

The Analysis of Politeness Strategies in Jimmy O. Yang: Good Deal (2020)

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Abstract

This study analyzes the use of politeness strategies in stand-up comedy performance titled Jimmy O. Yang: Good Deal (2020), focusing on Jimmy O. Yang who delivers humor with implied meaning through a pragmatic lens. This research aims to identify the types of the politeness strategies used by Jimmy O. Yang and to analyze the functions of each politeness strategy. This research applies Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness as the main theory to identify the types of politeness strategies and to analyze the function of each strategy. It employs a qualitative descriptive method by Creswell & Creswell (2018) to analyze the data. This study uses document analysis as the data collection method, as proposed by Creswell & Creswell (2018). It involved watching the show, analyzing the transcript, and recording instances of humor with implied meanings. The findings show three politeness strategies found in Yang's performance, with off record strategies as the most dominant. Positive politeness is used to build audience rapport, and bald on record strategies appear in low-risk, functional moments.

Introduction

People usually exchange their thoughts, feelings, or ideas through conversation. Since humans are complex creatures, verbal communication can be a solution to convey these things. According to Rocci and Saussure (2016), Verbal communication refers to the use of spoken or written language to convey messages and share information that also involves interpreted meaning through context, tone, and the listener's or reader's background knowledge. The usage of verbal communication helps people to deliver their thoughts or express their feelings, thus, it will be clearer and easier to understand by others. Verbal communication involves the use of language, which is structured according to a set of rules and norms understood by both speakers and listeners. Generally, the use of language in many interactions are shaped by context and shared knowledge, which all contribute to conveying meaning in a conversation. In verbal communication, meaning often appears in most conversations. Swarniti (2021) states, meaning is an aspect in language that gives an understanding of the matters talked in the moment. Meaning is produced by the use of language and must be understood by every participant to make the conversation clear and run smoothly.

Communication does not rely solely on words and grammatical structures, but also on the interpretation of meaning influenced by situational and interpersonal contexts. Context refers to the background information that helps speakers and hearers interpret meaning accurately. Context shapes how an utterance is understood, because what might be considered polite in one situation could be rude in another, depending on cultural norms or speaker-hearer dynamics. For example, saying "Can you be quiet?" in a classroom by a teacher may be acceptable, but the same phrase used among strangers in a casual setting may sound aggressive. Therefore, understanding context is crucial in pragmatics because it influences not only what is said but

how it is interpreted, guiding the hearer in inferring the speaker's true intention. To explore how meaning is shaped and received in such contexts, the study of pragmatics offers a valuable theoretical foundation. According to Birner (2013) Pragmatics can be generally known as the study of language use in context, which is the opposite of semantics, the study of literal meaning independent of context. This linguistic branch allows the speakers to convey and interpret meanings that go beyond the words themselves, and can be interpreted by social contexts, speaker intention, or shared knowledge between participants in conversation. In pragmatics, understanding of meaning depends on where or when the conversation occurred and who is involved in the communication. The same utterance might provide different meanings in different contexts, and will even mean different things to different people. For instance, a simple phrase like "You're crazy" can function as an insult, a compliment, or a joke, depending entirely on tone, relationship, and context. Yule (2010), also states that pragmatics is the study of how we recognize "invisible" meaning without it being said or written. The study of pragmatics allows people to uncover and understand hidden meanings by being responsible for elaborating how language functions in specific situations and social interactions. It requires the hearer to make assumptions about the speaker's intended meaning based on shared context and conversational norms. Pragmatics highlight the cognitive effort involved in interpreting indirect or implied messages, such as recognizing sarcasm, politeness strategies, or underlying emotional tones. Because the same content can be expressed differently, pragmatics also provides insight into how language is adapted to suit various social situations.

