
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Comparison of Jordanian and Syrian EFL Students' Politeness Strategies in Agreement Speech

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| ABSTRACT

This paper examines positive politeness agreement strategies among Jordanian and Syrian EFL students. It examines how cultural norms in Jordan and Syria influence these strategies in academic settings, aiming to identify and analyze the strategies employed to understand face-saving and relational harmony in their interactions. It adopts one of the politeness theories to analyze the politeness strategies employed by participants in their interactions. Using qualitative methods, data will be collected through note-taking and semi-structured interviews with English and translation students at Jerash University. Note-Taking will be gathered through interactions of students in and out of their classes. After sorting the notes, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with 10 students from each group to delve into the vital reasons for using some of the politeness strategies in their agreements. The central hypothesis posits that both participants employ various positive politeness strategies to maintain their 'saving face' and acknowledge others in interactions. The findings will highlight prevalent strategies for both groups and their sociolinguistic implications, contributing to knowledge in cross-cultural communication and EFL education in similar contexts. This study recommends that future researchers conduct more comparative studies between these two groups and other Arabic societies to identify similarities and differences in the agreement strategies used in their interactions.

| KEYWORDS

Agreement, Politeness Strategies, Syrian EFL Students, Jordanian EFL Students, Sociolinguistics, Qualitative Research

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Agreement speech is a crucial speech act for maintaining relational harmony among interactants. This involves using various linguistic strategies to affirm mutual understanding and save hearers' 'face'. While agreement is common in human interaction, it is constructed by cultural contexts that influence speakers' strategies. Although research has examined agreement in various linguistic settings, there is a limited of studies comparing the positive politeness agreement strategies used by Jordanian and Syrian EFL students in academic contexts. This kind of study prevents misunderstandings that can arise when individuals from different cultures communicate.

This study investigates the politeness agreement strategies of Jordanian and Syrian EFL students at Jerash University. It aims to identify and analyze these strategies while uncovering the motivations behind their use in academic settings. Understanding these motivations is vital for grasping culturally specific communication practices in Jordan and Syria, which are important for effective interactions. The findings have practical implications for educators, offering insights to develop alternative politeness strategies to improve student-student communication across cultures.

The research specifically adopts Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness analytical framework to analyze data. Methodologically, a qualitative design including systematic note-taking during naturalistic interactions and semi-structured interviews will be applied. These comprehensive approaches are designed to recognize nuanced insights into the inspirations guiding the use of agreement strategies by both groups, thereby contributing to a precise understanding of sociolinguistic phenomena in Jordanian and Syrian EFL students. Agreement strategies have largely relied on quantitative analyses, aiming to determine the occurrence of certain politeness strategies in students' agreements. Dissimilarly, this study adopts a qualitative approach to provide an in-depth analysis of the politeness agreement strategies preferred by Jordanians and Syrians to explore the reasons behind their preferences.

2.0 Past Studies

This part reviews previous studies that investigated the agreement speech act and politeness strategies. Brown and Levinson's (1987) analytical framework is employed to examine the data. The analytical framework outlines the politeness strategies to examine the data of this research effectively.

2.1 Past Studies on Agreement and Politeness

The speech act of agreement has received notable attention in sociolinguistics, alongside acts like refusing and apologizing. Research has focused on the taxonomies and realization of agreement strategies in various linguistic communities. For example, Wang et al. (2011) explored these strategies in English and Arabic broadcast conversations, identifying lexical, structural, durational, and prosodic features. They used Conditional Random Fields models to analyze the effectiveness of these features. Additionally, Walkinshaw (2015) defined agreement as a concurring stance, either verbal or nonverbal, indicating shared attitudes between speakers, while disagreement represents an oppositional stance challenging the speaker's proposition.

