

# An analysis of politeness strategy in the movie ‘Brave’ (2012)

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**Abstract:** This study examines the dialogue between Merida and Elinor, focusing on their use of face-threatening acts and politeness strategies. Despite their familial ties, they often jeopardize each other’s social image with criticism and disagreement. The research underscores the importance of teaching English learners about polite communication, aiding in their pragmatic understanding and graceful expression in the language.

**Keywords:** Brave, politeness strategies, face-threatening acts, pragmatics

## 1. Introduction

As defined by Fraser (1983: 30), pragmatic competence refers to ‘the knowledge of how addressee determines what a speaker is saying and recognized intended illocutionary force conveyed through subtle attitudes’. One of the principal aspects of pragmatic competence is politeness, which is stated to be a way of showing awareness of another person’s public self-image (Cruse 2006: 131). According to Pizziconi and Locher (2015: 27), politeness has been addressed by distinct researchers adopting various approaches. One of these is an influential model by Brown and Levinson (1987).

This paper aims at analyzing the phenomenon of politeness in terms of politeness strategies, face-threatening acts (FTAs), and redressive action. The data for the analysis were taken from the movie *Brave* (2012). It will then take into consideration how the findings indicate about the relationships between the participants, and their intentions in the conversation. Next, the extent to which it is essential to teach pragmatic competence to English learners will be fully discussed in the final section.

In brief, the ways of constructing politeness are shown in Figure 1 below.

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1. Definition of terms

The politeness theory by Brown and Levinson is based on Goffman’s concept of face (Brown and Levinson 2006: 311). In their theory, face is a public self-image, referring to the social and emotional sense of self that a person has and expects others to recognize (Brown and Levinson 2006: 311). So as to continue harmonious interpersonal relationship,

as well as facilitate successful social interaction, it is of great necessity that people be aware of another one’s face. According to Brown and Levinson (2006: 312), face has two aspects: the negative face, which is the desire to have freedom from imposition and freedom of action, and the positive face, which refers to the state of being approved and appreciated. The utterances or actions threatening one’s negative and/or positive face are called face-threatening acts (FTAs) (Brown and Levinson 2006: 313). The speech acts that tend to make the hearer feel that they are not able to do and act of their own will are known as negative FTAs, while the utterances that might make the hearer feel that they are not approved of or accepted are called positive FTAs (Brown and Levinson 2006: 313). It is believed that FTAs can threaten both the speaker’s and the hearer’s face. The boundary between positive FTAs and negative FTAs are occasionally blurry as particular actions or utterances might threaten both one’s positive and negative face (Brown and Levinson 2006: 313).

Human politeness behavior can be summed up in five different categories, namely negative politeness, positive politeness, bald on-record, off-record, and no FTA strategy (Bousfield 2007: 57). One can choose not to perform the FTAs or perform the FTAs. In the latter, the FTAs might be performed on-record by directly stating them (Brown and Levinson 2006: 316). In this instance, the speaker can perform speech acts without or with redressive action, which contains the use of positive and negative strategies. The speaker can also perform the FTAs off-record by indirectly stating them (Brown and Levinson 2006:

316). Positive politeness can be made use of in order to indicate that the speaker respects the hearer's need to be liked, approved of and accepted. The speaker can also utilize negative politeness to show that the hearer's face is recognized, however, there might exist an imposition on the hearer.

It should be noted that there are several sociological aspects exerting considerable impacts on determining the strength of FTAs, namely imposition, social distance, and relative power (Brown and Levinson 2006: 319). These aspects along with the rankings between positive face and negative face are weighed depending upon each culture, which means that politeness varies across cultures (Brown and Levinson 2006: 321).

## 2.2. *Politeness Analysis*

In the arguing scene between Merida (the princess) and her mother Elinor (the queen), there exist several utterances that demonstrate FTAs mitigated by some politeness strategies. The reason for making use of politeness strategies to alleviate a specific FTA might be to minimize the FTA strength as much as possible. This is because Elinor and Merida are mother and daughter. Accordingly, it can be stated that several politeness strategies are likely to be used to minimize the threat of an FTA (Brown and Levinson 2006: 319).

It is worth mentioning that there are certain speech acts that demonstrate the strategy of using in-group identity markers. In Elinor's first speech act ('Mighty me! I've just about had enough of you, lass!'), the language dialect is utilized in order to indicate the Elinor and Merida belong to the same region and they share specific wants. 'Mighty me' is an exclamation of disappointment and 'lass' is a term for girl. They are mainly used in Scotland and Ireland. Brown and Levinson (1987: 110) believe that the usage of in-group identity markers tends to signal positive politeness and its associated emotional support. This can be explained by the fact that positive politeness strategies are frequently found to minimize the distance between the speaker and the hearer.