One of the branches in pragmatics that explores how speakers manage meaning in communication is Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness strategies are ways of speaking that reduce the risk of offending someone. Politeness is a type of attitude that must be maintained when communicating for social interaction between speakers to be well established, (Pasaribu, Saragih, & Gea, 2022). These strategies help protect the speaker's and listener's public image, which is how people want to be seen and respected by others in society. This theory explains how people use language to avoid conflict and maintain social harmony during interactions. At the core of this theory is the concept of face, which refers to a person's self-image or social identity that they want to protect in communication. They define two types of face: positive face, which is the desire to be liked, accepted, and understood by others, and negative face, which is the desire to have freedom of action and not be imposed upon. Brown and Levinson also propose four super-strategies for performing FTAs: (1) bald on record, an unambiguous approach without mitigation, often used in emergencies, urgent situations, or among close relationships where face threats are minimal, (2) positive politeness that emphasize solidarity, approval, and shared values to address the hearer's positive face, (3) negative politeness that acknowledge the hearer's negative face by minimizing imposition and (4) off record that refers to indirect or ambiguous language that allows the speaker to avoid direct responsibility for an FTA.

Bald on record is the most direct form of performing a face-threatening act (FTA) without any redressive effort to minimize the threat to the hearer's face. Bald on record strategy employed when a speaker performs a face-threatening act (FTA) without any redressive action that used to soften speaker's utterances and typically used in situations where efficiency, clarity, or urgency outweighs the need for face consideration (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This strategy is appropriate when the speaker has a close relationship with the hearer, or when the FTA is deemed socially acceptable or required. It is often used in emergencies, task-oriented contexts, or by those in positions of power. Brown and Levinson categorize bald on record usage into two main cases: first, when there is no desire to minimize face threat such as military

commands. Second, when doing the FTA is in the hearer's interest and therefore not face-threatening such as friendly advice or warnings. Despite its clarity, this strategy risks offending the hearer if the context does not justify such directness. For example, an imperative like "Give me the salt". In this utterance the speaker asks the hearer to pass the salt directly to the hearer without softening the request. This makes it a clear case of bald on record strategy, where the speaker does not try to reduce the face- threatening impact of the request. The utterance lacks markers of politeness like "please" or apologies, and there is no attempt to acknowledge the hearer's feelings or freedom to refuse. The speaker assumes that the request is either acceptable because of familiarity like among close friends or family or because the situation calls for efficiency like during a busy meal.

The second strategy of politeness strategies is positive politeness. This strategy seeks to satisfy the hearer's positive face by showing friendliness, solidarity, and appreciation, often through compliments, shared values, and inclusive language. Positive politeness strategies are aimed at satisfying the hearer's positive face by the desire to be liked, admired, approved of, and treated as part of a group (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Positive politeness often appears in informal situations among friends or in-group members and it can also be used strategically to reduce social barriers in more formal situations. This strategy functions to reduce social distance, build rapport, and foster solidarity between the speaker and the hearer. For example, the utterance "Hey, buddy, you're really good at this—mind giving me a hand?" uses terms of affection, compliments, and inclusion to soften the request and affirm closeness. The word "buddy" functions as a term of affection, signaling familiarity and friendliness. The phrase "you're really good at this" is a compliment, recognizing the hearer's skill and boosting their positive face by expressing approval. Finally, the request "mind giving me a hand?" implies inclusion, as it suggests a cooperative effort rather than a demand, inviting the hearer to participate willingly. The speaker can use several ways to apply positive politeness, including noticing the hearer's condition such as interests or goods, exaggerating the utterances such as intonation or the choices of words, intensify the interest by using a vivid present story and put the listener into the middle of the events being discussed, and using in-group identity markers such as honey or mate. Positive politeness strategies not only perform the FTA but simultaneously build social bonds and show that the speaker values the hearer. They rely on shared cultural norms, common ground, and mutual understanding to create a sense of friendship and inclusion.

