultural and social factors when delivering sensitive questions, especially in diverse societies like Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

In this modern era, there are many ways for people to express and deliver their ideas, including their feelings, thoughts, and also their deepest curiosity. People can easily express those through many kinds of forms in language, such as a statement, a question, and simply

a simple and short utterance. They have consideration in using such a form, since people unconsciously get used to communicating by using languages in their daily life and daily communication. Communication is an important thing in people's lives. They practically communicate with others by using a language. Speakers use linguistic markers, such as slang and dialects, to claim in-group membership, a form of positive politeness, and certain ways of communication are highly contextual and socially dependent (Fathi, 2023). The use of these various ways of using language has been an inevitable interest in linguistics, including in the study of politeness.

From that statement, there is a fact that people, as the users of language, must use language appropriately, moreover, effectively. Appropriateness is closely related to the notion of politeness, which has obviously become the requirement for smooth social interaction and communication. According to Wardaugh (2006), politeness is the most crucial aspect in language use as we must consider other people's feelings. As Wijaya & Herlina (2022), Yulianto et al. (2021), and Rahayu & Nugroho (2023) that considering interlocutors or listeners' feeling are essential as it is need to build solidarity and good relationship among people involved in the conversations.

Their consideration in using language must be based on the social condition and social situations in which they are in and related to. For example, male and female speakers in Indonesia use different politeness strategies when answering sensitive personal questions like women were found to use more positive politeness strategies, such as compliments and agreement, while men favored negative politeness (Setiawan & Dewi, 2021). People are aware and conscious of whom they are talking to, and they are also aware to contexts existing in the conversation they hold. As Widiastuti (2023) claimed that the choice of words in communicating by each individual is different, and it depends on the context such as status. Therefore, the form of language and the choice of words they use must be different from one condition to another, because each context in which the conversation takes place will be different. This condition can be influenced by whom they are talking to, in what topics they speak, and in what place the conversation takes place. It is not possible that people will use the same language as used in the house when they are at their workplace. It is also not possible that people will use the same language when they talk to their superiors and their closest family members.

People as language speakers should be able to choose appropriate choice of words and language, in which the intention and the real meaning can be successfully delivered appropriately. People should also pay attention to the social situations existing in the conversations they hold. As Nugroho (2020) said that certain ways of communication in certain contexts must be reconsidered to avoid confrontation during sensitive discussions. Sometimes, conversations can lead to inappropriate topics in which people can feel uncomfortable. Topics, in which, the questions are also included, may become sensitive and make other people or hearers feel uncomfortable. According to Tourangeau and Yan (2007), a question is sensitive when it asks for a socially undesirable answer, when it asks, in effect, that the respondent admits he or she has violated a social norm. This kind of question, or topic held, can make people in this conversation feel awkward and uncomfortable. According to Lee & Renzetti (1990), any topic can be considered "sensitive".

There are several potential problems that may arise in many moments when one asks or answers a sensitive question caused by sensitive topics brought in the conversations. Many of these problems and phenomena usually occur when the participants do not know each other very well. However, these issues can also arise when socially sensitive topics are brought up between close friends or other family members. In communication, certain acts, utterances, statements, and questions can threaten the face of the hearer, in this case, other people, when those acts are delivered to the face of the addressee or the addresser. In other words, these kinds of acts can be considered as face-threatening acts. Some of the most common problems are related to face and face-threatening acts (FTAs). To avoid these threatening acts, people, as the speakers can use positive politeness or negative politeness to save or satisfy the hearers' faces. These strategies reduce the FTA based on the parameters of power, distance and rating of imposition which can be seen from the social situations and contexts existing at the moment.

Zhou & Kim (2021) compared the use of politeness strategies in Korean and Chinese cultures, and they found that both cultures heavily rely on negative politeness to avoid imposition when discussing sensitive topics. Related to Chinese speakers' politeness strategy, Garchia & Zhu (2022) found that Chinese people often use negative politeness to maintain social harmony, while English speakers use positive politeness to foster solidarity. On the other hand, Young (2010) found that the way in which socially sensitive questions are asked and answered largely reliably depends on the closeness of the relationship between participants. Her study finds that the turn determines whether the topic would be considered not polite and whether there is a substantial risk of an FTA occurring when questions are asked. Yet, due to the limited data that has been analyzed, Young would not be able to conclude that socially sensitive topics are never introduced in the presence of acquaintances or others with different degrees of familial relationships. Mori & Tanaka (2022) examined politeness strategies in Japanese communication and found the use of off-record and indirect strategies to navigate hierarchical social structures.