There are several speech acts in the transcript that demonstrate the utilization of rhetorical questions. It is proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987: 223) that by using rhetorical questions, the speaker asks a question with no intention of getting the answer. In Merida's utterance 'Do you ever bother to ask

me what I want?', for example, it is noticeable that she asks her mother that question without intending to receive the answer as she herself provides the answer 'No'. Merida's purpose of using a rhetorical question is that she wants Elinor to offer the indicated information.

While the number of on-record FTA (with redressive action) and off-record strategies are roughly equal (2 and 3, respectively), the bald on-record FTAs (without redressive action) seem to occur in three fourths of Merida and Elinor's interaction. At the end of the conversation, politeness strategies have a tendency of occurring more frequently. To be specific, the instances of FTAs mitigated by redressive action are likely to be rare as Elinor and Merida get involved in the heated argument right at the beginning of their interaction. Merida's spirit of freedom blocks her relationship with her old-fashioned mother. Both Merida and Elinor tend to express themselves in a 'bald' way: Elinor – 'I've just about had enough of you! You embarrassed me! You listen to me!'; Merida – 'You're never there for me! I'm not going to be like you! You're a beast! I will never be like you! I'd rather die than be like you!'. It should be noted that the politeness strategies are rather frequent during the second half of their interaction. They are used by Elinor in order to mitigate her on-record FTAs. After Merida slashes the tapestry, Elinor is so upset and surprised at her daughter's aggressive behavior that she throws Merida's bow at the fire. As Merida being shocked at her mother and running out of the room, Elinor realizes that she does not behave in an appropriate way. Hence, positive politeness strategies (using in-group identity markers, giving a reason) are used to minimized the distance between Elinor and Merida.

That bald on-record FTAs (without redressive action) are predominant in Merida and Elinor's interaction suggests that they both want to do the FTAs with effectiveness rather than to save the hearer's face. Their utterances are mostly spoken in a clear, concise, direct, and unambiguous way. This strategy is supposed to be applied without any minimization to the impositions to the hearers (Flowerdew 2012). This strategy is usually utilized when the hearers and the speakers have known each other well (in this case, the hearer and the speaker are family members). For that reason, bald on-record FTAs (without the use of redressive action) would

embarrass, shock, and make the hearers feel quite uncomfortable. Also, in a situation when the hearers have less power than the speakers, a bald on-record strategy seems to be applied.

### 2.3. Teaching pragmatic competence to learners of English

Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that politeness might be an effective strategy in maintaining the speaker and hearer's relationship. Concerning the field of education, how teachers and learners communicate plays an integral part in the process of teaching and learning (Pizziconi and Locher 2015: 26). However, language learners are stated to perform speech acts such as refusals, requests and apologies in accordance with the sociolinguistic norms of their mother tongue as a result of pragmatic transfer (Kasper 1992: 211). Learners of the English language, therefore, should learn to politely express themselves in English (Arndt and Janney 1985: 283). This idea is in line with Thomas's (1983: 93) view that politeness theory provides sufficient tools so as to teach linguistic forms in context. He also adds that second language learners are required to not only 'express the propositional content of their messages, but also to adapt these to meet the requirements of social interaction, since failing to meet social parameters can lead to pragmatic failure or even to communication breakdown'. Although there are some real challenges when it comes to teaching politeness strategies to English learning students, it is necessary for learners to be provided with detailed guidance about how to express themselves in a polite way in English (Pizziconi and Locher 2015: 25).

### 3. Conclusion

This paper aims at offering the analysis of the transcript of the argument between Merida and Elinor regarding the speakers' utilization of face-threatening acts (FTAs), redressive action, as well as politeness strategies. It can be concluded from the analysis that the speaker and the hearer make use of the bald on-record FTAs (without redressive action) and several politeness strategies to express themselves. Although Merida and Elinor are family members, they tend to frequently threaten each other's positive face by releasing destructive emotions, namely criticism, contradiction, and disapproval. In addition, it can be indicated that teaching politeness strategies to learners of the English language might be of great

necessity. Even though it might pose significant challenges to students, it can assist their pragmatic awareness development and ways to politely express themselves in English.

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