

# Politeness Strategies in WhatsApp Text Messaging Between Sundanese Students and Lecturers

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**Abstract**—This study aims to reveal politeness strategies used by Sundanese students when sending text messages to their lecturers via WhatsApp chat application. For the data, this qualitative study used 57 text messages from six students majoring in Sundanese language at a university in Bandung. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies, the study revealed that the students used all of the four politeness strategies with negative as the most frequently used strategy and bald on-record the least frequent one. These findings suggest that the students are aware of asymmetrical power relation with the lecturers. It is expected that this study would give insight into politeness strategies in mediated communication particularly between Sundanese students and their lecturers.

**Keywords**—computer-mediated communication; politeness strategies; text messaging

## I. INTRODUCTION

The latest technological developments such as mobile device and chit chat features have made communication easier. WhatsApp text messaging is one of the features that is commonly used by many people from various backgrounds including education [1]. Not only does communication happen among students, but it also happens between students and lecturers using this feature for education-related purposes, such as discussion, asking for information, and making appointments. However, many students still do not realize that there are also rules in communication of asymmetrical power relation in text messaging [2]. This challenges students to be polite when communicating with the lecturers in the limited space of text messaging [3]. Therefore, the politeness concept has an important role in such exchange.

According to Brown and Levinson, politeness is a universal concept which is used to save other people's face in a

communication transaction [4,5]. In other words politeness is the ways we do to save other people's feeling linguistically [6] that can be done linguistically through the use of vocabulary such as please, sorry, or thank you, using indirect speech acts, and speaking with respectful tone to others [7].

Despite a universal concept, different cultures can represent politeness differently. Something can be considered to be polite in one culture, but it might not be so in another. Therefore, people need to know the strategy to act politely. Brown and Levinson propose four major types of politeness strategies namely positive, negative, bald on-record, and off-record [3] (see table 1). Each of this strategy is sub-categorized into some different purposes known as sub-strategies of politeness (see table 2). In addition, the use of these strategies depends greatly on three social factors namely power relation, distance, and degree of imposition [3].

TABLE I. BROWN AND LEVINSON'S POLITENESS STRATEGIES

No	Politeness strategies	Example in the context of borrowing a pen	Trigger
1.	Bald on-record	"Give me a pen."	Imperative form of direct
2.	Off-record	"Oh I forget do not bring my pen."	Giving 'hints'
3.	Positive politeness	"Hey, buddy, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me use your pen."	Closeness form
4.	Negative politeness	"I'm sorry to bother you, but can I ask you for a pen or something?"	Saying sorry

TABLE II. BROWN AND LEVINSON'S SUB-STRATEGIES OF POLITENESS STRATEGIES

No	Sub-strategies of politeness strategies			
	Positive	Negative	Bald on-Record	Off-record
1	Notice, attend to hearer (his interest, wants, needs, good)	Indirectly	Urgency/desperation	Give hints
2	Exaggerate (interest, approval, and sympathy with the hearer)	Question, hedge	Channel noise	Give association clues
3	Intensify interest to hearers	Be pessimistic	Task-oriented	Presuppose
4	Use in group identity markers	Minimize imposition	Where speaker wants to satisfy hearer's face is small	Understate

**Table 2. Cont.**

No	Sub-strategies of politeness strategies			
	Positive	Negative	Bald on-Record	Off-record
5	Seek agreement	Give deference	Speaker wants to be rude	Overstate
6	Avoid disagreement	Apologize	Sympathetic advice/warning	Using tautologies
7	Presuppose/raise/assert common ground	Impersonalize speaker and hearer	Granting permission for something that hearer has requested	Using contradiction
8	Joke	Stating the FTA as a general rules	Welcoming	Be ironic
9	Assert/presupposes knowledge and concern for hearer's wants	Nominalize	Farewell	Using metaphor
10	Offer, promise	Go on record as incurring a debt	Offers	Using rhetorical question
11	Be optimistic	-	-	Be ambiguous
12	Include both Speaker and Hearer in the activity	-	-	Be vague
13	Give (or ask) reason	-	-	Over-generalize
14	Assume or assert reciprocity	-	-	Displace hearers
15	Give gifts to hearer (goods, sympathy, or understanding)	-	-	Be incomplete, use ellipsis

Brown and Levinson argue that these sub-strategies can be said as the representative of normal linguistic behavior between people that allow speakers to convey what they want specifically [3]. These politeness strategies are influenced by power relation between the participants involved [4,8-10]. Therefore, it can be said that a person would be more polite to someone who is more powerful [11].