The third politeness strategy is negative politeness. Negative politeness is a strategy used to show respect for the hearer's personal space and freedom. According to Brown and Levinson (1987) negative politeness refers to redressive action addressed to the addressee's negative face: his want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded. This strategy is commonly used to soften requests, suggestions, or any face-threatening acts (FTAs) that might limit the hearer's freedom or make them uncomfortable. It helps the speaker appear respectful, careful, and considerate by minimizing the imposition, especially in formal situations or with people of higher status. It includes actions such as using indirect language, hedging, apologizing, and showing deference. For example, instead of saying "Lend me your book," a speaker might say, "I'm sorry to bother you, but could I possibly borrow your book for a moment?". The phrase "I'm sorry to bother you" shows the speaker's awareness of the potential inconvenience and serves to soften the act. The modal verb "could" making the request less direct and giving the hearer room to refuse without feeling pressured. The word "possibly" further emphasizes uncertainty that reinforces the speaker's effort not to intrude. Additionally, the inclusion of "for a moment" also minimizes the perceived burden of the request, suggesting

that it won't take much of the hearer's time. This type of politeness is commonly used in formal situations, between strangers, or when there is a social distance or power difference. This kind of language helps reduce the force of a request and makes it more polite by respecting the hearer's freedom to say no. In simpler terms, Negative politeness in communication helps to maintain social distance and avoid conflict.

One of significant strategies within Brown and Levinson's politeness framework is the off record strategy, which constitutes the most indirect form of communication used to avoid direct imposition. Off record strategies are defined as utterances that contain more than one possible interpretation, making the speaker's intention ambiguous and deniable. Brown and Levinson argue that such utterances require the hearer to infer the speaker's intended meaning, often through violations of Gricean Maxims, particularly those of relevance, manner, and quantity as a way to prompt conversational implicature (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The degree of "off-recordness" depends on how viable alternative interpretations of an utterance are in the given context. The essence of going off record lies in allowing the speaker to do a face-threatening act (FTA) while minimizing threat. For instance, instead of requesting directly, the speaker may hint "It's cold in here". This statement can have more than one meaning, it could simply describe the room's temperature or indirectly ask someone to close the window. Because the speaker doesn't say exactly what they want, they avoid direct imposition and let the hearer guess the intended meaning. This protects the speaker's politeness and gives the hearer the freedom to respond or ignore without pressure. Brown and Levinson (1987) categorize off record strategies into several subtypes such as using metaphors, rhetorical questions, irony, understatement, and ellipsis, all of which rely on contextual cues and shared background knowledge for proper interpretation.

Politeness strategies often employed in real-world communicative settings, particularly in humorous performances such as stand-up comedy. Selfia and Marlina (2017) emphasize that politeness strategies are essential in public talk settings to maintain social harmony and avoid face-threatening acts. Stand-up comedy is a widely appreciated genre of live performance that relies significantly on monologic speech to entertain audiences. As Dynel (2011) emphasizes, humor is inherently dialogic, even in monologic genres like stand-up, since it requires active inferencing and participation from the audience. For example, Arief (2020) found that comedians often use indirectness and off-record strategies to deliver humor and reduce offense, particularly in performances involving social critique. Language serves as the primary tool in this genre, not only for storytelling but also for critiquing social norms and conveying humor. Attardo (1994) highlights that humor often operates through layered and context-sensitive meanings, making it a fertile site for linguistic analysis. In stand-up comedy, comedians frequently engage with socially sensitive issues such as race, gender, politics, and cultural identity, often through indirect or implied speech. As such, their linguistic choices are not merely stylistic but also ideological and pragmatic (Tsakona & Popa, 2011). These features underscore the importance of analyzing stand-up comedy through the lens of pragmatics, particularly to understand how humor functions in socio-cultural communication. Because humor in stand-up comedy operates beyond the surface level of words, politeness strategies can be a tool to examine how meaning is constructed and conveyed through the unique communicative context of this performance art.

One notable instance of the use of politeness strategies in contemporary stand-up comedy is Jimmy O. Yang: Good Deal (2020), a Netflix special performed by Chinese-American comedian Jimmy O. Yang. The performance features a blend of personal anecdotes, cultural

commentary, and racial humor drawn from Yang's experiences as an immigrant navigating American society. Yang's comedic style often relies on indirect criticism, irony, and culturally specific references, which require the audience to interpret implied meanings based on shared social knowledge. His use of off record strategies enables him to address sensitive topics such as racial stereotypes, linguistic identity, and social expectations while maintaining a humorous and engaging tone. As such, *Good Deal* offers a rich site for examining how humor and politeness intersect in performance, particularly through the lens of Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness.