Since people speak differently in the different social context, different cultural and linguistic groups show politeness differently. Holmes (2001:8-10) states that certain social factors can influence the language choices, which are the setting or social context of the topic, and the function of language. In addition, the social distance, the status, and the formality scales, is useful in analyzing linguistic Politeness (Holmes, 1995:11). According to Brown and Levinson (1987:74-77).

The objective of this study is to examine how sensitive questions are answered by Indonesians young adults. This research was conducted through a review of some of the research related to the politeness strategies theories by Brown and Levinson (1987), and the findings and analysis of interviews of several participants. The analysis focused on the broad topics of face, and politeness in order to illustrate how sensitive questions are answered by Indonesian young adults aged 19-25. Due to the fact that people on many occasions and phenomena related to language that people are not able to use the language in appropriate way in many forms of communication, in this case, asking questions that might lead to sensitive topics.

Theoretical Framework

Politeness Strategy, proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987:61), is merely about a face. They stated that face is the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself. Brown and Levinson (1987:68) divided human politeness behavior in five strategies; they are Bald On-Record, Negative Politeness, Positive Politeness, Off-Record, and Not Do the FTA.

Bald On-Record is a strategy that means speaking directly without any attempt to minimize the impact of what is being said. It is typically used when the speaker has a close relationship with the listener or when clarity and efficiency are necessary, such as in urgent situations. For example, "Give me the salt" is a bald-on-record request.

Positive Politeness is an approach that is used to establish or improve positive relationships between the speaker and listener. It often involves showing interest in the listener, giving compliments, or emphasizing the point of conversation. For example, "You're so good at this, can you help me with my project?" This strategy helps soften the request by making the listener feel appreciated.

Negative Politeness is a strategy that focuses on avoiding imposition and respecting the listener's personal space or autonomy. It is used when the speaker wants to be polite while knowing that their request may cause some inconvenience to the listener. For example, "I'm sorry to bother you, but could you please help me?"

Off-Record is when the speaker gives a hint or suggests something indirectly for the listener to interpret the meaning. This strategy is often used to avoid direct confrontation. For example, instead of asking directly for a favor or request, the speaker might say, "I wonder if anyone could help me move these boxes."

Not Doing the FTA is a strategy that involves the speaker to choose not to say anything at all to avoid potentially threatening or uncomfortable situations. It is used when even the most indirect communication could harm the relationship or cause discomfort.

After all, these strategies represent different ways people manage face-threatening situations in communication and managing relationships, depending on the level of directness or politeness they wish to convey. The choice of strategy often depends on the relationship between the speaker and listener, the social context, and the potential consequences of the conversation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are studies that took place in Indonesia that give insights about the use of politeness strategies in Indonesia when dealing with sensitive questions. Wijayanto, Laila, & Susiati (2020) reviewed how politeness was adapted in intercultural contexts, especially in Indonesia, where individuals tend to use more negative politeness strategies when dealing with sensitive questions to minimize the threat to the listener's face. It highlights that maintaining social harmony is important, and politeness becomes a crucial strategy in interactions involving sensitive topics. Prasetyo & Santoso (2021) discussed how Indonesians employ positive politeness when asked sensitive questions, often utilizing humor or mitigating strategies to avoid conflict. The study emphasizes cultural sensitivity and the need for face-saving strategies to prevent discomfort. Rahardjo & Dwi (2021) discussed how Javanese and Sundanese speakers use negative politeness when navigating socially sensitive topics, such as income or family matters. The study reveals a strong

preference for indirectness and mitigation in Indonesian cultures to maintain harmonious relationships. These studies collectively show negative politeness helps minimize conflict and maintain a listener's face and positive strategies such as humor play a complementary role in decreasing potential tension.

Across various regions and social contexts in Indonesia, maintaining harmony and preventing discomfort emphasizes the cultural significance of politeness in sensitive conversations. This implementation of politeness strategies reflecting the Indonesian value of preserving respectful and harmonious relationships is also shown in digital communication among Indonesians, particularly when discussing sensitive issues in online forums (Susanti & Aditya, 2022). They found both positive and negative politeness strategies are used to manage face-threatening acts, but anonymity often encourages more direct responses. In more passive online interactions, Ardiansyah (2021) found that positive politeness strategies, such as liking or sharing, serve as digital equivalents of face-saving acts.

In professional context, Hasan & Nurhidayat (2023) found that negative politeness strategies are used by Indonesian healthcare workers when discussing sensitive health issues with patients, such as terminal diagnoses. Susanti (2022) said that Indonesian politicians used politeness strategies during sensitive interviews, especially when faced with controversial topics and they used negative politeness strategies, such as evasion and ambiguity. Indonesian lawyers use politeness strategies to avoid face-threatening acts during sensitive court discussions, particularly in cross-examination (Hidayat & Sari, 2020).

Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies were also applied in Indonesian workplace settings, particularly when discussing sensitive topics such as salary or performance reviews (Anwar, 2022). The study found that Indonesian employees often employ indirectness and negative politeness to avoid face-threatening acts (FTA) which is to keep the relationship between colleagues well. Kartika (2023) said that teachers in Indonesia used positive politeness strategies when discussing sensitive topics with students, such as academic performance or disciplinary actions. Overall, maintaining harmony and avoiding discomfort are key elements of politeness in sensitive conversations across various Indonesian regions. Indonesia, emphasize positive politeness strategies to maintain group harmony when answering sensitive questions (Chen, 2021; Rahmawati, 2022).

Based on these findings and studies held by several researchers mentioned, there is a fact that Brown and Levinson's formula is applicable to many kinds of culture in the world, to reveal the politeness strategies in order to contribute in the development of linguistics as Wijaya (2023) claimed that people have adapted traditional politeness strategies to modern context in many kinds of social expect involving people. The politeness theory by Brown and Levinson is broadly accepted and utilized by most researchers studying politeness as the basis for research by the researchers in the field of not only sociolinguistics but of psychology, business, and so on. They define "face" as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself", and claim that "people cooperate (and assume each other's cooperation) in maintaining face in interaction" (1987). Two different types of politeness are used in interaction; "negative politeness" and "positive politeness". Brown and Levinson defined negative politeness as "a redressive action addressed to the addressee's negative face: his want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded (1987:129), and state that negative politeness is "the most elaborate and the most conventionalized set of

linguistic strategies” (1987:130). Typical examples of negative politeness strategies are conventionally indirect ways to request or to use honorifics. Positive politeness is defined as “redress directed to the addressee’s positive face, his perennial desire that his wants (or the actions/acquisitions/values resulting from them) should be thought of as desirable” (1987:101). Positive politeness strategies include somewhat exaggerated elements or ‘element of insincerity’, and that separates a positive politeness strategy from ordinary daily conversation. This section explains the theories you adopt to analyze the data, and interpret the findings.

METHODE

In doing this research, interviews were an appropriate method for gathering in-depth and nuanced data about how individuals perceive and use different forms of politeness in their interactions. The use of interviews allows for a flexible and responsive approach to data collection, where the researcher can gain participants’ thoughts and experiences in more detail. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), interviews are a powerful tool in qualitative research as they provide direct access to participants’ perspectives and enable the researcher to explore subjective interpretations of social phenomena. In the context of politeness strategies, interviews are especially useful because they allow participants to reflect on their communication behaviors where questionnaires or observations might not capture.

When setting up the interviews for this study, several steps were followed to ensure the process was transparent and comfortable for the participants. The first stage involved contacting the participants to arrange the interview and provide them with information about the research. This is crucial because participants need to feel informed about the purpose of the interview and how their data will be used. As Patton (2015) highlights that providing clear explanations to participants is a key ethical consideration in qualitative research to build trust and openness in the data collection process. Before the interview began, participants were encouraged to ask any questions they had about the research to make sure that they fully understood about the purpose of the study and their role in it.

The actual interview process included asking structured questions that based in the theoretical framework of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness strategies. These questions were designed to explore how participants manage their face-threatening acts in communication and how they apply politeness strategies in different social contexts. As Seidman (2019) said, interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format that allows flexibility while maintaining a clear focus on the research objectives. This method helped the interviewer to get interesting responses and explore topics in greater depth of the information where it is necessary for the additional important information that may contribute in this research. The interview mapping was made to help the researcher focus on the gain of interview data. The interview mapping can be seen in Table I.

Tabel. 1 Interview Mapping

No.	Concepts	Variables
1.	Participant's background knowledge and experience	Participant's consideration about sensitive questions
		Participant's experience about sensitive questions
2.	Participant's way to answer sensitive questions	Participant's experience in answering sensitive questions
		Participant's frequency in answering sensitive questions
3.	Participant's consideration of choosing whose sensitive questions to respond	Participant's experience in answering/asking sensitive questions with certain people

After the interview was done, the responses were transcribed and analyzed in accordance with the principles of thematic analysis. This approach, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), involves identifying key themes and patterns of the data that relate to the research questions. In this case, the analysis focused on how participants used different politeness strategies, such as Bald on Record, Positive Politeness, and Negative Politeness, in response to sensitive or face-threatening questions. By linking participants' responses to Brown and Levinson's framework, the study was able to provide insights into how social factors such as hierarchy, relationship, and context influence language choices.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following section describes the types of politeness strategy used by the participants regarding in how they answer the sensitive questions. The data were taken from the results of the interviews of 20 Indonesian participants. The findings discuss about what kind of questions considered sensitive by the participants, how the participants answered the sensitive questions asked to them, and whose questions the participants were willing to answer.

