



Research Paper

## Politeness Strategies in Contemporary Fiction: A Pragmatic Analysis

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**ABSTRACT:** Politeness plays a significant role in interpersonal communication as it helps individuals maintain social harmony, negotiate relationships, and minimize conflict. While politeness theory has been widely examined in everyday communication, political discourse, and digital interactions, limited studies have explored how politeness strategies are represented in contemporary fiction. Literary texts offer rich pragmatic data because characters' dialogues often reflect social norms, power relations, emotional tensions, and cultural expectations. This study investigates politeness strategies in contemporary fiction using a pragmatic framework grounded in Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. The research focuses on identifying positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record strategies, and off-record strategies in selected contemporary novels published between 2015 and 2024. Using qualitative textual analysis, dialogues from three contemporary novels were examined to determine how authors construct interpersonal relationships through linguistic choices. The findings reveal that positive politeness is the most dominant strategy used in intimate relationships, while negative politeness frequently appears in hierarchical interactions. Bald-on-record strategies occur in situations involving urgency or conflict, whereas off-record strategies are commonly employed to express indirect criticism or hidden intentions. The study contributes to literary pragmatics by demonstrating how fictional dialogue reflects real-world communication patterns and expands the application of politeness theory in literary studies.

**KEYWORDS:** politeness strategies, pragmatics, contemporary fiction, literary pragmatics, discourse analysis.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In literary texts, language serves as a mirror of social interaction as well as a tool for narrative. Authors create character interactions, expose problems, and depict social realities through dialogue. Conversations between characters in contemporary fiction frequently reflect real-life communication patterns, including strategies used to maintain politeness and interpersonal relationships. Politeness theory has become one of the major frameworks in pragmatics, particularly after the publication of Brown and Levinson's (1987) influential work on face-saving strategies. Their framework explains how speakers manage face wants through positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record strategies, and off-record strategies.

Previous studies have examined politeness in classroom communication, workplace discourse, political debates, and online communication (Culpeper, 2016; Haugh & Chang, 2019; Locher & Graham, 2018). However, studies focusing on contemporary fiction remain limited. Most literary studies emphasize themes, characterization, ideology, or stylistics rather than pragmatic interaction. This results in a research gap because there is little study employing pragmatic analysis to examine how politeness strategies work in contemporary fictional dialogue. This study addresses that gap by examining how contemporary fiction represents politeness strategies in interpersonal interactions. The novelty of this research lies in applying pragmatic politeness theory to contemporary literary texts to explore how linguistic behavior reflects social dynamics. The following research questions are specifically addressed by the study:

1. What types of politeness strategies are used in contemporary fiction?
2. How are these strategies used to construct interpersonal relationships between characters?
3. What pragmatic meanings emerge from the use of these strategies?

This study expands literary pragmatics by integrating politeness theory into literary discourse analysis. And the findings may help literature students, linguists, and researchers better understand communication patterns in fictional texts.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics concerned with how meaning is constructed and interpreted within particular contexts of language use. According to Stephen C. Levinson (1983), pragmatics studies the relationship between language and context, focusing on how speakers convey meanings that go beyond the literal interpretation of words. In pragmatic analysis, meaning is not only derived from linguistic structures but also from the social, cultural, and situational contexts in which communication occurs. Pragmatics studies meaning in context and how speakers communicate intended meanings (Yule, 2020). It examines how language users interpret utterances based on context. According to Levinson (1983), pragmatics includes:

- ✓ deixis
- ✓ implicature
- ✓ speech acts
- ✓ presupposition
- ✓ politeness

In literary texts, pragmatics helps explain implied meanings behind fictional dialogue.

### 2.2 Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed that individuals possess:

- ✓ Positive face: desire to be appreciated
- ✓ Negative face: desire for freedom of action

They introduced four politeness strategies:

#### 1. Bald-on-record strategy

This strategy involves performing the act directly without minimizing the threat to the hearer's face. It is often used when clarity or urgency is more important than politeness. For example: "Leave now."

#### 2. Positive Politeness Strategy

Positive politeness strategies aim to build solidarity and closeness between the speaker and the hearer. These strategies often include expressions of appreciation, shared identity, or emotional connection. For example "You are amazing- could you help me?"

