

## READING OF GENDER THROUGH WORDS: POLITENESS STRATEGIES AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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### **Abstract:**

*Linguistic politeness is a strategic and cultural tool crucial for effective communication and successful management of social relationships. It shows awareness of speaker's and others' self-image to ensure smooth communication and reduce conflict. This qualitative study employs Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory as the theoretical framework. A Discourse Completion Task (DCT) consisting of ten different scenarios associated with academics, industry, institutions and the public sphere is employed through Google Forms. The sample of this study consists ten participants (five female and five male). All the participants in the study are university students at under-graduation level. The politeness strategies are classified according to the theoretical framework; however, some of the strategies as aggression, complaint, avoidance, empathy, warning and negotiation are unique in the data. The analysis of the data show that both genders adapt their linguistic behaviour to social status, power and the intensity of the situation. However, females demonstrate more empathic and relational behaviour; whereas men are mostly concerned with problem solving approach in certain scenarios. It is up to people how they react to certain situations in relation to their peers. Gender, although, is one among numerous factors that influence individuals' linguistic behaviour; yet it is not the only factor that affects their behaviour. Status, power, intensity of the situation also have critical role. This research contributed to sociolinguistics, gender studies, anthropology in Pakistani setting.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Politeness Strategies, Sociolinguistics, Brown and Levinson

### **1. Introduction:**

The link between language and the social realm is very strong. The speakers employ language not only for exchanging information, but also for communicating their feelings, establishing relationships, negotiating their identities, and so forth. In addition, language is channelized in line with several social variables, such as age, gender, social class, power, and context. The core of sociolinguistics research revolves around the interrelation between language and society where gender has become one of the most researched sociolinguistic variables. From the mid-1970s, academics have started researching the differences in language usage by males and females; how do these differences reveal gender roles, and other related issues. Lakoff (1975) is among the first linguists to make a groundbreaking contribution towards this issue by asserting that the language employed by women has some unique features, such as hedges, tag questions, and politeness. Although, there are certain challenges to this view offered by subsequent scholars, it is clear that Lakoff's work has greatly facilitated the establishment of association between language and gender as a distinct field of sociolinguistics.

Eventually, scholars realize that it would be misleading to assume that gender influences people's way of speaking. Rather than focusing on this question, academics became interested in how gender is produced and performed in social interaction. This shift of focus is referred to as the discourse turn in language and gender research. Linguist Paul Kerswill (2013) claims that languages are products of the social environments. Similarly, gender is also no longer considered something inherent to an individual. Rather, gender is performed and created in social practice and communication. Thus, a transition to performance is termed as the 'performance turn' in language and gender studies. One aspect of language that has received

particular attention in gender research is politeness. In everyday communication, speakers constantly make choices about how directly or indirectly they should express themselves. These choices help them maintain social relationships, avoid conflict, and show consideration for others. Brown and Levinson (1987) describe politeness as a set of strategies used to protect an individual's "face," or public self-image during interaction. According to their model, speakers select different linguistic strategies depending on the demands of a particular situation and the potential threat that an utterance may pose to their or others' face. It should be pointed out that the issue of gender cannot be perceived as the sole determining factor of the emergence of particular communication styles. The existing relations between people also have an impact on the choice of language strategy. It goes without saying that the selection of the language depends heavily on the various factors including power, social status, social distance, and the actual situation.

While the issues of language, gender, and politeness have already been widely explored within the context of previous studies, what still remains is the point of view of non-Western researchers. More importantly, despite the vast body of existing literature devoted to the issues, not much is known about the application of linguistic politeness from the perspective of Pakistani culture and its peculiar socio-pragmatic approach concerning gender, social hierarchy, and intensity of situation. Moreover, few studies focus specifically on the question of politeness depending on situational contexts and power relations. Hence, it becomes necessary to conduct this study with a particular emphasis on gender differences in politeness strategies. In particular, using DCT test, it is aimed at evaluating the ways in which Pakistani students use politeness strategies in different social situations.

### **1.2 Research Questions:**

1. How do politeness strategies vary between male and female university students?
2. How does social status affect politeness strategies of male and female students?
3. How does situational severity affect the politeness strategies of male and female students?
4. What does the variation in politeness strategies reflect about Pakistani society?

