# Face Saving Acts of Indonesian Public Figures in Responding to Criticism on Social Media

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**ABSTRACT**

Politeness in language is one of the most essential aspects of communication. In this study, language politeness centers on the Face Saving Acts. Specifically, this study examines the Face Saving Acts (henceforth FSA) strategies used by Indonesian public figures in responding to criticism on two social media platforms; namely, Instagram and Twitter. The FSA strategies were analyzed based on the frameworks proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). By employing a descriptive qualitative method, this study investigated comments in the form of criticism or threats on the social media comment sections of public figures. The findings reveal that there are three out of five FSA strategies used by the public figures on their social media platforms which are Positive Politeness Strategy with forty-seven percent, Negative Politeness Strategy with forty percent, and Bald on Record Strategy with only thirteen percent. The findings suggest that Positive Politeness Strategies were used dominantly by public figures to save face on social media, given their effectiveness compared to other strategies.

*Keywords: Face Saving Acts (FSA) strategies, language politeness, public figures, social media.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Lately, there has been great progress made in technology and communication in the digital age, especially within social media. People can access information via their smartphones, one of their devices. Politics, education, sports, and entertainment are just a few examples of the information that can be obtained. Not only people can access information easily, but barriers between common citizens and public figures have also been removed in this digital age. This situation enables them to interact and exchange comments via social media too.

However, this development does not always have a positive impact. For example, some public figures may be embroiled in a debate or subject to hate speech, verbal abuse, or other threats from netizens due to controversial statements or posts uploaded on their social media. Here, politeness in communicating can help reduce shifts in an interaction that cause anger and resentment on the listener's part (Lakoff, 1975; Asmah, 2000).

In politeness theory, the theory from Brown and Levinson (1978) is a theory that researchers widely use and frequently utilize in politeness studies. The politeness of language used by Brown and Levinson (1987) emphasizes the concept of the face since all members of society have a property, best known as 'face', a concept which was first introduced by Goffman (1967). They define face as the public self-image each member wishes to claim for himself. This shows the desire of people in every society to present themselves in a good way in their environment.

Furthermore, according to the theory, the concept of the face is described into 2 (two), namely positive and negative faces. A positive face denotes the human need to be considered highly, appreciated, esteemed, and highly regarded. Conversely, a negative face represents the need to be unfettered and free from impositions. Yule (2010) defines politeness as "awareness and consideration of the face of others" concerning the concept of 'face.' Thus, every individual is described as having both a positive and a negative face, which their interlocutors should acknowledge.

In addition, Brown and Levinson (1987) and Yule (2010) state that there are actions in the concept of face called Face Threatening Acts and Face Saving Acts. According to them, when a speaker says something threatening to his speech partner or when an individual performs actions or makes statements that may cause another individual to lose

self-respect, the action is called the Face Threatening Act (FTA). Meanwhile, actions that can reduce the possibility of emerging threats are called Face Saving Acts (FSA).

Specifically, Brown and Levinson (1987) identify that Face Threatening Acts (FTA) occur due to 3 (three) aspects: Social Distance (D), Relative Power (P), and Absolute Ranking (R). From these three aspects, social distance, the speaker's strength, and the speaker's position can be seen, which forces the interlocutor to do something. The Face Threatening Acts (FTA) also have positive and negative face threats. On one hand, actions that threaten a positive face include complaints, criticism, accusations, etc. On the other hand, the act of threatening a negative face consists of an offer or a promise.

Similar to Face Threatening Acts (FTA), Face Saving Acts (FSA) include positive and negative faces. When efforts are made to minimize the loss of positive face, it is referred to as positive face-saving action. Conversely, saving negative faces is an attempt to reduce the loss of negative faces. To save face in interactions, Brown and Levinson (1987) present 5 (five) strategies: Say Nothing Strategy, Bald On Record Strategy, Off Record Strategy, Positive Politeness Strategy, and Negative Politeness Strategy.