Hodeib (2020) investigated Syrian Arabic politeness through the apology speech act and other speech acts as collaborative efforts. Four role-play scenarios were prepared to collect data and were then analyzed using Grainger's (2018) neo-Brown and Levinson framework. Findings indicated that a varied range of apology strategies aligned with Blum-Kulka et al.'s taxonomy, classifying apologies as negative politeness strategies. Participants employed both positive and negative politeness strategies, using varied contextual elements rather than strictly adhering to status and social distance, to successfully express politeness. Furthermore, the study highlighted that politeness is conveyed not only through discourse but also through conventionalized language expressions. Through interviews, Nelson et al. (1996) examined the compliment responses of Syrians and Americans; 87 Americans and 52 Syrians participated in the study. The findings of the study showed that 50% of American responses preferred the acceptance strategy, 45% mitigations, and 3% rejections, whereas 67% of Syrian responses were acceptances and 33% mitigations, with no rejections. Both groups have a tendency to accept or mitigate compliments rather than reject them, but differ in certain response forms. Americans favored employing appreciation tokens, while a preferred Syrian response was absent. These results highlighted the significant influence of cultural context on linguistic behavior. AlYousef et al. (2025a) explored persuasive strategies in academic settings using Aristotle's rhetorical triangle, ethos, logos, and pathos, demonstrating how cultural nuances affect communication. Almahasees et al. (2025) focused on translating legal terms between English and Arabic, noting challenges due to culturally specific legal expressions. These studies emphasize the importance of cultural factors in shaping language and communicative practices.

Khamam (2012) inspected patterns of request realization in Syrian Arabic and British English. The study determined that both Syrian and British speakers favor conventionally indirect strategies. This result supports the Cross-Cultural Speech Acts Realization Project's (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) finding that conventionally indirect strategies are prevalent across cultures. Apology strategies among native Syrian Arabic speakers were examined by Hodeib (2019). 45 students responded to a Discourse Completion Test (DCT). The study adopted Olshtain and Cohen (1983) analytical framework to analyze the data. The analysis indicated that they employed strategies that were compatible with universal principles of apologies, while also revealing specific cultural elements, such as invoking God's name and employing proverbs to emphasize apologies or blame others. Significantly, Social factors influence strategy usage; Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs) are most common when addressing older individuals or those of higher status, while they are less common in low-status, equal-distance situations. Further investigations into agreement and dispute have explored both logical and discourse-level dynamics. Lascarides and Asher (2009) provided a precise analysis, modeling disputes and implicit agreements. Kuo (1994) identified repetition and back-channel responses as key strategies in radio conversations. Baym (1996) highlighted how various factors, including media and participant characteristics, influence communication, revealing the complex nature of strategic agreement deployment in interactions.

Regarding refusal strategies among Jordanians and Syrian refugees in Jordan, Alshamaseen et al. (2023) examined them through a Discourse Completion Test that included 10 scenarios. The analysis explored refusals by semantic formulas, directness, and frequency. Results reveal noteworthy differences. Jordanians tend to use more direct refusals, uttering negative willingness, while Syrian refugees employed less direct strategies coupled with explanations. Gender also influences responses, with females from both groups providing more elaborate refusals using at least three strategies. Recent studies have examined politeness in agreement and disagreement in EFL contexts, notably Al Ghamdi's (2009) investigation into Saudi EFL teachers' disagreement strategies on Twitter. This study showed that while Saudi EFL and American ESL teachers share similarities in expressing aggravated disagreements, they differ in politeness strategies. Saudi teachers used both positive and negative politeness strategies, while American teachers primarily employed positive politeness, indicating the influence of cultural background on these nuanced expressions of disagreement.

