
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Politeness Strategies in Political Discourse: A Study through the Lens of Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

Jeffrey A. Rajik

Language Department, Mindanao State University – Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography, Philippines

E-mail: jeffreyrarik@msutawi-tawi.edu.ph

| ABSTRACT

This study explores politeness strategies in the political discourse of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., using Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987) as a framework. A descriptive-qualitative approach analyzed three speeches from February 2025, revealing a sophisticated blend of strategies. The findings demonstrate the strategic use of Bald On-Record, Negative Politeness, Positive Politeness, and Off-Record strategies, showcasing a calculated balance between assertiveness and respect to achieve various communicative goals (persuasion, rapport-building, and image management). The research highlights the importance of considering context in analyzing politeness strategies, extending existing literature by demonstrating the complex relationship of these strategies in contemporary political communication and offering avenues for future research into cross-cultural variations and audience reception.

| KEYWORDS

Politeness strategies, political discourse, Brown and Levinson, Philippine politics

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Political discourse is a critical arena where communication shapes public perception, influences decision-making, and delineates power dynamics (Apter, 2001; Horbenko, 2023; Valerevna, 2022). The way political figures navigate conversation can significantly impact their reception by the public and the media (McNair, 2017). This research aims to explore politeness strategies in political discourse through the lens of Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, which offers a foundational framework for understanding how individuals manage social interactions to mitigate face threats—essentially, the social value individuals claim for themselves in interaction.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness strategies are categorized into bald on-record politeness, negative politeness, positive politeness, and off-record strategies, each serving to preserve the face of both the speaker and the listener. By applying these concepts to political communication, this study aims to uncover how politicians employ these strategies to convey messages effectively while maintaining their public image and addressing the interpersonal dynamics at play in political contexts.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to explain the relationship of language, power, and social norms within political interactions, thus enriching the understanding of political communication. Despite the growing body of research on language in politics (Nafea & Taher, 2024; Rahmani & Saeed, 2024; Rajik, 2023; Rashkin et al., 2017), there remains a literature gap regarding a systematic examination of politeness strategies specifically framed by Brown and Levinson's theory in contemporary political discourse. This study addresses this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of how these politeness strategies manifest in political speeches.

Specifically, the goal of this study is to identify and analyze the use of various politeness strategies employed in political discourse and assess their effectiveness in facilitating communication and shaping audience perception. Through qualitative analysis of selected political discourse, this research seeks to contribute to the existing scholarship by providing insights that could inform both political communication theory and practice, eventually enhancing understanding of the role of language in political engagement. Importantly, this study's findings are purely for academic purposes and should not be interpreted as an endorsement or critique of any particular political entity.

2. Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, introduced in their 1987 book "Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage," focuses on how individuals manage social relationships through language using strategies to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs). Central to this theory is the concept of "face," which pertains to an individual's self-esteem or public image, categorized into two types: positive face, the desire to be liked and accepted, and negative face, the wish for autonomy and freedom from imposition. FTAs are actions or statements that could potentially threaten someone's face, such as requests or criticisms. To address these FTAs, Brown and Levinson identified various politeness strategies that vary in directness, including Bald On-Record, which denotes straightforward communication without politeness markers; Positive Politeness, aimed at enhancing the listener's positive face; Negative Politeness, emphasizing respect for the listener's autonomy; and Off-Record strategies, which are indirect and create ambiguity. In this study, these strategies were applied to analyze how the politician subject navigates language in discourse, influencing public perception and maintaining interpersonal dynamics.

3. Materials and Methods

This study employed a descriptive-qualitative research design to identify and describe the politeness strategies utilized in political discourse, specifically focusing on the speeches of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. The choice of a descriptive-qualitative approach allows for a detailed exploration of the subtleties of language use within political contexts.