Considering power relation in the use of politeness strategies, there are number of studies investigating the interaction between students and lecturers in text messaging contexts. Wardhono for instance, investigated politeness strategies in SMS exchange between students majoring in English and their lecturers in a university in Indonesia [3]. The students in his study mostly used negative politeness strategy in requesting something to their lectures. Similarly, Eshghinejad and Moini sought to explain the use of politeness strategies by male and female students majoring in English in a university in Iran [2]. The result revealed that female students frequently used negative strategies more than male students. Another study came from Manipuspika and Sudarwati who analyzed the politeness strategies used by students majoring in English in a university in Indonesia when sending SMS to their lecturers [12]. Their study found bald on-record as the dominant strategy in requesting and giving information for academic matters.

Most previous studies on politeness so far have only focused on investigating the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. Considering the fact that politeness is a universal concept, it is interesting to examine how non EFL students use politeness strategies. Accordingly the present study is conducted to reveal the politeness strategies used by Sundanese students when sending text messaging via WhatsApp to their lecturers.

## II. METHOD

This qualitative study was conducted in a Sundanese Education Department in a university in Bandung. 57 WhatsApp text messages from six students were used as the

data. These students were chosen based on voluntary participation. For ethical purposes, all of the students' names are referred to using pseudonyms in this study. The data were analyzed using Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies [3]. The analysis itself involved two main processes namely identification and categorization. In identification proses, the parts of text messages containing politeness strategies were identified. Meanwhile, categorization process involved two other processes. The text messages were first categorized into politeness strategies and then these strategies were further categorized into sub-strategies of politeness. The results from each step of analysis were interpreted to draw conclusion regarding the use of politeness strategies from the students to their lecturers.

## III. FINDINGS

### A. Types of Politeness Strategies

The study revealed that the students used the four politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson namely negative, positive, off-record, and bald on-record with negative strategy as the dominant strategy (67.23%), followed by positive(30.25%), off-record (1.68%) and bald-on record (0.84%) strategies. As shown in the data analysis, four politeness strategies were realized in various ways depending on the purpose of communication known as sub-strategy politeness [3]. To realize these communicative ends, 119 occurrences of politeness sub-strategies were identified. More detail explanations on how the students used sub-strategies and its realization is given below.

As mentioned earlier, negative strategy was the dominant strategy used by the students. Brown and Levinson argue that when speakers use this strategy, they save the hearers' negative face [3]. The speakers will not damage the hearers' freedom of action. By using this strategy, the students in this study expressed their intentions indirectly which may indicate their awareness of showing respect toward the lecturers' negative face.

The students used negative strategy for some purposes namely *giving deference*, *making request*, *apologizing*, and *asking question*. *Giving deference* was the highest sub-strategy used by the students. According to Brown and Levinson, this sub-strategy is used when speakers give the negative wants of the hearers or when the hearers are treated as superior [3].

The students in this study used this sub-strategy frequently was probably because they were aware of different power relation with their lecturers. In order to give respect to the lecturers, the students addressed the lecturers with honorific terms such as *sir* or *ma'am* as can be seen in Excerpt 1 below.

#### **Excerpt 1**

*Raja* : Assalamualaikum **pa** enjing abdi bade bimbingan kinten kinten bapa tiasa? hatur nuhun

(Assalamualaikum **sir**, are you available for consultation tomorrow? Thank you)

In Excerpt 1 above, the student requested a consultation session to the lecturer. The way the student used the honorific term *sir* indicates respect for someone who has higher power. In addition, the use of honorific term shows a social distance between the interlocutors.

The second most used strategy by the students in this study is positive strategy. Data analysis revealed that the use of positive politeness strategy shows close relationship between students and lecturers. According to Brown and Levinson, when people use positive politeness strategy, it can be said that they try to save the hearers' positive face. In addition, the speakers treat the hearers by expressing the same as what they wanted (for example by treating the hearers as a member of an in-group or a friend).

Students in this study used positive strategy for some purposes namely seeking an agreement, exaggerating, promising, using in group identity markers, avoiding disagreement, and noticing the hearer wants with seek an agreement as the most used strategy. Brown and Levinson argue that seek an agreement is included as the way to get common ground with the hearers by highlighting the agreement to them. By using this sub-strategy of positive as the dominant one, the students tend to follow what the lecturers wanted by saying agreement.

An example of *seek an agreement* sub-strategy can be seen in Excerpt 2 below.

#### **Excerpt 2**

*Dona* : Oh muhun ibu siap, hatur nuhun ☺  
(Oh yes ma'am, thank you ☺)

In Excerpt 2, the student gave the response to the lecturer after her request for appointment was rejected. Here, the student preferred to say *yes* to indicate that she agreed with what the lecturer wanted. In other words, by agreeing with what the lecturer wanted, the student tried to save the lecturer's positive face.