(im)Politeness in Syrian Arabic was investigated by Hodeib (2024). He collected data from an online questionnaire from 88 native speakers. It was found that participants distinguish politeness and impoliteness as opposites, focusing on (dis)respect and adherence to suitable behavior. Central to their notions of (im)politeness are concepts of hierarchical respect, face, equity, reciprocity, and concern for others. These views are associated with moral foundations such as authority, fairness, and care. Mainly, politeness in this context was seen as relational and morality-based rather than just strategic, aligning with contemporary perspectives on the subject. Recent research has explored the interplay of politeness and conflict management in communication. Glavan (2024) analyzed how Moldovans handle political disputes within close relationships, emphasizing communicative actions that foster family bonds amid disagreements. Parker (2024) introduced "adversarial cooperation" as a strategy for constructive engagement in contentious contexts, drawing from concepts in both sciences and humanities. Additionally, Rahmani et al. (2025) investigated digital interventions to enhance pragmatic competence, highlighting that mobile-based assessments with sociocultural feedback effectively improve learners' skills in handling disagreement speech acts, which is crucial for digital language education.

Party speeches were scrutinized by Aydemir, N. (2023). The study analyzed data that were collected from 2011 to 2019 to explore how different political identities, Islamic Neo-Ottomans, Turkish and Kurdish nationalists, and secular modernizers influence the framing of Syrian refugees. The results indicated that political identities pointedly shape refugee governance, while such identity-focused explanations face limitations. Since 2016, the AKP's previous Neo-Ottoman approach has diminished, while Turkish nationalists have moderated their disapproval due to alignment with the AKP in the new presidential regime established in 2018. Research highlights the significant influence of cultural context on linguistic behaviors. Al-Yousef et al. (2025a) analyzed persuasive strategies of Jordanian academics using Aristotle's rhetorical triangle, finding professors favored logical appeals (logos) while students leaned on emotional appeals (pathos). Their work integrated translation studies, emphasizing language's role in cultural communication. Similarly, Al-Yousef et al. (2025c) examined code-switching among bilingual Jordanians, identifying three types: intra-sentential, inter-sentential, and tag-switching, with identity expression and lexical gap bridging as key motivations. These studies underscore the need to explore cultural backgrounds in rhetorical strategies and sociolinguistic interactions.

Investigations into politeness strategies during negotiation reveal their complex role in facilitating agreement. Terada et al. (2021) demonstrated that virtual agents using off-record strategies were effective in gaining concessions, while positive politeness strategies led to fairer outcomes, highlighting a balance between directness and relational harmony. Similarly, Shigemitsu (2003) found that Japanese speakers often emphasize agreement to satisfy the hearer's need to feel validated, promoting collaboration and preserving harmony, which reflects the cultural importance of relational politeness in negotiations. Al-Natour et al. (2025a) explored socio-pragmatic behaviors in an academic context through observation and interviews. They identified strategies students use, such as acceptance, mitigation/deflection, rejection, and silence, highlighting that cultural norms significantly affect these responses. Their research underscores the role of compliments in fostering social relationships and solidarity between students and professors, emphasizing the relational aspects of communication.

Murphy (2014) scrutinized the unique mechanisms by which Syrian Arabic encodes negation, employing a Role and Reference Grammar framework. It delineated the lexical, morphological, and analytical methods used across verbs, clauses, nouns, and noun phrases. The study emphasized that Syrian Arabic used distinct negative particles for wide-scope and narrow-scope negation, along with several strategies for emphatic negation. Although mainly part of the Levantine Arabic dialects, Syrian Arabic's negation strategies showed a closer similarity to those of Iraqi and Gulf Arabic dialects. Al-Natour et al. (2025) explored congratulatory strategies in graduation notebooks of Jerash University students, highlighting diverse methods such as direct statements, expressions of happiness, and attached presents. Maqableh et al. (2025) examined positive politeness strategies in requests by Jordanian and Omani students, aiming to reveal cultural influences and similarities/differences in their request patterns, aligning with the focus on positive politeness in the current study.

Pedagogical approaches play a crucial role in language proficiency. Ayyat et al. (2025) found that using the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) significantly improved ESL learners' writing skills, demonstrating the effectiveness of corpus-based tools in vocabulary enhancement. Additionally, Rahmi G. (2020) investigated politeness in digital communication, revealing that students often used informal greetings and occasionally engaged in face-threatening acts, highlighting their unawareness of appropriate politeness strategies in texting lecturers.