The writers have determined several research questions for this study. The research questions are; what politeness strategies are found based on Brown & Levinson's (1987) theory and the functions of the use of those politeness strategies. This study is aimed to explore how politeness strategies function in the context of comedic performance, focusing on Jimmy O. Yang: *Good Deal* (2020) through a pragmatic lens. While previous research has examined politeness in daily conversations or formal communication, there is still limited research focusing on politeness strategies in stand-up comedy performance. This research fills that gap by analyzing politeness strategies used by Jimmy in *Jimmy O. Yang: Good Deal* (2020) stand-up comedy performance. This study offers a fresh contribution in pragmatics, discourse analysis, and humor studies with pragmatic analysis of how a comedian manages face-threatening acts through humor.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to analyze the off record strategies used by Jimmy in *Jimmy O. Yang: Good Deal* (2020). According to J.W. Creswell & J.D. Creswell (2018), qualitative approach refers to exploration and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem and involves emerging questions, procedures, and inductively building from particulars to general themes. The use of a qualitative approach in this study focuses on analyzing the type and function of politeness strategies used by Jimmy based on Brown & Levinson's theory. Moreover, the data is collected from Jimmy's utterances in the transcription of *Jimmy O. Yang: Good Deal* (2020). The writer uses the process of data collection to conduct this research. Data collection is the process of gathering, evaluating, and analyzing accurate information for research purposes (Mazhar, Anjum, Anwar, & Khan, 2021). The first step of data collection is to watch the series using English subtitles and pay attention to Jimmy's utterances and the context of his jokes. The second step is analyzing the transcription of the performance. The third step is recording instances of humor with implied meanings.

To analyze the data, the writer follows data analysis steps by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) consisting of data condensation, data display, and drawing conclusion. First, the writer uses data condensation to determine the types and functions of politeness strategies of the collected data based on Brown & Levinson's theory (1987). Second, the writer displays the data by analyzing and describing the types and functions of politeness strategies used by Jimmy on his performance. Lastly, the writer draws and verifies the conclusion of what types and functions of politeness strategies often occurred in *Jimmy O. Yang: Good Deal*.

Finding and Discussion

This study found a total of 30 politeness strategies used by Jimmy O. Yang in *Jimmy O. Yang: Good Deal* (2020). These data were classified and analyzed by using Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Most used politeness strategy in this performance is off-

record strategy (11 out of 30), relying on indirectness and implication through humor and cultural references. The bald on record strategy appears 9 times, typically used in direct commands or blunt statements. Additionally, the positive politeness strategy occurs 10 times, often seen in expressions of camaraderie, shared group identity, and praise.

This section presents the findings of the analysis of politeness strategies, focusing specifically on off record strategies as proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). The utterances were selected from Jimmy O. Yang's performance in Good Deal (2020), and examined for implied meaning (implicature), context, and humorous function. Some representative examples are discussed below:

Data 1

Jimmy: "What's up, y'all beautiful people?"

Context:

This greeting occurs early in the performance. Yang addresses the audience warmly and enthusiastically, aiming to establish a friendly rapport. There is no critique or irony here, it is a straightforward attempt to bond with the crowd.

Analysis:

This utterance uses a positive politeness strategy, specifically Strategy 1: Notice, attend to H (his interests, wants, needs, goods) (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 103). By calling the audience "beautiful people," the speaker acknowledges their presence and builds in-group solidarity. The function is to create social closeness and positive face enhancement, as positive politeness is used to reduce social distance and express familiarity or appreciation (p. 101–102). This is a common move in stand-up comedy to build comfort and trust between performer and audience.

Data 2

Jimmy: "You guys can have a seat now."

Context:

This is said right after the audience gives Jimmy a standing ovation at the beginning. It's not intended to demand but simply to transition into the show's content. The imperative is delivered casually and expected in the context of a performance setting.