The data for this research were derived from three notable speeches delivered by President Marcos Jr. during the "Alyansa Para sa Bagong Pilipinas" rallies. These speeches were held in Pasay City on February 18, 2025 (Marcos, 2025a), in Dumaguete City, Negros Oriental on February 20, 2025 (Marcos, 2025b), and in Bacolod City on February 21, 2025 (Marcos, 2025c). This selection of speeches not only reflects a diverse audience but also presents an opportunity to examine how politeness strategies may vary in different rhetorical contexts and locales.

In the analysis phase, the methodology began with the identification of utterances present in the speeches, allowing for the isolation of specific instances of communication that could be examined for their politeness features. This process facilitated a rich understanding of the language utilized by the President and how it might resonate with the audience. Subsequently, the identified utterances were categorized into four main types of politeness strategies as outlined by Brown and Levinson: Bald On-Record, Negative Politeness, Positive Politeness, and Off-Record. This categorization presented a structured framework for analyzing the varying levels of directness and politeness embedded within the speech.

The study then classified the utterances into specific strategies under each major category. For example, within Negative Politeness, strategies such as hedging and indirect requests were marked, whereas Positive Politeness included building rapport and negotiating requests. This thorough classification revealed the range of tactics employed by the speaker to navigate social relationships and mitigate potential face threats during discourse. Finally, the analysis focused on the purpose behind the utilization of each strategy, exploring how these approaches contributed to political objectives such as persuading the audience, reinforcing authority, and fostering a connection with constituents.

4. Results and Discussion

A total of 47 politeness utterances were utilized across the three political discourses analyzed in this study. Of these, 18 utterances were categorized as Bald On-record, encompassing six distinct strategies. The Negative Politeness category comprised 11 utterances, also associated with six identified strategies. Nine utterances were classified under the Positive Politeness level, which included three distinct strategies. Lastly, nine utterances were designated as Off-record, corresponding to two identified strategies.

Table 1. Politeness Strategies in Political Discourse

Politeness Level	Strategies	Sample Utterance
Bald On-record	Statement of Confidence	Kaya <i>malakas po ang loob ko makaharap sa inyo</i> at sabihin na iboto ninyo ang ating mga kandidato. "That's why I am confident to stand before you and say to vote for our candidates."
	Fact Assertion	<i>Lahat po 'yan dumaan na sa Senado.</i> "All of them have been in the Senate."
	Call to Action	<i>Kaya't tayo na! Magkaisa muli tayo</i> kagaya ng ating ginagawa kapag tayo ay nahaharap sa krisis. "So, let's go! Let's unite again like we did when we faced a crisis."
	Comparison	Iyan na po ang <i>kaibahan ng Alyansa sa lahat ng mga ibang tumatakbo</i> dito sa halalan na ito. "That is the difference of the Alliance from all the other candidates running in this election."
	Describing Qualifications	<i>Alam nila</i> ang gobyerno, <i>kabisado nila</i> mula sa matataas na posisyon. "They know the government; they are familiar with it from high positions."
	Declaring Intent	<i>They will stand in the Senate</i> , not to oppose but to propose.
Negative Politeness	Hedging	– tingnan po natin ang ating grupo dito <i>baka</i> (maybe) hindi po niyo nabibilang sabihin ko sa inyo, walo po sa kanila ay naging senador na... "Let's take a look at our group here because you might not be counting, let me tell you, eight of them have already become senators..."
	Indirectness	<i>Wala po kayong maririnig na pagmumura.</i> "You will not hear any cursing."
	Apology	<i>Pagbigyan niyo po ako</i> at binibilang ko lang 'yung aming mga kandidato... "Please give me a few minutes as I am just counting our candidates..."
	Conditioning	<i>Kung sa pambabatas naman</i> , apat po sa kanila ay abogado. "If it is regarding legislation, four of them are lawyers."
	Offering Options	<i>Kung titingnan niyo po ang record po nila...</i> "If you may look at their records..."
	Minimizing the Imposition	<i>Kaya naman po pagka nailuklok na sila sa kanilang posisyon bilang senador ulit, ay makikita po natin hindi na po sila kumakapa-kapa sa kanilang trabaho.</i> "So, once they are elected to their positions as senators again, we will see that they are no longer groping in the dark with their work."
Positive Politeness	Building Rapport	<i>Magandang gabi po sa inyong lahat, mga tiga-Pasay, mga tiga-Metro Manila!</i>