In the Jordanian context, scholarly attention to language has shifted towards language technology, notably in machine translation (MT). AL-Yousef et al. (2025b) examine various MT approaches—rule-based, statistical, and neural and assess their effectiveness, especially in translating academic abstracts. Their findings emphasize the historical evolution, current challenges, future directions, and ethical implications of AI in language translation. Additionally, Misra et al. (2017) explored the automatic detection of agreement and disagreement in social media, illustrating the effectiveness of theoretically motivated features in this area.

Broader linguistic frameworks are informing various fields. Rabee et al. (2025) examined the influence of linguistic theories on literary and translation studies, noting a significant impact on translation due to its ties to linguistic structures. This underscores the value of linguistic analysis. Additionally, Liang (2024) enhanced the understanding of ELF users' pragmatic and emotive skills in online social argumentative contexts, thus expanding the study of pragmatic competence.

Kurdi, H. A., & Matras, Y. (2008) examined the use of discourse markers by Syrian Arabic learners of English. The findings indicated that learners utilized some markers for various functions, displaying no clear impact from Arabic. Nevertheless, some instances demonstrated the marker acting as a transition indicator, influenced by the Arabic marker "fa," signifying that learners applied their linguistic resources skillfully. Additionally, Al-Natour et al. (2025) studied the diverse refusal strategies used by Jordanian students, looking to identify the cultural and linguistic features that shape their choices. The expected results underlined the significant impact of these features on the forms of refusal strategies. Additionally, demonstrate the culture-bound nature of interactive performances. Even silence, an apparently non-verbal indication, carried politeness implications; Al-Natour et al. (2024) sought to define the meaning of politeness in silence among Jordanian EFL students, revealing that both professors and students strategically utilized silence for various goals, such as managing interruptions or expressing disapproval. The cultural context of Jordan has also been a focal point for studies examining politeness and specific speech acts, providing a vital backdrop for the present research. Akkawi et al. (2025) explored the pragmatic application of negative politeness strategies in requests made by Jordanian and Omani students. Their study assumed that while both groups might prefer similar negative politeness strategies, the specific linguistic realizations and constructions of these requests could differ, highlighting cultural distinctions in politeness representation.

AA, K. A. (2022) scrutinized terms of endearment in American English and Syrian Arabic in family discourse, focusing on their pragmatic meaning, use, and communicative values. By examining 312 interactions. The study discovered some similarities and differences in usage and specified that these terms served as markers of informality, closeness, and emotive politeness. In Syrian Arabic, terms of endearment also express respect and are more varied and expressive, highlighting their significance in Arabic family interactions. Regarding dialects and their impact on speakers of different languages, Al-Wer et al. (2023) discovered that the Druze dialect of Jordan shares the bulk of its distinctive features with the Druze dialect of Ġabal al-'Arab, while displaying some linguistic influence from neighboring Jordanian Sedentary as well as Bedouin varieties. Broader discursive strategies within the Jordanian context have also been analyzed, as seen in Almahasees et al. (2023), who acknowledged the main discursive strategies used by King Abdullah II in addressing Jordanians during the COVID-19 pandemic, including nomination, prediction, argumentation, and mitigation, all aimed at appeasing the populace and conveying directives. These studies mutually demonstrated the pervasive impact of culture on communication shapes and the strategic deployment of politeness in various interactional settings within Jordan.

Studies on politeness highlight the significance of agreement in interaction. Sembiring and Sianturi (2019) found that university students employed all four politeness strategies to avoid conflict, with a preference for the bald on-record approach. Meanwhile, Concannon et al. (2015) demonstrated that expressed agreement in dialogue was less disruptive than disagreement, although it did necessitate more deliberation in subsequent discussions. Ahmad (2021) contrasted American English and Syrian Arabic address forms, highlighting their pragmatic characteristics in family and acquaintance contexts. The data itemized how social and cultural contexts affect language use, reinforcing literature on social relationships. The results of the study explained that American culture is individualistic, promoting a communicative style that flattens hierarchy, while Syrian culture is collectivistic, emphasizing age- and status-oriented communication.