Analysis:

This example uses a bald on record strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 94). There is no redressive action to mitigate the directive, as the utterance is entirely direct. According to Brown and Levinson, bald on record is appropriate when "the speaker does not fear to be seen as impolite" or where there is minimal threat to face, such as in urgent or ritualized contexts (p. 95–96). The function of this utterance is practical, to signal the beginning of the performance and move things along efficiently, without damaging the relationship between speaker and audience.

Data 3

Jimmy: “We got to be proud of him, finally.”

Context:

Following the reference to Jeremy Lin, this line sarcastically implies that the Asian-American community rarely finds public figures to take pride in. The word “finally” carries a double meaning, both as a celebration and as a subtle critique of systemic underrepresentation.

Analysis:

This is another example of an off record politeness strategy, combining Strategy 3: Presuppose (p. 217) and Strategy 8: Be ironic (p. 221). The sentence presupposes a lack of prior figures to celebrate and uses irony to reflect societal conditions. The function here is to soften a face-threatening act (FTA), criticizing media and institutional neglect. While keeping the tone humorous and indirect. This aligns with Brown and Levinson’s assertion that off-record strategies enable the speaker to leave the interpretation up to the hearer, especially in situations of social critique (p. 211–213).

Data 4

Jimmy: “Jeremy Lin won a championship... for doing nothing.”

Context:

This line refers to the Asian-American basketball player Jeremy Lin, who was part of a championship-winning team. The comedian highlights the contrast between public celebration and the athlete’s actual on-court contribution. The audience is expected to recognize this as a cultural moment where representation is celebrated, even if the individual impact may have been minor.

Analysis:

This utterance employs an off record politeness strategy, particularly Strategy 8: Be ironic (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 221). By flouting the maxim of quality (Grice, 1975), the speaker ironically states something that is not entirely true on the surface in order to imply a deeper social message. The function of this utterance is to critique tokenism and superficial diversity, using irony to highlight the gap between visible success and actual impact. Humor emerges from the contradiction between audience expectations and reality, and the off-record delivery allows the speaker to avoid direct offense while still engaging in social critique.

Data 5

Jimmy: “Are you sure that’s not Ken Jeong?”

Context:

Jimmy O. Yang recounts being mistaken for other famous Asian-American actors, such as Ken Jeong. The rhetorical question is not meant to be answered but rather to highlight the issue of racial stereotyping. Particularly, the assumption that all Asian performers look the same.

Analysis:

This utterance exemplifies off record politeness, specifically Strategy 10: Use rhetorical questions (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 223). The speaker avoids making a direct accusation about racism, instead humorously illustrating a common microaggression. The function is to

indirectly criticize racial stereotyping, making the audience complicit in recognizing the problem through laughter. The rhetorical structure avoids direct confrontation, fulfilling the politeness goal of minimizing imposition or threat to face.

These findings reveal how off record strategies such as irony, rhetorical questions, and understatement are effectively used in Jimmy O. Yang: Good Deal to address socially sensitive topics like race, identity, and representation. By relying on shared cultural knowledge and indirect communication, Yang balances humor with critique, achieving a humorous tone while maintaining politeness and minimizing potential offense.

The data illustrates that off record strategies in stand-up comedy not only function to entertain but also serve deeper pragmatic and ideological purposes. As Brown and Levinson (1987) describe, these strategies allow speakers to perform Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) without direct confrontation. In the comedic context, they support both plausible deniability and social bonding, contributing to the effectiveness of the performance.

Conclusion

This study explored Jimmy O. Yang's stand-up special Good Deal (2020) using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory to examine how humor is constructed through linguistic strategies that manage face. The analysis of five selected utterances reveals that Yang predominantly employs off record strategies to address sensitive issues like race and identity in a humorous yet indirect way. These strategies allow him to deliver potentially face-threatening content while minimizing confrontation and maintaining audience rapport. At the same time, positive politeness is used to build solidarity and reduce social distance with the audience, while bald on record appears in low-risk contexts where clarity and control are prioritized over face concerns. This research demonstrates that stand-up comedy serves as a valuable site for pragmatic analysis, revealing how comedians skillfully manage face needs and push boundaries.

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