

Politeness in initiating and terminating conversation: a pragmatic analysis

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Abstract: This study aimed to describe the linguistic makeup of 100 online messages from students, employing pragmatic analysis to reveal politeness linguistic structures and their associated politeness maxims in both initiating and terminating conversations. Initiating conversations involved consultative devices, committers, downtowners, forewarning, playdowns, and politeness markers, aligning with maxims like agreement, sympathy, and tact. When terminating conversations, consultative devices, committers, downtowners, forewarning, playdowns, politeness markers, and hesitators corresponds to maxims like agreement, tact, sympathy, and tact. This research underscores the importance of linguistic structures in conveying politeness for successful communication while also recognizing that structural politeness does not guarantee overall politeness.

Keywords: Students, Online, Pragmatics, Politeness, Philippines

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INTRODUCTION

In the current educational landscape, students have increasingly turned to online platforms as a means of communication with their teachers. These platforms serve as conduits for seeking instructions, clarifications, requesting considerations, and even asking for favors. However, a discernible issue has emerged, as some students employ expressions that lack politeness or, at times, verge on impoliteness. In these online interactions, certain politeness linguistic structures are often overlooked, which could significantly contribute to the enhancement of politeness maxims. Undoubtedly, these observations shed light on a disconcerting trend among students, reflecting heightened negative behaviors that disrupt effective communication.

This issue finds support in Yulia's (2016) study stating that as online communication comes with its unique language nuances, students might possess a limited understanding of polite language. This, undoubtedly, leads to potential breakdowns in communication. As Oktaviani and Laturrakhami (2013) explored, students' insufficient attention to the use of politeness in online communication includes terms of address, appropriate diction, linguistic devices, and nonverbal cues. Furthermore, Banguis et al. (2023) stipulated that students use various impolite expressions online, which include bald-on record, mock, negative, and positive impoliteness.

The problem of impoliteness in online communication among students and teachers has garnered significant attention in various studies related to politeness. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which categorizes politeness strategies into bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record, serves as a foundational framework for understanding how individuals navigate social interactions while avoiding conflict. Studies like Adel, Davoudi, and Ramezanzadeh (2016) and Zaire and Mohammadi (2012) have examined how politeness strategies are employed in various contexts, shedding light on the significance of employing these strategies in online communication to foster closer relationships and reciprocity. Syting and Gildore (2022) concluded that the use of politeness linguistic expressions highlights interests in embracing different perspectives and valuable skills of mediation.

Moreover, the role of politeness linguistic structures, as outlined by House and Kasper (1981), offers a comprehensive view of how language is used to signal politeness in communication. These structures, including politeness markers, play-downs, consultative devices, and more, are instrumental in

promoting polite discourse. Scholars like Holmes (1995) have further refined this taxonomy, distinguishing between hedges and boosters, which affect the illocutionary force of utterances. The inclusion of linguistic structures in the discourse analysis underscores their importance in shaping polite interactions. Additionally, politeness maxims, as discussed by Leech (1983) and others, play a vital role in guiding the behavior of speakers and hearers, especially in educational settings. The application of these maxims, such as the tact maxim, generosity maxim, and agreement maxim, aims to minimize face-threatening acts and maintain positive social relations. Scholars like Ningsih and Boeriswati (2020) have explored how these maxims influence classroom interactions and their impact on teacher-student relationships.

While numerous publications delve into the subject of politeness, there remains a notable gap in research concerning linguistic structures and their role in shaping politeness maxims. Most politeness studies revolve around general interactions, with a limited focus on specific interaction events such as initiation and termination. As Wang (2008) asserts, understanding the significance of politeness is pivotal as it underscores the necessity for mutual comprehension of communication norms to maintain positive social relations and interpret one another's behavior.

Without a doubt, this study can serve as a valuable reference in addressing issues related to impoliteness. Its findings can inform curriculum integration, spanning disciplines like social psychology, conflict studies, sociology, media studies, and history, among others. Moreover, this study aids in the practical application of discourse analysis to real-world language use problems, equipping students with the ability to become discerning listeners who can decode concealed language cues, a skill often elusive to those unfamiliar with speech acts and pragmatic meaning.