### **2. Literature Review:**

The intersection of language and gender exists for decades driving the sociolinguists to contemplate how linguistic performance relates to social identity. They indulged in empirical endeavors to identify which factors may influence gender-based communication and behavior of people. Over time, opinions concerning gender as part of the communicative practice changed from stable characteristic to variable social construct dependent on the situation.

It should be noted that the problem of the role of language in creating a gender-related image has been previously addressed by Lakoff (1975) in her book "Language and Woman's Place". Among specific features of the women's language, Lakoff highlighted such speech elements as hedges, tag questions, intensifiers, and politeness strategies. According to the results obtained, women tend to use indirect and polite language because of their socially subordinate status. Despite being criticized by other scholars in regard to some issues, Lakoff's work greatly contributed to the evolution of the science of sociolinguistics because it raised interest in this sphere and inspired numerous other studies on the subject.

The discovery which became really remarkable in the sphere of gender studies is 'gender performativity' by Judith Butler (1990), proposing that gender should not be regarded as an innate phenomenon, but as something performed using language. This theory is interesting from the point of view of current research because of the importance of language in performing gender. This idea revolutionized the field because it provided new grounds for linguistic investigation. Unlike previous works aimed at discovering differences between genders, Butler suggested investigating the ways of their creation. Holmes (1995) made great

contribution to studying gender and language. According to Holmes, women use language to create social relationships, while men behave rather straightforwardly. Language strategies cannot depend only on biological needs of interlocutors, but on their purposes as well.

Moreover, the contribution to understanding of the issue of politeness strategies in the process of communication belongs to Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987). The authors developed the theory of politeness based on the concept of Goffman. The main idea of their approach is that all communicators apply different techniques of politeness in order to protect their image as well as that of others involved in the discussion. Four basic politeness strategies were devised: Bald-on-Record, Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness, and Off-Record Approaches. The main criteria used for choosing the strategy include such factors as power, social distance, and imposition.

As method of analyzing politeness phenomena is concerned, Blum-Kulka's (1989) study is recommendable. Having conducted research on speech act of requests, Blum-Kulka discovered that it is important good social relations, social power, and the particular situation are decisive. The author refuted the idea of universalism in explaining the phenomenon of politeness and pointed out that the context played a significant role in analyzing communicative actions. This approach is valuable for this research to analyze the status of politeness in various social contexts of Pakistan.

Riaz and Jabeen (2019), in their more recent work, have assessed differences in terms of gender when it comes to the use of politeness strategies by university students. Their study indicates that female respondents use more strategies related to interpersonal cooperation and harmony than male respondents do. While using some strategies for showing politeness, male respondents are noted for using less polite and indirect language. This research demonstrates the persisting role of gender in linguistic communication and shows that other contexts can play an essential role in this process as well.

From a review of previous literature on gender and politeness, it becomes evident that there is a significant change in terms of perspectives towards gender in linguistic behavior and politeness as a phenomenon. Consequently, gender is not seen as a fixed category influencing one's ability to speak. Moreover, politeness strategies are no more discussed as an immutable set of rules. Nevertheless, empirical evidence showing how such categories interacted in Pakistani academic settings are not provided yet. This research gap is covered in the current research study by focusing on the politeness strategies of Pakistani male and female students at under-graduation level.

### **3. Research Methodology:**

#### **3.1 Research Design:**

The current study implements a qualitative research design to discover gender variations in the use of politeness strategies among university students. Qualitative research is particularly useful for examining social phenomena within their real-life contexts (Creswell, 2014). The study emphasises on understanding how male and female participants reply to different communicative situations and how their linguistic choices are based on factors such as social status, power relations, and situational severity. A qualitative approach is relevant here because it allows for an in-depth analysis of participants' responses and the meanings behind their language use. Instead of measuring their behaviour statistically, this research focuses on analysing communication patterns and investigating the ways politeness is constructed during social interaction. That's why Dörnyei (2007) favours qualitative research due to its value in studying language use and communicative behaviour in context.

#### **3.2 Sample and Sampling Technique**

This research is conducted among 10 undergraduate students (5 males and 5 females), studying in the 6th semester of the English Department, University of Narowal. Convenience sampling

technique is employed to recruit the participants because of their availability. In line with the language competence level of Pakistani university students, the participants are bilingual, using English language academically in addition to their regional/national languages. Though the size of the sample is small, it is perfectly adequate for the purpose of an exploratory qualitative study.