Topics Considered Sensitive

As Nugroho (2020) said that certain ways of communication in certain contexts must be reconsidered to avoid confrontation during sensitive discussions and a question is sensitive when it asks for a socially certain topic. When it is asked, in effect, that the respondent admit the speaker might have violated a social norm. Therefore, the participants considered the questions when the speakers about certain topics described at the Table 2.

Tabel. 2 Topics considered sensitive by the participants

No	Topic	Numbers	Percentage
1	Physical appearance	15	75%
2	Family	7	35%
3	Career	11	55%
4	Financial status	5	25%
5	Marital status/relationship	7	35%
6	Political Opinion	8	40%
7	Religion	6	30%

From the Table 2 above, most of the participants considered the questions sensitive when those are about the physical appearance of the participants. Questions about career of the participants are considered sensitive by more than a half of the total participants. Questions about family, financial status, marital status or relationship, political opinion, and the religion are the topics that are also considered sensitive.

The participants' ways to answer sensitive questions

From the data taken from the result of the interview of 20 participants, the participants have several ways to answer the questions considered sensitive. The data include the example of sentence or statement that the participant would utter when they are asked with sensitive questions.

a. Bald on Record Politeness Strategy

This research only finds the data of strategy "speaker's want to satisfy hearer's face is small" and strategy "speaker cares about hearer" which is included in Bald On-Record strategy that means speaking directly without any attempt to minimize the impact of what is being said. It is typically used when the speaker has a close relationship with the listener or when clarity and efficiency are necessary, such as in urgent situations.

1) Satisfying the hearer's face is small

Brown and Levinson (1987: 97) state this strategy is used because the speaker is more powerful or doing non-cooperation, e.g. by directly telling the speaker to change the topic: "We talk about our assignment now.", "Please, ask another question."

2) Speakers care to hearers

Brown and Levinson (1987: 98) state that in this strategy, a speaker conveys that he/she cares about hearer, for example: by convincing that they care and telling politely to not ask the question: "I appreciate our privacy, so let's not talk about this", "We keep our friendship together, we might not want to talk about that again."

From 20 interviewees, there are 8 participants that used strategy "Satisfying the hearer's face is small" and there are also 8 participants that used strategy "speakers care to hearers"

b. Negative Politeness Strategy

The data show that participants used (be conventionally indirect: assuming the hearer is unlikely to be able to do any acts) and strategy (give deference) which are included Negative Politeness that is a strategy that focuses on avoiding imposition and respecting the listener's personal space or autonomy. It is used when the speaker wants to be polite while knowing that their request may cause some inconvenience to the listener.

1) Be Conventionally Indirect

Brown and Levinson (1987: 132) state this strategy tended to be conventionally indirect means being pessimistic in which the speaker assumes the hearer not doing any act or unlikely to be willing to do any acts, for example: Asking politely to ask another question: "Can we talk about our plan tomorrow?", "Well, you don't wanna talk about your girlfriend?"

2) Giving Deference

Brown and Levinson (1987: 178-187) states this strategy explains about giving deference when speaker asked the hearer to do the act, for example: Telling directly to

not ask the sensitive question again: "I want you to stop." "Don't ask me that again, ever."

From 20 interviewees, there are 6 participants that used strategy "be conventionally indirect" and there are 7 participants that used strategy "Giving deference"

c. Positive Politeness

Based on the data, the participants used strategy "assert speaker's knowledge of and concern for hearer's want and include both speaker and hearer in the activity" which is included Positive Politeness that is an approach used to establish or improve positive relationships between the speaker and listener. It often involves showing interest in the listener, giving compliments, or emphasizing the point of conversation. This strategy helps soften the request by making the listener feel appreciated.

1) Asserting speaker's knowledge of and concern for hearer's wants

Brown and Levinson (1987: 125) states this strategy explores about asserting speaker's knowledge of and concerning for hearer's wants, for example: By change the subject the participants want to talk about: "I know that yours are terrible, I want to talk about other thing except this", Or asking the one who ask the sensitive question: "if you want to me to answer, I want you to answer your own question."

2) Including both speaker and hearer in the activity

Brown and Levinson (1987: 127-128) state that strategy 6 include both speaker and hearer in the activity, for example: Telling them to answer the sensitive questions too: "You ask me that, I want you to answer that first.", "I answer, and then you too. Deal?"