The aim of this descriptive-qualitative study, employing pragmatic analysis, was to investigate the extent to which college students employ politeness when initiating and terminating conversations with their teachers in online-mediated communication. Specifically, this research unveils the various politeness linguistic structures in use and their associated politeness maxims.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a pragmatic analysis approach to explore the use of politeness elements in online conversations initiated by students with their teachers. It focuses on both the linguistic politeness structures from House and Kasper (1981) and the politeness maxims proposed by Leech (1983) used in initiating and terminating conversations online. These frameworks guide the investigation into how students utilize these structures and adhere to maxims when engaging in online interactions with their teachers.

House and Kasper (1981) introduced a taxonomy of linguistic structures that play a key role in conveying politeness. These structures include Politeness Markers (words that explicitly convey politeness), Play-downs (expressions that soften the potential impact of an utterance), Consultative Devices (words and phrases that seek consent or cooperation from the listener), Hedges (expressions that allow flexibility in delivering information), Understaters (linguistic structures that downplay propositional content), Downtoners (expressions that reduce the assertiveness of a statement), Committers (expressions that decrease the speaker's commitment to their utterance), Forewarning (polite expressions that involve the speaker commenting on the content of their utterance before delivering it), Hesitators (utterances or stuttering to convey politeness and uncertainty), Scope-staters (expressing subjective opinions about current events or situations), and Agent Avoiders (avoiding attributing actions or situations to specific individuals).

On the other hand, Politeness maxims, as proposed by Leech (1983), provide guidelines for effective polite communication. Leech's framework encompasses six distinct politeness maxims: Agreement (encouraging consensus and minimizing disagreements), Approbation (prioritizing minimizing criticism and maximizing praise for the listener), Generosity (emphasizing prioritizing the listener's benefit over the speaker's), Modesty (guiding self-praise by advocating downplaying it while elevating self-disparagement), Sympathy (urging understanding and empathy, minimizing antipathy, and maximizing sympathy), and Tact (highlighting the importance of minimizing imposition when offering assistance or directives, promoting respectful communication). These maxims collectively shape polite and harmonious interactions while emphasizing courtesy and respect.

Research Data

This study examined 100 online messages sent by students to their professors from various academic backgrounds using platforms like Facebook, Messenger, Learning Management System, and Google Classroom. These messages included both the initiating and terminating conversations, with a focus on school-related topics such as queries, lesson clarifications, attendance, absences, and compliance

issues. The corpus was constructed from transcribed screenshots to ensure participant confidentiality, and the analysis considered both linguistic and social aspects of these interactions.

Data Analysis

In this study, online messages from students were collected, with a specific focus on identifying politeness in both initiating and terminating messages. The analysis process followed the guidelines outlined by Meadows and Morse (2001). Initially, sentences and statements containing linguistic politeness structures were gathered. These expressions were then subjected to House and Kasper's politeness linguistic structure taxonomy for analysis. To identify politeness maxims, a two-step process was employed. First, the illocutionary forces implied by the identified politeness linguistic structures were analyzed. Then, these illocutionary forces were examined within the context of the entire message to determine the specific politeness maxims employed. Each utterance was diligently reviewed and coded for efficient reference and organization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Politeness Linguistic Structures in Initiating Conversation

Based on the discourse analysis conducted as shown in table 1, a number of politeness linguistic structures were found. Students used committers, consultative devices, downtoners, forewarning, playdowns, and politeness markers in initiating conversations. On the other hand, the students used committers, consultative devices, downtoners, playdowns, politeness markers, and hesitators in terminating conversations. To comprehensively discuss the politeness linguistic structures found in the initiating conversation, below are the following:

Table 1: Politeness Structures in Initiating and Terminating Conversation

Politeness Linguistic Structures	Politeness Formulae	Utterances
Initiating Conversation		
Committers	We will ...	Sorry ma'am by tomorrow we will send it. [PLS:ST77]
Consultative Devices	Can I... I would like..	Sir, can I conduct an interview with you? I would like to ask few questions, sir. [PLS:ST57]
	Is it okay...	Ma'am? Is it okay if I excuse... [PLS:ST67]
	Can I...	Can I ask when I can take the exam? [PLS:ST45]
Downtoners	...just ... might...	Sir good evening I might be absent tomorrow sir because... It will just be for tomorrow sir. [PLS:ST33]
	... might ...	There are still others who haven't filled up. There might be some changes. [PLS:ST50]
	Really	I really thought that I could wake up by the sounds of my alarm... [PLS:ST45]
	...slight ...	I was not able to attend the previous synchronous... due to the slight changes in my training... [PLS:ST41]

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Forewarning	It is about...	Good evening sir (smile emoji) it is about in my LP group sir... [PLS:ST78]
	that is why...	My shift starts at 9 pm, and I need to commute from 6 pm due to curfew, that is why I want to take the exam earlier so that I can make it right before I go to work. [PLS:ST42]
Playdowns	I was thinking... I would like	Good morning, sir! I would like to... I was thinking you might want to... [PLS:ST42]
	I just want to...	Good day, Sir. I sent you some proof of my scholarship yesterday, I just want to ask if it valid or not? [PLS:ST74]
Politeness Markers	Excuse me	Excuse me ma'am, I haven't been included [in the groupings] ma'am because I am a late enrollee. [PLS:ST16]
	Good afternoon	Good day sir, I was about to answer the lesson 6 activity but it said that a problem occurred in the drive (sends screenshots). I also tried it in the laptop but still the same error. [PLS:ST31]
	Hello po maam	Hello po Ma'am. Ma'am, Sir (name) wasn't answering we ask about the total population of BSED-ENGLISH. [PLS:ST63]
Terminating Conversation		
Committers	I will	Ah I see, even the app is saying that there is a problem. Okay sir, I'll try again tomorrow. Thank you, sir. [PLS:ST31]
	But in the next activity, I won't	I Included them all sir, even though they have not done their part. But in the next activity I won't. Thank you, Sir. [PLS:ST78]
Consultative Devices	If that's okay with you	...because our internet connection is unstable sir, if that is okay with you? [PLS:ST17]
	Can i...	I really thought that I could wake up by the sounds of my alarm; however, I didn't. Can I ask when I can take the exam? [PLS:ST45]
	Should we...	Okay sir. Should we take a video or picture only? [PLS:ST60]
Downtoners	I'll just	Ok sir. I'll just face the consequences for that. [PLS:ST77]
	Only	Yes, ma'am. Only this once. Thank you, ma'am. [PLS:ST46]
Playdowns	I would understand...	I would understand sir if the submission would not be reopened but just to inform you... [PLS:ST24]
	hoping for your kind consideration	I'm so sorry, hoping for your kind consideration. [PLS:ST72]
Politeness Markers	Thank you, Ma'am. God bless!	Thank you, Ma'am. God bless. [PLS:ST1]
Hesitators	Hmm	Hmm, so 300 then. [PLS:ST86]

Committers. Students employ politeness linguistic structures, such as "We will" and "I won't," strategically in their messages to reduce the commitment associated with their requests and suggestions, making them contingent on the teacher's decision while maintaining a polite tone and avoiding undue imposition. This practice aligns with Najafabadi and Paramasivam's (2012) classification of "We will" as a committer with external modification, indicating its role in softening or emphasizing the strength of requests. The use of "I will" serves to convey politeness while expressing decreased commitment to the conveyed messages. Additionally, students often use the phrase "I won't" to express concerns about uncooperative groupmates, contingent upon the teacher's consent, aligning with Brown and Levinson's (1987) positive politeness strategy, emphasizing direct communication of one's intentions while maintaining politeness. Tajjedin's (2014) study further supports the use of "We will" as a politeness linguistic structure, categorizing it as one of the committers used in crafting polite utterances, particularly in the context of making offers or promises.