### 3.3 Research Tool

The data collection technique used for this study involves the use of an online Discourse Completion Test (DCT). This includes ten hypothetical scenarios of real-life communication events occurring in educational, working, institutional, and public contexts. Respondents are expected to write down what they would say in the same situations. In essence, the use of the written DCT is important as it enables the researchers to receive comparable pragmatic answers to questions while controlling and maintaining uniformity in the scenarios faced by all respondents.

### 3.4 Analytical Framework:

In this study, Politeness Theory by Brown and Levinson (1987) is adopted to understand how individuals manipulate the FTA's during their discourse.

**Table 1: Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Strategies**

Politeness Strategy	Description
Bald on Record	Direct, unmitigated, and unsoftened expressions that prioritize communicative efficiency over face needs
Positive Politeness	Expressions of warmth and camaraderie aimed at showing solidarity and reducing perceived distances
Negative Politeness	More distant and formal expressions in recognition of the hearer's rank or status and minimizing intrusion.
Off Record	Expressions of ambiguity or indirection, where meaning is not explicitly stated.

In the process of analysis, it becomes evident that certain answers could not be placed strictly within the aforementioned categories. That's why another round of coding is done to detect recurrent structural themes within the data.

**Table 2: Emerging Response Patterns and Typologies**

Response Pattern	Function and Definition	Example from Collected Data
Aggressive Responses	Expressing anger, immediate punishment, or active confrontation.	<i>"Shut up", "I fired him"</i>
Complaint/Reporting	Seeking institutional intervention from higher authorities.	<i>"Report to higher authorities"</i>
Avoidance/Silence	Opting for strategic silence or bypassing direct confrontation.	<i>"Ignore it", "Do nothing"</i>

Response Pattern	Function and Definition	Example from Collected Data
Empathetic Responses	Validating the other party's circumstances before reacting.	<i>"Listen to him first"</i>
Warning/Authority	Issuing explicit instructions, commands, or disciplinary notices.	<i>"Don't repeat this again"</i>
Negotiation	Initiating cooperative dialogue to balance collective outcomes.	<i>"Let's sort it out"</i>

### 3.4.1 Contextual Variables:

In addition to that, every situation is evaluated on the basis of two socio-pragmatic features, namely social status and severity of the context.

#### (a) Social Status Coding:

- +S: Interaction with someone of higher status
- -S: Interaction with someone of lower status
- =S: Interaction between equals

#### (b) Severity Coding:

- +SV: High severity situations
- ±SV: Medium severity situations
- -SV: Low severity situations

This is achieved through an equitable distribution of scenarios among three key structural changes: change in status from low to high interactions, change in status from high to low interactions, and equivalent status interactions.

### 4. Data Analysis:

The collected responses are analyzed qualitatively by close reading of the texts regarding how direct or indirect they are, how much mitigation there is, or whether any other face-saving techniques has been employed. The language use is examined based on gender, social stratification, and severity of situation.

From the study, it is clearly evident that politeness is not a static characteristic in language but is a dynamic process influenced by the interrelationship between gender, status, power, and the degree of seriousness of the situation. There are clear differences in responses from males and females, especially when faced with difficult situations.

#### 4.1 Politeness Strategies Across Gender:

The female sample tend to show concern for harmonious relations and conflict resolution. This manifested itself through the use of relational strategies, which make context explanation and face-saving strategies necessary to cope with any arising tension. Indeed, when faced with a situation in which one's academic honesty is questioned by a teacher, the typical response from a female respondent involves some deference and strong defense of oneself at the same time: "Sir, I politely oppose your assertion" or "I would like you to check my work fairly." These examples definitely represent Negative Politeness, as they allow for self-defense while affirming the institutionally superior status of the teacher (+S).

Conversely, male respondents approach those situations as purely functionally and focus on objective arguments. Instead of trying to keep good interpersonal relations intact with words, they are more interested in solving the problem at hand using whatever information and procedures are available: "I would request evidence from him" and "I would ask him to check

the surveillance video.” This shows that both groups respect hierarchy in educational institutions, but the ways in which they handle authority differ significantly.

#### **4.2 Influence of Status/ Power Relations:**

Status played a decisive role in influencing the linguistic directness among the subjects regardless of gender differences. Both males and females tend to use honorific terms and mitigation markers while communicating with high-status persons, which may be professors, senior administrative officials, or heads of institutions, for example. "Excuse me," "Please," "Ma'am" and "Sir" are frequent softeners used by the subjects as Negative Politeness markers in order to reduce imposition and signal their deference.

