

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF POLITENESS MAXIMS IN WHATSAPP ACADEMIC COMMUNICATION ACROSS MASTER'S ADMISSION PATHWAYS AND LECTURERS

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Abstract

Academic communication between students and lecturers has already transformed significantly with the widespread use of instant platform message especially WhatsApp. This study examines the discourse of politeness maxims by Geoffrey Leech (1983) as manifested in WhatsApp based academic communication between Master's students from distinct pathways and the lecturers. The primary objective is to examine how politeness strategies are used, negotiated, and varied depending on the admission background including regular admission, fast-track program, and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) program. This study employs a qualitative discourse analysis approach, drawing on Leech's politeness maxims (1983) as the primary theoretical framework and complemented by Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies (1987). Data were collected through systematic documentation of WhatsApp academic conversations between Master's students from various admission background and the lecturers. Data were analyzed through discourse interpretation to identify patterns of politeness maxims including tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy maxims. The findings are expected to reveal that students from different admission pathways exhibit distinct pattern in their politeness strategies. Furthermore, this study anticipates that face-threatening acts are mostly mitigated through indirect speech and the use of respectful language. The findings are hopefully able to significantly contribute to the understanding of digital academic course, politeness norms in virtual educational environments, practically work as a reflection for students to be aware and wise in employing politeness strategies to communicate with lecturers, and as a consideration to higher education to formulate digital communication ethic more structured.

Keywords – politeness maxims, digital communication, admission pathways

Introduction

The widespread use of mobile instant messaging applications has significantly changed the way academic communication takes place in universities around the world. Among all platforms, WhatsApp has become one of the most commonly used tools for communication between students and lecturers, especially when direct face-to-face interaction is limited by distance, time, or even institutional circumstances (Mulyono et al., 2021). In Indonesian universities, WhatsApp plays an important role during the academic phases, as it allows prospective students to communicate directly with their lecturers easily. Therefore, this growing reliance on digital communication brings attention to important linguistic issues, particularly

how politeness is implemented, interpreted, and maintained in academic interactions conducted through online messaging platforms.

Politeness has been considered since very long time ago as an essential aspect of human communication and has become an important topic in the fields of pragmatics and sociolinguistics. One of the most influential theories was introduced by Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson (1987), who explained politeness through the concept of Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) which showing how people use certain strategies to reduce social tension or potential offense during interaction to be able to maintain social harmony. In line with this view, Geoffrey Leech (1983) developed

politeness principle through 6 maxims including tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy. These principles help explain how speakers adjust their language and level of politeness based on social relationships and differences in power.

Although research on Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and digital pragmatics has continued to increase, still studies focusing on politeness in WhatsApp interactions between postgraduate students and lecturers are still relatively few. Communication in this context is shaped by an unequal power relationship, since prospective students are in a lower position compared to lecturers who have authority and influence in the academic settings. Because of this imbalance, postgraduate students often need to use careful and considerate politeness strategies when communicating with lecturers. At the same time, the casual style commonly found in instant messaging can sometimes conflict with the formal nature of academic communication. This situation creates communication patterns that are complex, subtle, and worthy of deeper academic investigation.

In the last five years, scholarly has put their interest in exploring politeness within WhatsApp-based communication which offering insights that could support the present study. Abourahim et al. (2024), through their study found that WhatsApp users carefully manage forms of address, levels of directness, and various modification strategies when making request. This finding indicates that even without strong institutional hierarchies, WhatsApp interactions still involve complex politeness practices and thoughtful communicative choices.

Advancing this area of study, Hussein et al., (2023) stated that students used

politeness strategies and relational expressions to present themselves professionally and to maintain unequal social relationships within students and teachers. In addition, these findings are particularly relevant to the current study because they show that institutional roles and power relations do not disappear in WhatsApp communication.

In the Indonesian context, politeness is strongly influenced by cultural values called 'unggah-ungguh' in Javanese culture or the wider social expectation of maintaining harmony in interpersonal relationships. These cultural principles play an important role in shaping how people communicate, especially in situations involving differences in status or authority. Therefore, during master's degree, postgraduate students face an important communicative situation where they are expected to show not only their academic competence but also respectfulness and appropriate social behavior. One way these qualities are expressed is through the careful and strategic use of politeness in language. Therefore, examining how postgraduate students communicate via WhatsApp can provide deeper insights into digital academic literacy, intercultural pragmatics, and how postgraduate students adapt to academic communities and institutional norms.

The relation between discourse analysis, maxims of politeness, and digital communication has become an important area of research in recent years. Through the analysis of authentic WhatsApp conversations between master's students and lecturers, this study aims to provide empirical insights that can enrich current discussions on digital academic discourse. At the same time, the study also seeks to broaden the application of politeness maxim theory by examining how it operates in socially meaningful academic communication contexts.