Research on Face Threatening Acts and Face-Saving Acts in the political realm has been conducted by some researchers. Kasenda (2018), for example, conducted a study that aimed to investigate the face-threatening acts and face-saving acts performed by Anies Baswedan and Basuki Tjahaja Purnama as DKI Jakarta governor candidates at the debate held in April 2017. This previous research discovered that 1) Bald on record is a strategy used by candidates to threaten face. They are intended to show contradiction, disagreement, insult, interrupt, speak off-topic, challenge, and exaggerate. 2) Both candidates used positive and negative strategies to show face-saving actions intended to show contradiction, assert similarity, show agreement, joke, apologize, and avoid dissent. 3) Face-threatening actions and face-saving actions can be perceived as attempts to defend their arguments and maintain their positive face, 4.) The use of the word "we" and passive voice can be seen as markers in both candidates' utterances to minimize face-threatening actions and to signal solidarity to each candidate and the audience; 5) Anies is known to use face-threatening actions more often, Basuki is the candidate who uses face-saving actions more often during the debate.

Another research that was related with this present study was done by Agustina (2021). This previous study aimed to observe the threatening and face-saving utterances produced by 6 (six) lecturers during 6 (six) different lessons at a state university. Her study revealed that lecturers generally tend to organize more face-saving actions. However, it showed that most of the face-threatening utterances were produced by male lecturers. It also showed that lecturers with longer teaching experience produced more face-threatening utterances and lecturers with shorter teaching experience produced more face-saving utterances. The fact that female lecturers in this study were dominant in negotiating face-saving actions justifies women being more polite than men.

From the previous studies, it can be seen that few studies examine the context of online language. However, little to no attention has been given to the analysis of FTAs or FSAs in relation to public figures. Therefore, to fill the research gap, this study is conducted with the aim to describe the strategies of FSAs employed by public figures in Indonesia to preserve their image on social media by using Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of FSA strategies.

## 2. METHOD

This study used a descriptive qualitative method as the purpose of this study was to describe and interpret a social phenomenon in more detail. This is in accordance with what Sugiyono (2012) and Sukmadinata (2011) stated that descriptive qualitative research is intended to describe existing natural and human-made phenomena, which pay more attention to the characteristics, quality, and interrelationships between activities. In addition, Sukmadinata (2011) adds that descriptive research does not provide treatment, manipulation, or change in the variables studied but describes a condition as it is. The only treatment is the research carried out through observation, interviews, and documentation.

Accordingly, the data in this present study were comments in the form of criticism or threats on the social media comment sections of public figures. The public figures chosen in this study were several active social media users. In order to analyze the collected data, four steps were accomplished in this study. The steps are identifying, categorizing, quantifying, and interpreting the findings. The analysis was conducted by using theory of FSA strategies by Brown and Levinson (1987).

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From 5 strategies of Face Saving Acts (FSA), namely Say Nothing Strategy, Bald On Record Strategy, Off Record Strategy, Positive Politeness Strategy, and Negative Politeness Strategy, there were only 3 face-saving act strategies found, which are Bald on Record Strategy, Positive Politeness Strategy, and negative Politeness Strategy.

In addition, from the collected data, fifteen (15) face-saving acts were identified on the social media of two public figures: Instagram and Twitter. So, about 7 out of 15 face-saving acts are categorized into positive politeness strategies or about 47% of the total data found. While the second most used strategy is negative politeness, with 6 out of 15 face-saving acts or about 40%. Lastly, two out of 15 face-saving acts strategy through the Bald on Record Strategy found or about 13%.