#### 3. Negative Politeness Strategy

Negative politeness strategies aim to respect the hearer's autonomy and minimize imposition. These strategies often involve indirectness, hedging, or formal language. For example "I am sorry to bother you, but I really need your help"

#### 4. Off-record strategy

Off-record strategies involve indirect communication where the speaker implies meaning without stating it explicitly. These strategies rely heavily on context and interpretation. Off-record strategies rely on indirect communication and implicature (Grice, 1975). For example "It is quite cold here..."

### 2.3 Literary Pragmatics

Literary pragmatics is a branch of pragmatics that studies how meaning is constructed, interpreted, and communicated in literary texts through context, interaction, and language use. It focuses on how readers infer implied meanings, intentions, and social relationships embedded in literary discourse.

Pragmatics is concerned with "the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society and emphasizes that meaning cannot be separated from context and speaker intention, (Mey, 2015). In literary works, pragmatics helps explain how characters communicate, how readers interpret hidden intentions and social meanings.

In short, the analysis of politeness strategies through the perspective of literary pragmatics demonstrates that language in literary works functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a reflection of social relationships, intentions, emotions, and contextual meaning. By combining politeness theory with literary pragmatics, the researcher is able to reveal how characters maintain harmony, express power, protect face, and negotiate interpersonal relationships through their utterances. This approach provides a deeper understanding of implied meanings and communicative purposes within literary discourse, showing that politeness strategies are essential elements in constructing interaction and characterization in literary texts.

## **2.4 Contemporary Fiction**

Contemporary fiction refers to literary works written in the present or recent period that reflect modern life, social issues, and human experiences. According to M. H. Abrams, contemporary literature generally describes works produced in the current age and influenced by contemporary society, culture, and values. These literary works often discuss themes such as identity, gender, technology, family, politics, and globalization. Peter Barry (2002) explains that contemporary fiction usually presents realistic characters and situations that are closely related to everyday life. It often focuses on individual experiences, emotional struggles, and social conflicts in modern society.

Meanwhile, Dominic Head (2007) states that contemporary fiction reflects changing social and cultural conditions in the modern world. Many contemporary novels explore multiculturalism, social inequality, trauma, and personal identity through diverse narrative styles and perspectives.

Therefore, contemporary fiction can be understood as modern literary writing that portrays present-day issues and realities while exploring human relationships, emotions, and social changes through creative storytelling.

## **III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Research Design**

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method. According to John W. Craswell (2014), qualitative research is an approach used to explore and understand the meaning of social or human problems through detailed descriptions and interpretations. The qualitative descriptive design is appropriate for this study because the researcher focuses on analyzing politeness strategies and literary pragmatics found in literary dialogue and interactions.

This study applies a literary pragmatics approach combined with politeness theory to identify, classify, and interpret utterances produced by the characters in the literary work. The researcher analyzes the contextual meaning, implied intentions, and social relationships reflected through the characters' conversations.

### **3.2 Data Sources**

The primary data were collected from three contemporary novels published between 2015-2024.

- Normal People by Sally Rooney
- The Midnight Library by Matt Haig
- It Ends with us by Colleen Hoover

These novels were selected because they contain rich interpersonal dialogue.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

The data collection process involved several steps:

1. Reading the novels.
2. Identifying character dialogues.
3. Extracting politeness-related utterances.
4. Categorizing based on Brown and Levinson's framework.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2020) interactive model is applied to this study through the following steps:

1. Data Collection

The researcher collects the data from the selected literary work by reading the text carefully and identifying utterances containing strategies and pragmatic meanings.

2. Data Condensation

The researcher selects, simplifies, classifies, and focuses the data based on the objectives of the study. The utterances that contain politeness strategies are categorized according to the theory of Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson (1987), such as bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record strategies.

3. Data Display

After classifying the data, the researcher presents the findings in the form of tables, descriptions, and explanations to make the analysis easier to understand. The displayed data help the researcher interpret the contextual meaning and communicative purposes of the utterances through literary pragmatics.

4. Conclusion Drawing and verification

In the final step, the researcher draws conclusions based on the analyzed data and verifies the findings continuously throughout the research process. The researcher interprets how politeness strategies reflect the characters' intentions, interpersonal relationships, and implied meanings in the literary work.

Therefore, the interactive model by Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldania is suitable for this researcher to analyze the data systematically, interactively, and continuously throughout the research process.