This study has three objectives which plan to be achieved. First, it seeks to identify the kinds of politeness strategies used by Master's students when communicating with lecturers through digital platforms, especially within the WhatsApp application where both academic and technological contexts shape interaction. Second, the study aims to explore the communicative purposes behind the use of these politeness strategies, including how they help participants manage face needs, navigate power differences, and maintain smooth and cooperative communication between students and lecturers. Third, the research intends to compare the politeness strategies used by students from different admission pathways in order to understand whether the route through which students enter a Master's program influences the linguistic choices they make in digitally mediated academic communication with faculty members.

To address the objectives of this study, three research questions are proposed. First, what kinds of politeness' maxims do Master's students use when communicating with lecturers through digital platforms? Second, how are these maxims of politeness expressed in students' WhatsApp messages, especially through the choice of words, sentence structures, and pragmatic features that appear in natural online interaction? Third, how do maxims of politeness differ among students from various admission pathways, and what do these differences reveal about the connection between institutional background and communicative behavior in digital academic settings?

Methodology

This study is based on two related theoretical frameworks that provide a strong foundation for analyzing politeness in digitally mediated academic communication. The main framework

used is Geoffrey Leech's (1983) regarding politeness strategies which explain that communication is guided by six politeness maxims including tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy. These maxims are created for speakers to reduce impolite expressions and increase polite expressions in order to maintain harmonious and cooperative social interaction.

This study uses a qualitative research approach because it is considered the most suitable method for addressing the interpretive and descriptive aims of the research. Through a qualitative approach, then the researcher can explore language use and discourse patterns in deeper way and pay attention to the subtle ways politeness is expressed, negotiated, and shaped by different communication contexts and participants backgrounds. Instead of focusing only on counting linguistic features, the study emphasizes understanding in the meanings, functions, and social importance of politeness strategies as they appear in authentic WhatsApp academic conversations. This approach aligns with common practices in pragmatics and discourse analysis research which provides greater value on the richness and contextual nature of naturally occurring language data rather than on board statistical generalization.

Finding and Discussion

Message from international student (Deemimah):

"Good morning, Sir. This is Deemimah Liliura and sorry for disturbing you at this time. I am sending this courtesy message to inform you that I will be having my proposal seminar at 10:00 a.m. this morning. I apologize for not messaging you earlier. I did send you an email on Friday, but

perhaps it was not opened, so you may not have received the message. I am truly sorry for that.

I attached the soft copy of my proposal, the PowerPoint slides, and the invitation letter via email on Friday. I also have the hard copy of my proposal with me. May I kindly ask if you could share your office room number so that I can drop it off before the seminar at 10:00 a.m.?”

1. Tact Maxim

Evidence:

“May I kindly ask if you could share your office room number...”
“...so that I can drop it off before the seminar...”

Analysis:

- The student uses indirect request “May I kindly ask” instead of direct command.
- The action benefits the lecturer (receiving the proposal conveniently).

Conclusion: Strong realization of tact maxim (minimizes imposition and shows deference)

2. Generosity Maxim

Evidence:

“I also have the hard copy of my proposal with me.”
“...so that I can drop it off...”

Analysis:

- The student offers effort (coming to the office and bring the hard copy.”
- Shows willingness to take responsibility rather than asking the lecturer to act.

Conclusion: Clearly follows generosity maxim (student takes the burden, not the lecturer)

3. Approbation Maxim

Evidence:

“Good morning, Sir”
“Sorry for disturbing you”

Analysis:

- No explicit praise (e.g., “thank you for your guidance), however the honorific “Sir” + respectful tone functions as implicit respect.
- Avoids any negative evaluation of the lecturer.

Conclusion: Moderately realized (respect is implied rather than explicitly stated)

4. Modesty Maxim

Evidence:

“I apologize for not messaging you earlier.”
“Perhaps it was not opened...”
“I am truly sorry for that.”

Analysis:

- The student takes responsibility, downplays self, and avoids sounding demanding or entitled. Moreover, the phrase “perhaps it was not opened”, it really softens potential blame toward the lecturer.

Conclusion: Strong realization (high level of humility and self-awareness)

5. Agreement Maxim

Evidence:

“perhaps it was not opened, so you may not have received the message”

Analysis:

- The student avoids accusing the lecturer and implying negligence. Instead, offers a neutral explanation to maintain harmony

Conclusion: Clearly realized
 (avoids potential conflict or disagreement)

6. Sympathy Maxim

Evidence:

“sorry for disturbing you at this time”

“I am truly sorry for that”

Analysis:

- Those phrases show awareness of lecturer’s time and possible inconvenience which expressing empathy and concern

Conclusion: Strong realization
 (builds interpersonal rapport)

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Conclusions

This research dives into how Master’s students from different entry routes including research, RPL, fast track, and regular employ politeness principles to work in their WhatsApp chats with lecturers in academic contexts.

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