		"Good evening to all of you, residents of Pasay, residents of Metro Manila!"
	Negotiating Request	<i>Ipagtatanggol natin ang ating soberanya at karapatan sa pamamagitan ng diplomasya at dignidad.</i> "Let's defend our sovereignty and rights through diplomacy and dignity."
	Creating Friendly Atmosphere	Magsiupo po tayo at <i>mga dalawang oras itong speech ko.</i> "Please take a seat, as my speech will be about two hours long."
Off-record	Rhetorical Question	<i>Kung sa pambabatas naman, anong magagawa ng mga abogado na hindi naman bihasa sa paggawa ng batas?</i> "In terms of legislation, what can lawyers who are not skilled in making laws do?"
	Complaint	Wala po kayong maririnig na masasamang salita. Wala po kayong maririnig na panakot. "You will not hear any bad words. You will not hear any threats."

Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the politeness strategies identified in three political speeches, organized according to Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987). The analysis uncovers a diverse range of strategies used, reflecting a sophisticated approach to communication.

The data reveal a sophisticated blend of politeness strategies, showcasing a thoughtfully calculated approach to political communication. The speaker employs direct appeals while also demonstrating sensitivity to the audience's needs and preferences. The relatively balanced distribution across categories indicates a conscious effort to harmonize assertiveness with respect and rapport-building, eventually aiming for effective persuasion within a socially acceptable framework. The variety of strategies within each level highlights a nuanced and strategic implementation of these strategies to achieve different purposes.

Bald On-Record

This level of politeness encompasses 18 utterances that employ direct and assertive language, prioritizing efficiency while conveying confidence. These utterances are categorized into six strategies, reflecting a focused intention to persuade the audience.

1. Statement of Confidence

Two utterances fall under this strategy. For example, the phrase "Malakas po ang loob ko" ("I am confident") clearly expresses self-assurance, which is central to this strategy. This utterance conveys the speaker's confidence and reinforces the credibility of his message.

2. Fact Assertion

Five utterances are classified here. The statement "Lahat po 'yan dumaan na sa Senado" ("All of that has gone through the Senate") presents a factual claim about past Senate experience without any hedging or softening. This straightforward assertion serves to persuade by demonstrating experience.

3. Call to Action

Six utterances are identified within this strategy. The phrase "Kaya't tayo na!" ("Let's go!") serves as a direct invitation for the audience to take action, with no ambiguity. Similarly, the imperative tone in "Magkaisa muli..." ("Let's unite again...") exemplifies the assertiveness characteristic of this strategy, developing a sense of urgency and collective action.

4. Comparison

One utterance exemplifies this strategy: "Iyan na po ang kaibahan..." ("That is the difference"). This statement explicitly compares the speaker's group favorably to other candidates, stressing advantages proposed to persuade the audience through contrast.

5. Describing Qualifications

Three utterances align with this strategy. The phrase "Alam nila ang gobyerno..." ("They know the government...") directly enumerates the qualifications of the candidates, aiming to build credibility and trustworthiness. This straightforward presentation of expertise is intended to influence the audience's perception positively.

6. Declaring Intent

One utterance is identified here: "They will stand in the Senate..." This statement clearly outlines the group's future plans, leaving no room for misinterpretation. The declarative nature of this assertion underscores their commitment, aiming to shape voters' expectations and instill confidence in the candidates' objectives.

Negative Politeness

This level of politeness encompasses eleven utterances that demonstrate respect for the audience's autonomy by minimizing potential imposition or face-threatening acts. These eleven phrases are classified into six strategies that illustrate various methods through which this level of politeness is accomplished.