Further studies on politeness in disagreement highlight findings by Jaafar & Ageli (2022), which reveal that native speakers of English adapt their politeness strategies more flexibly than EFL learners, who show less variability across contexts. Additionally, Lee N. (2024) argues that speech acts significantly influence (im)politeness, particularly in Korean communication, positing that positive politeness should be incorporated into discussions on perceived politeness in speech practices, complementing negative politeness. This aligns with the focus of the current study on positive politeness.

The existing literature lays a strong basis for understanding politeness and agreement across cultures. While previous studies have examined general politeness and specific speech acts in Jordanian and Syrian contexts, there is a gap in the qualitative analysis of positive politeness agreement strategies among Jordanian EFL students and their professors in academic environments. This research seeks to address this gap by exploring these culturally informed strategies in depth.

2.2 Analytical Framework

Over the course of several decades, research on politeness has represented a significant area of sociolinguistic investigation, exploring a variety of speech actions, including agreement, disagreement, requests, apologies, refusals, compliments, and complaints. Grice (1975), Lakoff (1973), Leech (1983), and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory stand out as one of the most widely used and significant frameworks in modern study. These studies have drawn from a variety of theoretical approaches. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory claims universality, which holds that its guiding principles apply to all cultures because of essential human "face wants,".

2.2.1 Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

"Face-Threatening Acts" are what Brown and Levinson (1987) refer to as communicative acts that intrinsically threaten the face desires. Speakers intentionally use a variety of positive politeness strategies to mitigate these threats. The politeness strategies that are mentioned in Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory are summarized into five strategies, which are the positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, bald-on-record, and do not do the FTA. The use of the positive politeness strategy by the speaker is to maintain the hearer's positive face by showing solidarity, approval, and appreciation. It frequently includes using in-group markers, offering compliments, claiming a common perspective, or demonstrating common ground. The negative **politeness** strategy saves the hearer's negative face by avoiding imposition, deference, or minimizing the threat to autonomy. Common strategies include expressions of humility, apologies, indirectness, and hedges. This strategy comprises performance and an FTA indirectly, allowing for multiple interpretations is off-record. In this strategy, the intention of the speaker is not obviously stated, providing a way to hint at an FTA without directly performing it, thus enabling plausible deniability. **Bald-on-record** strategy encompasses employing an FTA directly and clearly, without any effort to diminish the threat to the hearer's face. It typically occurs in situations where competence is paramount, the threat is a strong power dynamic, or minimal. Lastly, **do not use the FTA strategy** when a speaker may select to evade acting the potentially face-threatening act altogether, choosing silence or complete evasion of the topic to avoid any imposition or threat to face.

The selection of these strategies is influenced by social distance between interlocutors, their relative power, and the ranking of imposition of the particular FTA. Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 60) explain the circumstances that determine the choice of politeness strategies as explicated in the following diagram.

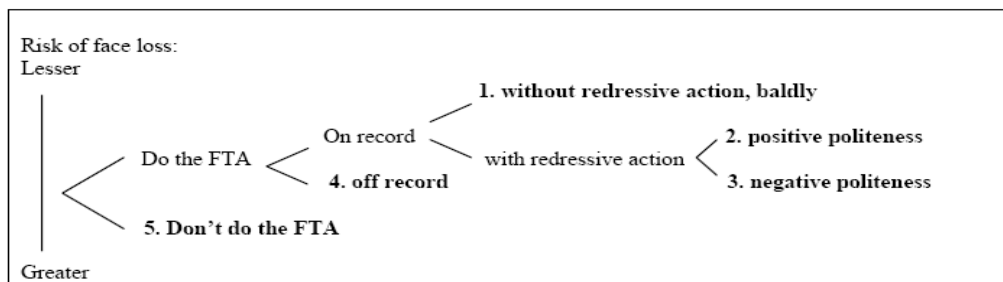


Figure 1:
Circu

stances Determining Choice of Strategy (from Brown and Levinson, 1987, p.60)

Given its comprehensive nature and its claimed universality, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theoretical framework will serve as the primary analytical lens for this study. This framework is particularly suitable for analyzing politeness agreement

strategies utilized by Jordanian EFL students and their professors, providing a robust structure for interpreting their communicative choices within an academic setting.