A significant linguistic difference is noticed when subjects communicate in a position of comparative power. While dealing with the roles of supervisor, manager, or employer, both sexes tend to employ unmitigated directives. The subjects frequently resort to the Bald-on-Record strategy in order to communicate their demands in such an environment: "Don't repeat this again," "You should be punctual," and "It cannot happen again." This shift between males and females is a strong confirmation of Brown and Levinson's hypothesis (1987) that increased power distance decreases the frequency of face-saving mitigators.

#### **4.3 Responses to High-Severity Situations:**

It is evident that with the increase in the severity of the situation (+SV), the traditional gender distinctions in terms of language use are erased; and the two genders move towards the usage of the direct style. The situations which include deep violations in the structure, including company data breach, academic plagiarism, or stealing of the intellectual property led to very assertive and unmitigated statements.

Specifically, when referring to the situation of breach of the confidentiality of a workplace, the respondents use the language which is directly aggressive and based on authority. Expressions like "I fired him", "I will terminate him," or "I will report him" clearly show the tendency of using power to deal with the problem. Although this trend is particularly strong among men respondents, who tend to impose institutional penalties immediately, women respondents also abandon their habitual soft phrasing. Specifically, in the case of stolen credit, the female respondents cease to maintain relations privately and demand public correction of the situation.

#### **4.4 Empathy, Cooperation, and Relationship Management:**

When faced with collaborative tasks or peer conflict (=S), women are always noticeable for employing empathy and cooperation in their framing. Whenever one has to evaluate how peers contribute to team work, the woman respondents avoid confronting their peers and instead try to understand what is causing them not to do well. Examples include such questions like, "Is there any problem you have?" or "Let us work it out together." This is clearly associated with the Positive Politeness technique because its essence is cooperation within a collective society that shares a common goal and in-group membership. The men participants, however, view team work from an individualistic perspective where collaboration is seen as contractual and based on deadlines.

#### **4.5 Avoidance and Off-Record Strategies:**

Strategic silence and avoidance prove to be significant approaches for dealing with interpersonal conflict especially within the context of low-severity public interactions (-SV). For instance, "ignore it," "do nothing," and "I would be silent" are all forms of Off-record interaction. In this case, the participant deliberately refuses to engage in an open verbal discussion as he or she is afraid of damaging his or her face. Although some respondents justify such a response on the basis of their personality traits, others suggest that it is due to the fact that confrontation in a public place for a low-level violation is not efficient.

#### 4.6 Emerging Response Patterns:

Even though the classical taxonomy of Brown and Levinson accounts for most of the data, the practical complexity of the data necessitates further analysis that is to form another level of categorization. There are identified six distinct types of responses that are action-oriented in nature.

**Table 3: Functional Typology of Emerging Pragmatic Patterns**

Response Pattern	Function
Aggressive Responses	Expressing anger, immediate punishment, or direct confrontation.
Complaint/Reporting	Escalating the issue to higher institutional authorities for external resolution.
Avoidance/Silence	Opting for strategic withdrawal to completely bypass interpersonal conflict.
Empathetic Responses	Investigating and validating the other party's circumstances before reacting.
Warning/Authority	Deploying institutional power through explicit commands and disciplinary notices.
Negotiation/Problem Solving	Initiating cooperative, balanced dialogue to achieve a shared outcome.

Such extended patterns indicate that participants do not employ politeness strategies separately. Rather, they are able to integrate the strategies into broader communication objectives, reconciling face considerations with practical necessities related to managing conflicts and enforcing authority.

#### 5. Discussion

Overall, the empirical evidence suggests a rather obvious trend in the communication style based on one's gender: females prefer using empathic, relation-building, and face-saving tactics, whereas males utilize more direct methods that are aimed at solving the problem and follow a certain set of rules. At the same time, these behaviors cannot be considered as some kind of unbreakable barriers – both sexes are quite flexible in terms of language usage depending on the distance in power relations, hierarchy in the institution, and the severity of the situation. In fact, these patterns can be described using the classical theory proposed by Holmes (1995), who claimed that women's communication is mainly focused on creating solidarity, while men tend to communicate assertively. Furthermore, these findings can serve as a local verification of the formulas developed by Brown and Levinson (1987) concerning the influence of power and imposition on face-threatening behavior. Finally, all the results presented above fully fit into post-structuralist sociolinguistic ideas. In other words, gender roles cannot be considered as the main determinants of polite behavior since the latter is determined by many contextual factors.