From the findings, it is clear that the most commonly employed strategy is positive politeness. Public figures essentially protect their image by offering a contrary statement to what is being addressed by netizens. For example:

**Data (1)**
Netizen 1: "*Gelambir lu tuh benerin dulu, baru pd kwkwk Kalau kakak orang baik, no rek ku \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\* an \*\*\*\*\*\* ya kak*" (get rid of your flabby arm fat, so that you can…if you're a good person, my account number…okay, bro)
Public Figure 1: *SENT THE TRANSFER RECEIPT* "*Semoga lancar kuliahnya*" (good luck with your study)

In Data 1, a netizen commented on the body-shaming of the public figure while also sending their bank account details to receive money from the public figure. Instead of focusing on body shaming, the public figure transferred some money to the netizen and said, "Good luck with your study." This suggests that the public figure has no intention of continuing any threats or hate speech. The focus is on meeting the present needs through a money transfer. This finding is in line with Brown and Levinson (1987) and Yule (2010) who say that positive politeness strategies are carried out to satisfy listeners through the provision of goods, sympathy, understanding, and cooperation. In other words, positive politeness strategies support people to keep their face in the interaction which is also similar to Kasenda's (2018) and Agustina's (2021) findings.

The second most common strategy found in this study is negative politeness. An example of this FSA strategy was found when a public figure asked for forgiveness.

**Data (2)**
Netizen 2: "\*\*\*\*\* *antum, jangan sibuk ngurusin itu dululah. Tolong kesampingkan. Antum harus minta maaf sama babeh \*\*\*\*\*\* Ini terkait tantangan antum beberapa waktu lalu. Bagaimanapun \*\*\*\*\* adalah sesepuh yang harus dihormati anak muda model antum. Bisa masuk neraka antum…* ☺" (…you, don't concern yourself. Just ignore it. You should apologize to 'babeh' ……This was related to your challenge a few moments ago. In fact, ... is the elder who needs to be respected by young generation like you. You can go to hell….)
Public Figure 2: "*Ya Pak. Maaf saya salah*" (Yes, Sir. Sorry, I'm wrong)

In Data 2, a netizen commented and accused the public figure of doing something terrible from the perspective of the netizen towards a senior politician in Indonesia. As can be seen from the data, the public figure did not want to prolong the discussion and instead apologized to end the conversation. This finding is in accordance with Brown and Levinson (1987) and Yule (2010), which posit that in this particular strategy of negative politeness, the speakers express their regret to their interlocutors. They do so by acknowledging the intrusion and demonstrating hesitancy. This finding is also similar to Kasenda's (2018) finding on negative politeness when in her study, the candidates use negative politeness to show face-saving actions intended to apologize.

Finally, the last FSA strategy used by the public figure in responding the criticism on social media is the bald-on strategy. An example is found where the public figure answers according to reality.

**Data (3)**
Netizen 3: "*Uda berapa kali tidur sama manajer?*" (How often did you sleep with the manager)
Public Figure 3: "*Tak terhitung, pokoknya sejak dalam kandungan lah, soalnya manager gw adalah sodara kembar gw sendiri*" (It's countless, since we're inside uterus, as my manager is my twin)

In Data 3, the netizen asked the public figure how often she has slept with her manager, and the public figure just said that it's countless because her manager is also her twin brother. It can be inferred that the public figure does not take the speech as a serious attack on her because she already knows what the reality is. Therefore, she could point out her argument directly without having any other intention to further argue with the netizen. This situation is in line with Brown and Levinson (1987) and Yule (2010) which allow us to apply the bald on record strategy and, at the same time, this finding can be related to factors like social status and power relations. The social status of public figures requires them to maintain their popularity and image in social media. As for the power relations, they may be employed by the public figures to gather social agreement in defending their opinions and views concerning their faces.

## 4. CONCLUSION

It was discovered that three out of the six face-saving strategies identified were used by Indonesian public figures in responding to criticism on two social media platforms. They were the Bald on Record Strategy, Positive Politeness Strategy, and Negative Politeness Strategy. A total of fifteen face-saving acts were recorded on the public figures' social media accounts on both Instagram and Twitter. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that Indonesian public figures often employ positive politeness strategies to save face, given their effectiveness compared to other strategies. This trend is attributed to factors such as social status and power relations. Social status incentivizes celebrities and politicians to maintain their popularity, presence, and sustainability in various entertainment and political fields by fostering a positive reputation in social media, specifically in responding to face-threatening acts from netizens. In contrast, power relations may result in individuals utilizing their position to gather social agreement and support in defending their perspective to save face.

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