## **IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.2 Types of Politeness Strategies used in Contemporary Fiction**

The analysis demonstrates that all four major politeness strategies appear in the three novels; however, the frequency and communicative purposes differ according to narrative context, emotional tension, and character relationships.

#### **4.2.1 Bald on Record Strategy**

Bald-on-record strategies are direct utterances without mitigation. These strategies commonly appear during emotionally intense interactions, moments of conflict, urgency, or psychological breakdown.

##### 1) Normal People

In *Normal People*, Connell and Marianne frequently employ direct expressions during emotionally vulnerable conversations. Connell's statements such as "I don't know what you want me to say" and Marianne's emotionally explicit responses demonstrate direct communication with minimal face-saving mechanisms. The use of bald-on-record strategies reflects:

- ✓ emotional honesty,
- ✓ psychological intimacy,
- ✓ relational instability,
- ✓ and vulnerability.

Rooney uses minimal dialogue tags and sparse narration, making the directness more impactful. The lack of elaborate politeness markers mirrors the characters' emotional confusion and difficulty in articulating affection.

##### 2) The Midnight Library

In *The Midnight Library*, bald-on-record expressions emerge primarily during Nora Seed's existential crises. Statements expressing hopelessness, regret, and frustration are communicated directly, particularly in conversations with Mrs. Elm and alternative versions of herself. These direct utterances function to:

- ✓ externalize emotional suffering,
- ✓ emphasize existential urgency,
- ✓ and reveal internal conflict.

The strategy reinforces the novel's philosophical themes regarding regret, identity, and self-worth.

##### 3) It Ends with Us

In *It Ends with Us*, bald-on-record strategies are strongly associated with conflict, domination, and emotional control. Ryle's direct commands and emotionally charged language often appear during arguments with Lily. For examples of direct speech include:

- ✓ commands,
- ✓ accusations,
- ✓ and emotionally coercive expressions.

Unlike the previous novels, directness here frequently signals power imbalance and psychological aggression rather than intimacy.

#### **4.2.2 Positive Politeness Strategy**

Positive politeness strategies aim to reduce social distance and create solidarity, intimacy, affection, and emotional connection.

##### 4) Normal People

Positive politeness is dominant in the relationship between Connell and Marianne. The characters frequently:

- ✓ seek agreement,
- ✓ share personal experiences,
- ✓ use emotionally supportive language,
- ✓ and express mutual understanding.

Their conversations often include:

- ✓ compliments,
- ✓ empathy,
- ✓ jokes,
- ✓ and emotionally validating statements.

For example, Connell's attempts to reassure Marianne emotionally demonstrate a desire to preserve closeness and relational harmony. The strategy constructs:

- ✓ romantic intimacy,
- ✓ emotional dependency,
- ✓ and mutual recognition.

5) The Midnight Library

Positive politeness in *The Midnight Library* appears through supportive conversations that encourage Nora to value herself and reconsider her life choices. Mrs. Elm consistently uses:

- ✓ encouragement,
- ✓ reassurance,
- ✓ shared understanding,
- ✓ and emotionally comforting language.

These interactions create a mentoring relationship that reduces Nora's emotional isolation.

6) It Ends with Us

Positive politeness is highly significant in Lily's interactions with Atlas. Atlas frequently uses supportive language, attentiveness, and emotional reassurance. Unlike Ryle's controlling directness, Atlas's politeness strategies communicate:

- ✓ safety,
- ✓ empathy,
- ✓ respect,
- ✓ and emotional stability.

Positive politeness therefore becomes a marker of healthy interpersonal relationships.

#### 4.2.3 Negative Politeness Strategy

Negative politeness strategies emphasize respect for personal space, autonomy, and freedom from imposition.

7) Normal People

Connell frequently uses hedging, indirectness, and apologetic language. Expressions such as "maybe," "I think," and "if you want" indicate hesitation and sensitivity toward Marianne's autonomy. These strategies reflect:

- ✓ social anxiety,
- ✓ class insecurity,
- ✓ fear of rejection,
- ✓ and emotional uncertainty.

The politeness forms illustrate Connell's struggle to negotiate intimacy while protecting both his own and Marianne's face.

8) The Midnight Library

Negative politeness appears in Nora's self-conscious interactions, especially when she questions her own value or avoids burdening others. Her speech often includes:

- ✓ self-minimization,
- ✓ indirect requests,
- ✓ and cautious expressions.

This reveals her emotional fragility and fear of imposing herself on others.