From 20 interviewees, there are 5 participants that used strategy "Asserting speaker's knowledge of and concern for hearer's wants" and there are 6 participants that used strategy "Including both speaker and hearer in the activity."

Participants' consideration to answer whose sensitive questions

In line with Holmes' (2001) view that language choices are influenced by social factors, such as the setting or social context, this study find that participants adapted their responses based on their relationships with the speakers asking the questions. The findings show that participants were more willing to answer sensitive questions when they felt comfortable with the person asking, especially in more intimate relationships. This is in line with Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness, which tells that individuals use different politeness strategies based on the social distance and power dynamics between interlocutors. When dealing with close friends, participants were more likely to use Positive Politeness strategies, as they felt trust and intimacy with those friends that would avoid the threat to face. From the data of 20 interviews, the participants tend to answer the sensitive questions as described in the Table 3.

Tabel. 3 Participants' consideration to answer whose sensitive questions

No.	Answer	Number
1.	Close friends	17
2.	Friends	2
3.	Family members	10
4.	People with higher title/position	8

As shown in Table 3 the findings shows that the theory that social relationships greatly influence the level of politeness used, with close family often showing more open and informal communication styles. For participants, the family bond seemed to ignore the discomfort in answering potentially sensitive questions which aligns with Brown and Levinson's Positive Politeness theory aimed at reducing social distance.

For sensitive questions asked by people in positions of power, participants often used Negative Politeness strategies as Rahardjo and Dwi's (2021) study showed that in Javanese and Sundanese cultures, individuals prefer indirectness and deference when speaking with those in higher social positions. This study shows similar findings where participants showed greater deference to people with higher position by either being indirect or giving careful and respectful answers. This result shows how Negative Politeness strategies, as defined by Brown and Levinson (1987), are employed to avoid confrontation and maintain respect when people with higher power or status are in conversations.

Interestingly, only a small number of participants felt comfortable answering sensitive questions from acquaintances or distant friends. In these cases, they said that as long as the question was asked politely, they did not mind responding. This highlights the importance of Bald On-Record politeness strategies, which focus on clear and direct communication without making face threats (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The willingness of these participants to answer sensitive questions shows that the social distance and the context of the interaction can sometimes ignore the use of politeness strategies.

CONCLUSION

In communication, people must carefully choose their words and language to ensure that their intended meaning is conveyed clearly and appropriately. This study has shown that people often adjust and change their choice of language use based on the social situation and the sensitivity of the topic being discussed, especially when addressing face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Politeness strategies, as discussed by Brown and Levinson, provide a theoretical framework that explains how individuals modify their speech to maintain social harmony and avoid discomfort. As highlighted by Wijayanto, Laila, and Susiati (2020), Indonesians tend to use politeness strategies, particularly Negative Politeness, when dealing with sensitive questions to minimize the threat to the listener's face. This shows that the choice of language is strongly influenced by cultural norms and social expectations.

In this research, participants were found to use several politeness strategies, including Bald on Record, Positive Politeness, and Negative Politeness, when answering sensitive questions. Bald on Record involves being direct without concern for mitigating face threats, which can be used in contexts where efficiency and clarity are prioritized (Brown &

Levinson, 1987). However, Positive Politeness strategies, such as showing friendliness or solidarity, are often employed to reduce social distance and build rapport, as seen in Prasetyo and Santoso's (2021) study. They found that humor and informal language were frequently used by Indonesians to defuse the discomfort associated with sensitive questions, emphasizing the importance of cultural sensitivity in communication.

Negative Politeness, on the other hand, is used to acknowledge the imposition of a question and to minimize discomfort by being indirect and respectful. This strategy was particularly evident in the responses of Javanese and Sundanese speakers, as documented by Rahardjo and Dwi (2021), who found that indirectness and deference were common when discussing personal or sensitive topics. These findings align with Brown and Levinson's (1987) assertion that individuals tend to use more polite, indirect language when the risk of face-threatening acts is high. Social factors, such as the speaker's relationship with the listener and the context of the conversation, play a crucial role in determining which politeness strategy is used.

In conclusion, the findings of this study support the theories brought by Brown and Levinson (1987) regarding politeness strategies. The way individuals respond to sensitive questions is not only shaped by their personal preferences but also by cultural norms, social interaction, and the level of sensitivity of the topic. As various studies, including Wijayanto, Laila, and Susiati (2020), and Prasetyo and Santoso (2021), have shown, these strategies are important for maintaining social harmony in diverse cultural contexts. This study shows the importance of understanding the role of politeness strategies in communication and how they are used depending on the social and cultural factors that occur.

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