**Table 4: Major Gender-Based Tendencies observed in the Responses**

Female Participants	Male Participants
High frequency of empathetic and supportive frames.	High frequency of responses that were more solution-oriented and objective in nature.
Preference for prioritizing harmony and relationships	More emphasis on compliance with rules, structure, and processes.
Consistent use of face-saving and mitigating tactics.	Use of harsher forms of linguistic communication.
Mutual communication that is collaborative and cooperative in teams.	Language grounded in authority structures at work.
High tendency to avoid conflict and use silence in insignificant conflicts.	Readiness to confront others for small infractions.

**Gendered Pragmatic Tendencies in Males and Females**

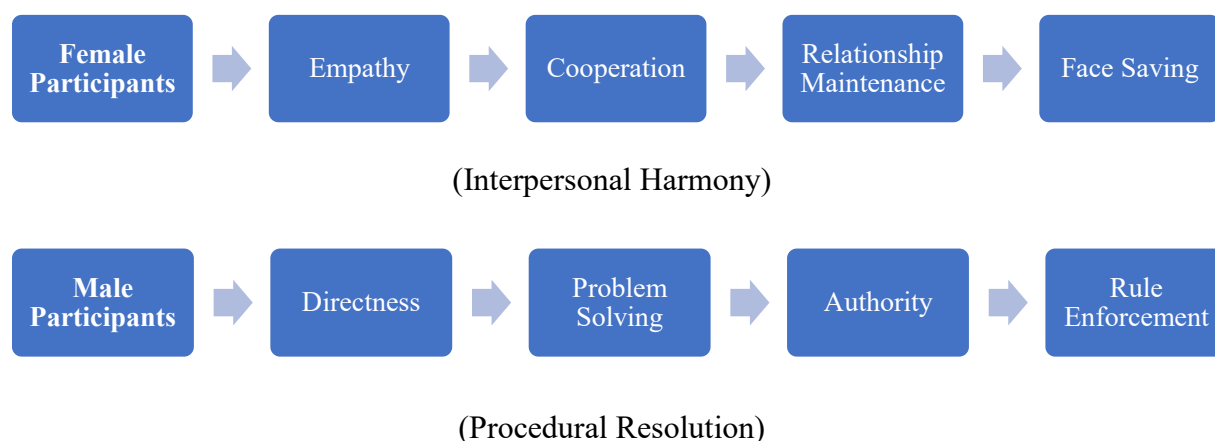


Figure 1: Primary Alignment in Male and Female Discourse

**6. Conclusion**

The current research examines gender differences in the implementation of politeness strategies in Pakistani university students and how these linguistic behaviors relate to the power structure, and intensity of the particular situation. Using the principles of Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory, the investigation explores how Pakistani men and women use linguistic techniques to deal with interpersonal face threats, ensure social alignment, and handle situations defined by power differentials within an educational institution. As shown by the results, politeness is highly variable and context-dependent. On average, Pakistani women exhibit more tendency towards relationship, empathy, and face-preservation oriented strategies; while Pakistani men favor straightforward, authority-based, and procedural strategies. However, all these behaviors are largely determined by situational factors: low-status respondents elicit similar politeness strategies in all situations (indirect and defensive), but roles of authority or high-severity triggers make both groups prefer a shift to more direct and confrontational Bald-on-Record strategies. In addition, the identification of various

secondary reaction strategies (aggression, avoidance, etc.) further emphasizes the variability of linguistic resources available to the respondents as means of handling interpersonal tensions.

From this perspective, the current research contributes to sociolinguistics and non-Western sociolinguistic literature by empirically analyzing politeness strategies and related behaviors in the Pakistani university students. It appears that rather than fixed, unchangeable behaviors, politeness is a flexible resource used by communicators as a way of negotiating power relations and performing social identities in institutional contexts.

### 6.1 Delimitations

There are evident limitations in this investigation that should be addressed by future research.

1. First, the sample used in this study consists of ten respondents from one university department only, which limits its validity and restricts its generalizability.
2. Second, the use of written DCT may produce valid quantitative results; however, the lack of audio material prevents us from examining actual verbal communication.

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