9) It Ends with Us

Negative politeness appears unevenly in this novel. Lily frequently mitigates her speech to avoid conflict, especially during tense interactions with Ryle. Her cautious language demonstrates:

- ✓ emotional self-protection,
- ✓ fear,
- ✓ and relational negotiation within unequal power structures.

#### 4.2.4 Off Record Strategy

Off-record strategies rely on indirectness, ambiguity, implication, silence, and conversational inference.

1) Normal People

Off-record communication is central to the relationship between Connell and Marianne. Much of their emotional conflict emerges because feelings remain implied rather than explicitly stated. Silences, unfinished sentences, and indirect references function as:

- ✓ emotional concealment,
- ✓ avoidance of vulnerability,
- ✓ and implicit desire.

Rooney's minimalist style intensifies pragmatic ambiguity, requiring readers to infer emotional meanings.

2) **The Midnight Library**

In *The Midnight Library*, indirectness often appears through metaphorical and philosophical dialogue. The library itself functions symbolically as an off-record communicative space representing regret, possibility, and self-reflection. Characters frequently imply emotional truths rather than state them directly.

3) **It Ends with Us**

Off-record strategies appear in Lily's internal reflections and in emotionally tense interactions where abuse is minimized or indirectly acknowledged. Silence and indirectness become mechanisms of:

- ✓ denial,
- ✓ emotional suppression,
- ✓ and psychological coping.

### **4.3 Constructing of Interpersonal Relationships through Politeness Strategies**

The findings reveal that politeness strategies significantly shape interpersonal relationships in the novels.

#### **4.3.1 Romantic Intimacy**

In *Normal People*, positive politeness and off-record strategies jointly construct romantic intimacy. The relationship between Connell and Marianne is characterized by:

- ✓ emotional dependence,
- ✓ implicit understanding,
- ✓ and communicative incompleteness.

Their intimacy emerges not from perfect communication but from shared vulnerability. The combination of indirectness and emotional openness reflects contemporary representations of emotionally complex relationships.

#### **4.3.2 Mentorship and Emotional Healing**

In *The Midnight Library*, politeness strategies construct supportive interpersonal relationships centered on emotional recovery. Mrs. Elm's use of positive politeness creates:

- ✓ emotional reassurance,
- ✓ psychological safety,
- ✓ and intellectual guidance.

The interactions position politeness as therapeutic communication. The novel therefore presents politeness as a mechanism for rebuilding self-worth and human connection.

#### **4.3.3 Power Imbalance and Toxic Relationships**

In *It Ends with Us*, politeness strategies reveal changing power dynamics. Ryle's directness and emotional inconsistency gradually expose patterns of control and manipulation, while Lily's cautious responses reflect fear and emotional negotiation. In contrast, Atlas's supportive politeness constructs:

- ✓ trust,
- ✓ equality,
- ✓ and emotional security.

The novel demonstrates that politeness can both conceal and expose toxic relational structures.

#### **4.3.4 Emotional Distance and Social Anxiety**

Negative politeness strategies in all three novels reflect emotional distance and insecurity. Characters frequently use:

- ✓ hedging,
- ✓ apologies,
- ✓ indirect requests,
- ✓ and avoidance.

These linguistic features demonstrate how contemporary fiction portrays interpersonal relationships as psychologically fragile and emotionally negotiated.

### **4.4 Pragmatic Meaning Emerging from the use of Politeness Strategies**

The analysis reveals several major pragmatic meanings emerging from the use of politeness strategies.

#### **4.4.1 Vulnerability and Emotional Exposure**

Direct expressions and emotionally charged utterances often communicate vulnerability rather than aggression. In *Normal People* and *The Midnight Library*, honesty and emotional openness become pragmatic

signals of trust and existential struggle. The pragmatic meaning extends beyond literal language into emotional positioning.

#### 4.4.2 Power and Control

In *It Ends with Us*, politeness strategies reveal unequal power relations. Direct commands, interruptions, and emotional coercion pragmatically communicate:

- ✓ dominance,
- ✓ manipulation,
- ✓ and intimidation.

Meanwhile, Lily's mitigated responses indicate resistance, fear, and self-preservation. Thus, politeness becomes a linguistic indicator of social power.