Consultative Devices. Students employ phrases like "Can I," "I would like," and "Is it okay" as consultative devices to politely request favors from their teachers, aligning with Tajjedin's (2014) emphasis on the role of politeness structures, including consultative devices, in promoting politeness during interactions. This approach, evident in their use of phrases like "would you mind" and "could you," grants listeners autonomy to decide whether to carry out the requested action, without imposing direct requests. Such use of consultative devices aligns with Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of negative politeness, which advocates for indirect communication to convey politeness while respecting the addressee's rights and avoiding undue imposition. Pratiknyo (2016) identifies this strategy in the subcategories of questioning and minimizing imposition. Moreover, Widanta et al. (2023) and Trosborg (1995) highlight that students employ these consultative devices, such as "would you mind" and "can I" to create a consultation-like atmosphere while indirectly requesting specific actions from their teachers, ultimately fostering polite and cooperative teacher-student interactions (Trosborg, 1995).

Downtoners. Students employ linguistic structures like "just," "might," "really," "slight," and "only" to convey politeness by downplaying the significance of their requests, such as asking for an absence and acknowledging their readiness to face potential consequences. This practice is substantiated by Soler's (2005) study, which identifies these words as downtoners, softening the impact of requests and serving as a form of politeness. Soler's research also indicates that students tend to underuse downtoners while overusing politeness markers when communicating with professors, perceiving downtoners as requiring a higher level of pragmatic linguistic competence. Wijayanto's (2014) findings align with this practice, highlighting the use of downtoners to express politeness and respect while conveying a degree of uncertainty in interactions between students and professors. Brown and Levinson's (1987) negative politeness strategy further supports this approach, emphasizing that employing downtoners in communication serves to convey politeness by attenuating the perlocutionary impact of the message on the listener, ultimately fostering harmonious teacher-student conversations.

Forewarning. Students employ linguistic structures like "it is about," "that is why," and "sorry for the disturbance" in their politeness strategies, aiming to provide context, forewarn, and respect their teachers' rights to information. This practice is supported by Minoos and Sajeda's (2013) study, which highlights forewarning as a linguistic structure invoked for politeness, effectively mitigating potentially impolite impacts of students' utterances while incorporating compliments at the beginning or middle of their conversations. These phrases serve to veil the propositional content of their statements while respecting their teachers' self-image. The usage of such phrases, as observed in the students' messages, aligns with Franser and Nolen's (1981) concept of utterances that respect the hearer's rights and contribute to politeness. Additionally, these linguistic strategies, as per Brown and Levinson (1987), correspond to the concept of positive politeness, aiming to assert common ground and maintain the teacher's positive face while avoiding adjustments to the hearer's point of view, ultimately fostering polite and harmonious communication in their interactions with teachers.

Playdowns. Students employ polite communication strategies that involve mitigating the potential perlocutionary effect of their utterances through phrases like "I was thinking," "I would like," and "I just want to." This practice is supported by Wijayanto's (2014) research, which categorizes these phrases as playdowns, indicating that both the speaker and hearer recognize the use of syntactic devices to soften the impact of speech. The use of such phrases aligns with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategy, particularly the positive politeness strategy, by avoiding offense and emphasizing friendliness. Additionally, Tajjedin and Pezeshki's (2014) study reinforces this practice, highlighting the frequent use of phrases like "it is about," "that is why," and "sorry for the disturbance" as playdowns. These playdowns are employed to reduce the potential perlocutionary effect and avert conflicts, ultimately showcasing students' polite expressions when making requests or expressing concerns in their interactions with teachers.

Politeness Markers. Students effectively employ politeness markers, such as greetings like "Excuse me," "Good afternoon," "Hello po ma'am," and phrases like "please," "thank you," and "I'm sorry," in both initiating and terminating messages as linguistic structures to express politeness in their

conversations with teachers. This practice aligns with the findings of Najafabadi and Paramasivam's (2012) study, which observed learners using politeness markers in both initial and final positions of their requests. The use of politeness markers, including "thank you" and "please," as well as the use of honorifics like "ma'am" and "sir," reflects positive politeness (Syting, 2018), a concept supported by Brown and Levinson (1987) and underlines the idea of reciprocating a favor or prefacing a request when interacting with figures of authority. Additionally, phrases like "I'm sorry" and "thank you" are ritualistic expressions of politeness, emphasizing that students employ these linguistic structures to convey courtesy and respect to their teachers, who occupy a higher position. This demonstrates the use of both negative and positive politeness strategies, highlighting the students' sociolinguistic competence in using these markers to enhance politeness in their interactions, as corroborated by Tamimi Sa'd and Mohammadi's (2014) study.