Another politeness strategy used by the students was off-record strategy. The students used this strategy to implicitly tell their purpose of texting their lecturers. Brown and Levinson

argue that an action of off-record was shown only one clear communicative intention to the act. If the speakers want to do face-threatening act to the hearers but they want to avoid the responsibility to do it, then the speakers can let the hearers interpret it by themselves. In this study, the students used this strategy when they needed to say something implicitly to the lecturers, namely *giving hints*. Out of the 15 sub-strategies of off-record proposed by Brown and Levinson, there were only two students that used this strategy. This *giving hints* is explained by these two linguists when the speakers invite the hearers to search for a relevant possible interpretation of their messages by giving the hint (see Excerpt 3).

#### **Excerpt 3**

*Raja* : Bapa abdi di departemen  
(Sir, I am at the department)

In Excerpt 3 above, the student was informing the lecturer that he was already at the department and the lecturer was expected to see him immediately. Here, the way the student informed the lecturer was by giving the hint. He let the lecturer to interpret what he wanted.

The least used politeness strategy by the students, bald on-record is said to be employed when the speakers do not fear retaliation from the hearers [3]. This strategy is risky, but if the hearers do not retaliate it, they are successful in changing the public definition of the relationship with the hearers. In addition, this bald on-record strategy can be said as a direct way in delivering the message without minimizing the threat to addressees. This strategy was realized by only one student for one purpose namely *urgency*.

Brown and Levinson believe that *urgency* sub-strategy is used when the interlocutors do not redress face [3]. In using this *urgency*, redress would minimize communicated urgency, as can be seen in Excerpt 5 below.

#### **Excerpt 4**

*Fuad* : Assalamualaikum pa abdi fuad **nyuhunkeun acc di sias. Hatur nuhun pa**  
(Assalamualaikum sir, I am fuad I ask your approval to accept in sias. Thank you sir.)

In Excerpt 4 above, the student showed he did not care about the lecturer's face. The way he said his request to the lecturer could damage the lecturer's face. Even though the student expressed greeting and thanking, but still his wants to save the lecturer's face was small because it did not contain face redress. However, in this context the student succeeded in getting public relationship with the lecturer because the lecturer's response indicated that his face was not threatened by the student.

## IV. DISCUSSION

The use of negative strategy between the students and the lecturers in this study shows that there is a social distance between the interlocutors. As mentioned in the example earlier, the way the students referred to their lecturers by using honorific terms such as *sir* or *ma'am* was to give respect to someone who has higher power. This finding was in line with

the studies by Wardhono [4] and Eshghinejad and Moini [2] which showed that the students in their studies wanted to show respect to the lecturers by using negative strategy as the dominant one. These similar findings revealed that either EFL or non-EFL students used negative politeness strategy in communicating with the lecturers whom they see to be superior to them.

In addition, the students also made requests through positive strategy which showed direct way and closeness – highlighting that both students and lecturers belonged to some set of persons who shared some wants. In this study, the students used appropriate language to their lecturers which might be attributed to these students' strong exposure to Sundanese culture as pointed out by Sudaryat that asymmetrical power relation affected the use of politeness strategies [13].

Finally, the study also found bald on-record as the least strategy used by the students. This strategy was used only by one student. The use of this strategy as the least one indicates that the students did not want to risk the lecturer's face. In addition, both the students and the lecturers have close relationship. This finding was in contrast with the study by Manipuspika and Sudarwati which investigated the use of politeness strategy in text messages between students and lecturers who found bald on-record as the most dominant strategy used by the students [12]. The students frequently used direct way of asking questions, giving and requesting information without using any mitigating devices to soften their language which could threaten the lecturers' face. Based on the lecturers' perspective, this strategy could be said as irritating and impolite because the command-like text messages gave them pressure. Therefore, the use of bald on-record to communicate with the teachers who have the higher power relation could be said as impolite. In addition, in communicating with the lecturers as the superior people could be assumed that the students' writing and their choice of words could affect the lecturers' feeling in an unfavourable way.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the politeness strategies used by Sundanese students in sending text messages via WhatsApp to the lectures. Based on the data analysis, it was revealed that the students used four politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson, with negative strategy as the strategy that the students used most and bald on-record the least. In addition, the

study also found that asymmetrical power relation affected the use of politeness strategy in students and lecturers communication. By using negative strategy as the dominant way to communicate with their lecturers, it was revealed that the students tend to be indirect to show respect to other people. Furthermore, this can indicate a polite way in communication between them.

Future studies may be conducted with different focus of speech acts and may involve different cultures.

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