#### 4.4.3 Identity Construction

Characters use politeness to construct social and psychological identities. Connell's hesitations reflect insecurity and class consciousness. Marianne's directness reflects emotional defensiveness. Nora's cautious speech reflects depression and uncertainty. Atlas's supportive language constructs emotional maturity and reliability. The pragmatic meaning of politeness therefore contributes to characterization.

#### 4.4.4 Silence and Implicit Meaning

Silence functions pragmatically as meaningful communication. Across the novels, silence may indicate:

- ✓ emotional pain,
- ✓ hesitation,
- ✓ repression,
- ✓ unresolved conflict,
- ✓ or intimacy.

Readers must interpret implied meanings through contextual inference. This demonstrates the importance of pragmatic interpretation in literary discourse.

#### 4.4.5 Emotional Authenticity in Contemporary Fiction

The findings suggest that contemporary fiction values emotionally authentic communication over conventionally formal politeness. Characters often:

- ✓ interrupt,
- ✓ hesitate,
- ✓ speak indirectly,
- ✓ remain silent,
- ✓ or express fragmented emotions.

These communicative patterns reflect modern interpersonal realities characterized by:

- ✓ psychological complexity,
- ✓ emotional instability,
- ✓ and evolving social relationships.

### 4.5 Discussion

The findings indicate that across the three novels, bald-on-record strategies serve different narrative functions:

No	Novels	Dominant Function of Bald on Record Strategy
1	<i>Normal People</i>	Emotional intimacy and vulnerability
2	<i>The Midnight Library</i>	Existential urgency and self confrontation
3	<i>It Ends with Us</i>	Power assertion and emotional control

This demonstrates that directness in contemporary fiction is context-dependent and pragmatically flexible.

In addition, positive politeness strategy across the novels functions to:

- ✓ construct emotional closeness,
- ✓ create solidarity,
- ✓ reinforce affection,
- ✓ and establish trust.

However, the novels also reveal that positive politeness may conceal emotional dependency or relational imbalance. In *Normal People*, emotional closeness coexists with communication anxiety. In *It Ends with Us*, affectionate politeness initially masks abusive cycles before becoming contrasted with healthier communication patterns. Thus, positive politeness in contemporary fiction is not merely harmonious; it may also expose emotional complexity and relational tension.

Furthermore, negative politeness in the novels primarily functions as:

- ✓ emotional defense,
- ✓ relational caution,
- ✓ and social negotiation.

The strategy is particularly associated with vulnerable characters who experience insecurity, trauma, or uncertainty. Contemporary fiction therefore uses negative politeness not only to show respect but also to symbolize psychological tension and emotional restraint.

The last strategy, that is Off-record strategies are especially important in contemporary fiction because they:

- ✓ create emotional depth,
- ✓ encourage reader interpretation,
- ✓ and reflect psychological realism.

Indirectness allows characters to negotiate difficult emotions without explicit confrontation. The strategy also increases narrative subtlety and reader engagement.

Overall, politeness strategies in contemporary fiction operate as more than linguistic forms of politeness. They function as narrative tools that reveal emotional states, construct relationships, negotiate social power, and represent psychological realism. The three novels collectively demonstrate that:

1. Politeness strategies are highly context-dependent.
2. Directness may indicate intimacy, trauma, or dominance.
3. Indirectness often reflects vulnerability and emotional complexity.
4. Silence and implication carry important pragmatic meanings.
5. Contemporary fiction prioritizes authentic emotional interaction over rigid social formality.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that politeness strategies contribute to multimodal characterization because emotional meaning is also conveyed through:

- ✓ pauses,
- ✓ silence,
- ✓ narrative description,
- ✓ gesture implication,
- ✓ and contextual tension.

The novels therefore illustrate how pragmatic analysis can deepen literary interpretation by uncovering implicit meanings within dialogue and interpersonal interaction.

## V. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that contemporary fiction extensively employs bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies to represent emotionally complex human relationships.

In *Normal People*, politeness strategies construct intimacy and emotional vulnerability. In *The Midnight Library*, they facilitate emotional healing and existential reflection. In *It Ends with Us*, they reveal power imbalance, manipulation, trauma, and relational recovery.

The pragmatic meanings emerging from these strategies include vulnerability, affection, identity construction, emotional negotiation, silence, power relations, and psychological realism.

Ultimately, politeness strategies in contemporary fiction function not only as linguistic devices but also as mechanisms for representing contemporary human experience, emotional authenticity, and interpersonal complexity.

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