Hesitators. Students utilize politeness linguistic structures, particularly "hesitators" like "hmm," in their concluding messages to convey uncertainty or hesitation, in line with findings from Wijayanto's (2014) study, which indicates that such expressions are employed in conversations where the speaker intends to convey uncertainty or hesitation, often seeking the addressee's cooperation when discussing contentious matters. Hesitators are used to employ negative politeness by opting for indirectness in their utterances to appear polite, as emphasized by House and Kasper (1981). This practice is supported by Soler's (2005) categorization of hesitators as internal modifications that elicit the speaker's thoughts and contribute to the overall coherence of learners' interactive oral performance, enhancing clarity. The significance of hesitators in structuring messages for politeness is further underscored by Martinez and Juan (2006) and Alemi and Razzaghi (2013), collectively confirming that students employ hesitators as a linguistic tool to convey politeness effectively in their interactions.

Politeness Maxims in Initiating and Terminating Conversation

Based on the pragmatics analysis conducted as shown in table 2, there were a number of politeness maxims followed. In terms of initiating conversation, students used agreement maxim, sympathy maxim, and tact maxim. On the other hand, in terms of the terminating process, the students followed the agreement maxim, sympathy maxim, and tact maxim.

Table 2: Politeness Maxims in Initiating and Terminating Conversation

Politeness Maxims	Illocutionary Force	Politeness Linguistic Structures	Utterances
Initiating Conversation			
Agreement Maxim	Inquiring	Downtoner	Good evening sir, is it okay to upload the master list tomorrow? There are still others who haven't filled up. There might be some changes. [PLS:ST50]
	Requesting	Downtoner	Sir good evening I might be absent tomorrow sir because I will take my exam in NSA-UCLM. It will just be for tomorrow sir. But I will have it fast so I can make it up for our class sir. [PLS:ST33]
	Requesting	Consultative Devices	Ma'am? Is it okay if I excuse myself this Friday exam ma'am? Because I will be having my anti rabies shot, I was bitten by our dog. I will just show you a certificate ma'am. [PLS:ST67]
Sympathy Maxim	Informing	Committers	... Sorry ma'am by tomorrow we will send it. [PLS:ST77]
	Informing	Downtoners	Good day! I was not able to attend the previous synchronous class and for tomorrow's synchronous class due to the slight changes in my training schedule (3pm-11pm) at VXI. [PLS:ST41]
	Informing	Forewarning	Good evening sir (smile emoji) it is aboutin my LP group sir... [PLS:ST78]

	Requesting	Playdowns	My shift starts at 9 pm, and I need to commute from 6 pm due to curfew, that is why I want to take the exam earlier so that I can make it right before I go to work. [PLS:ST42]
	Requesting	Consultative Devices	I really thought that I could wake up by the sounds of my alarm; however, I didn't. Can I ask when I can take the exam? [PLS:ST45]
Tact Maxim	Informing	Politeness Markers	Hello po Ma'am. Ma'am, Sir (name) wasn't answering we ask about the total population of BSED-ENGLISH. [PLS:ST63]
	Inquiring	Playdowns	Good day, Sir. I sent you some proof of my scholarship yesterday, I just want to ask if it valid or not? [PLS:ST74]
Terminating Conversation			
Politeness Maxims	Illocutionary Force	Politeness Linguistic Structures	Utterances
Agreement Maxim	Requesting	Consultative Device	...because our internet connection is unstable sir, if that is okay with you? [PLS:ST17]
Sympathy Maxim	Informing	Playdowns	I would understand sir if the submission would not be reopened but just to inform you of my incorrect
Tact Maxim	Confirming	Hesitators	Hmm, so 300 then. [PLS:ST86]
	Informing	Committers	Ah I see, even the app is saying that there is a problem. Okay sir, I'll try again tomorrow. Thank you, sir. [PLS:ST31]
	Informing	Downtoners	Ok sir. I'll just face the consequences for that. [PLS:ST77]
	Requesting	Playdowns	I'm so sorry, hoping for your kind consideration. [PLS:ST72]
	Thanking	Politeness Marker	Thank you, Ma'am. God bless. [PLS:ST1]