2.2.2 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative method to explore communication between Jordanian and Syrian English-speaking students at Jerash University. Data collection comprises note-taking and semi-structured interviews, ensuring participant privacy through unique coding. Observations and systematic note-taking will identify and categorize politeness strategies based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, revealing how agreement and politeness are exchanged in this academic setting. Note-taking will be collected from approximately 100 participants. Moreover, 5 students will be interviewed from each group.

3.0 Methodology

The purpose of adopting a qualitative approach in this study is to examine the politeness agreement strategies used in communication by Jordanian and Syrian EFL students at Jerash University. A thorough grasp of these nuanced pragmatic strategies can be obtained using a qualitative method.

3.1 Data Collection

Data collection from Jordanian and Syrian English and Translation students at Jerash University will employ observational notes and semi-structured interviews, following a systematic seven-step procedure. This includes obtaining institutional approval, scheduling observations and interviews, audio recording interactions, transcribing relevant data, classifying politeness agreement strategies according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, and extracting representative examples for analysis and presentation.

3.2 Sample of the Study

The study will involve Jordanian and Syrian students from the English Language and Literature and Translation Departments at Jerash University. Participant recruitment and data collection will continue until theoretical saturation is reached, defined as the point where no new information or themes emerge, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being investigated. Hennink, M., Hutter I., & Bailey, A. (2020), occurs when no new information or themes emerge from further data collection, indicating that a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation has been attained.

3.3 Instruments

This research employs semi-structured interviews and note-taking instruments to gather data from Jordanian and Syrian students at Jerash University, focusing on politeness agreement strategies among Arabic-English bilingual Jordanian speakers. Identifying negative situations or exceptions, differentiating between regular and irregular actions, figuring out what is happening and why, and capturing variance to observe the event in its totality from the number of actions are all part of taking notes (Musante, K., & DeWalt, B. R., 2010). Note-taking will aid in identifying exceptions, distinguishing between regular and irregular activities, and capturing comprehensive perspectives on the events studied. Researchers will secure permission from the English and Translation Department and ensure participants sign consent forms, emphasizing that the data will solely serve the study's purposes.

The research methodology incorporates semi-structured interviews and note-taking. Semi-structured interviews, held in private settings at Jerash University's Faculty of Arts, enable an in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions of politeness agreement strategies, while ensuring consistency in core questions. Note-taking during lectures and interviews serves multiple functions: it helps identify negative cases, distinguishes between regular and irregular communication activities, facilitates understanding of interaction dynamics, and allows for the observation of variations in politeness strategies to provide a comprehensive view of communication events.

3.4 Trustworthiness

The researcher will obtain a formal permission letter from the Head of the English and Translation Department. Subsequently, all prospective participants will be provided with a detailed consent form outlining the study's purpose, their rights (including

voluntary participation and withdrawal), and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Participants will be explicitly informed that all collected data will be used solely for the academic purposes of this study and will not be utilized for any other objectives. To maintain participant privacy, all collected data will be anonymized using codes (e.g., J.S-1 for Jordanian students, S.P-1 for Syrian students).

4.0 Conclusion

This conceptual research investigates politeness agreement strategies used by Jordanian and Syrian students in their communication, focusing on face maintenance. The study expected that students would tend to use mitigated agreement strategies, reserving stronger agreements for close colleagues. The choice of formal or mitigated strategies is influenced by contextual factors such as interaction settings, Jordanian and Syrian cultural norms, gender dynamics, and situational demands. The findings highlight the need for empirical validation to further understand the motivations behind using these strategies, contributing valuable insights for future research.

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