Agreement Maxim. The agreement maxim is employed by students in their online communication with teachers, where they utilize two key illocutionary forces: inquiry and request. Inquiry involves seeking information, and request pertains to asking for favors. Adhering to this maxim reflects politeness and acknowledges the authority held by teachers over students. This approach allows teachers to maintain their face and fosters a positive perception of students seeking assistance from those in higher positions. Studies by Guo and Zhao (2019) and Yu and Ren (2013) underscore the significance of the agreement maxim in making inquiries and requests, indicating that its application enhances the likelihood of obtaining answers and favor approval, promoting politeness in student-teacher interactions. Cherry's (1988) research on politeness in written persuasion further emphasizes the importance of cooperation and understanding in requests, supporting students' use of the agreement maxim to express politeness when aligning themselves with their teachers in online communication.

Sympathy Maxim. The sympathy maxim, operating through illocutionary forces like informing and requesting, is exemplified in students' online interactions with teachers, aligning with Guo and Zhao's (2019) study on politeness in e-business transactions. In these exchanges, students utilize informing to empathize with issues such as internet connectivity problems and work-related challenges, fostering mutual understanding and emotional connection with their teachers. This corresponds to the principles of

the sympathy maxim, contributing to politeness by making teachers feel valued and understood. The use of informing is further supported by Ren's (2020) research on business letters, emphasizing that employing the sympathy maxim when providing information is effective in managing complaints and receiving accolades. Additionally, when students utilize requesting with the sympathy maxim, it conveys the idea that fulfilling the request is a reciprocal expression of goodwill, enhancing politeness and safeguarding both the teacher's and student's face, ultimately leading to polite and harmonious online-mediated conversations.

Tact Maxim. In students' online interactions with teachers, the application of politeness maxims, particularly the tact maxim, significantly influences their choice of illocutionary forces like requesting, informing, confirming, and thanking. Guo and Zhao (2019) and Syting and Gildore's (2022) studies highlight how students align their use of these illocutionary forces with the principles of the tact maxim. The tact maxim emphasizes the importance of minimizing impositions and demonstrating respect for figures of authority, all while maintaining a non-coercive communication style, which aligns with the negative politeness approach. This approach is aimed at fostering politeness in their exchanges, as supported by Haryanto and Nashruddin's (2018) findings. Moreover, the tact maxim's influence is not solely about being direct but extends to the students' skill in navigating their interactions with teachers, thereby upholding respect and consideration while addressing various academic-related concerns. This approach ultimately contributes to a respectful and harmonious tone in their online-mediated conversations, as also emphasized by Hill et al. (1986) and Rachmawati and Al Arif (2020) in their respective studies.

CONCLUSION

The pragmatic analysis of students' communication highlights their conscious and diverse use of politeness strategies, encompassing committers, consultative devices, downtoners, forewarning, playdowns, and politeness markers, both in initiating and terminating conversations. This reflects their deliberate effort to establish a positive and respectful tone from the outset, underpinned by the consistent application of politeness maxims like the agreement maxim, sympathy maxim, and tact maxim. These findings emphasize the central role of politeness in shaping teacher-student and student-student interactions, transcending mere social courtesy. Politeness acts as a vital framework for conflict avoidance, fostering a constructive learning environment and safeguarding individuals' core values, ultimately contributing to a harmonious educational atmosphere.

Moreover, politeness extends its influence to broader societal contexts, promoting harmonious relationships and cooperation. By prioritizing respect for values and the preservation of dignity, it creates an environment where conflicts are addressed peacefully, and collective goals are pursued collaboratively. Politeness, far from being a superficial social convention, emerges as an essential element in facilitating interactions characterized by mutual respect and understanding, thus contributing to a more harmonious and cooperative world.

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