1. Hedging

Two utterances are identified in this strategy, which employ uncertain or tentative language to soften the impact of statements or requests. This strategy acknowledges the possibility of disagreement or discomfort while avoiding direct imposition of the speaker's views. Words like "baka" ("maybe") and "siguro" ("perhaps") reduce the assertiveness of the statements, making them less confrontational. For example, "Baka hindi po niyo nabibilang sabihin ko sa inyo..." ("You might not be counting, let me tell you...") demonstrates this technique effectively.

2. Indirectness

One utterance exemplifies Indirectness as strategy to achieve Negative Politeness level: "Wala po kayong maririnig na pagmumura" ("You will not hear any cursing"). This statement indirectly reassures the audience about the nature of the speech and the candidates' campaign style, subtly suggesting that other candidates may engage in cursing. By conveying this message without direct criticism, it maintains a respectful tone, allowing the audience to feel secure in their decision-making process.

3. Apology

Expressing remorse for any potential inconvenience or disruption caused by a statement or request is a hallmark of negative politeness. This strategy shows consideration for the audience's time, effort, or potential discomfort. Three utterances fall under this category, such as "Pagbigyan niyo po ako at binibilang ko lang 'yung aming mga kandidato..." ("Please give me a few minutes as I am just counting our candidates..."). This phrase implicitly acknowledges the inconvenience to the audience, demonstrating the speaker's awareness of their time and a willingness to accommodate their needs.

4. Conditioning

This strategy involves framing information or requests conditionally, which gives the audience a sense of control and choice. By suggesting that the request or action is contingent on specific circumstances, the speaker allows the audience to evaluate their relevance. Three utterances fit this strategy, including "Kung sa pambabatas naman, apat po sa kanila ay abogado." ("If it is regarding legislation, four of them are lawyers."). The use of "kung" ("if") conditions the discussion of the candidates' qualifications on the audience's understanding, enabling selective engagement based on their interests.

5. Offering Options

This strategy empowers the audience by providing choices, allowing them to feel in control while avoiding pressure to comply with a single directive. An example from this category is "Kung titingnan niyo po ang record po nila..." ("If you may look at their records..."). By inviting the audience to explore the candidates' records, the speaker grants them the option to conduct further research, thus facilitating a more participatory decision-making process.

6. Minimizing the Imposition

The goal of this strategy is to lessen the perceived burden or inconvenience associated with a request. It downplays the effort required from the audience and highlights the ease of the action requested. In the statement "Kaya naman po pagka nailuklok na sila sa kanilang posisyon bilang senador ulit, ay makikita po natin hindi na po sila kumakapa-kapa sa kanilang trabaho." ("So, once they are elected to their positions as senators again, we will see that they are no longer groping in the dark with their work."), the

speaker minimizes the challenges of returning to the role by implying a seamless transition. This reassures the audience, mitigating concerns about potential ineffectiveness or learning curves.

Positive Politeness

This politeness level includes nine utterances that foster rapport and solidarity. The utterances are organized into three distinct strategies that create a positive and engaging atmosphere.

1. Building Rapport

This strategy consists of six identified utterances aimed at establishing a friendly and positive connection with the audience, thereby creating a sense of camaraderie and shared identity. Effective rapport-building encourages the audience to be more receptive to the speaker's message. For example, the statement "Magandang gabi po sa inyong lahat, mga taga-Pasay, mga taga-Metro Manila!" ("Good evening to all of you, residents of Pasay, residents of Metro Manila!") personally addresses the audience and explicitly acknowledges their location. By mentioning "mga taga-Pasay, mga taga-Metro Manila," the speaker demonstrates awareness of the audience's specific context, fostering a sense of connection.

Additionally, the inclusion of the politeness marker "po," a respectful particle in Filipino, adds a layer of politeness and deference, signaling respect for the audience. The phrase "sa inyong lahat" ("to all of you") further enhances the inclusive and welcoming tone, making the audience feel valued and engaged.

2. Negotiating Request

This strategy focuses on framing requests or demands collaboratively, emphasizing shared goals and mutual benefit. It transforms requests from commands into cooperative efforts. The sole utterance in this strategy is "Ipagtatanggol natin ang ating soberanya at karapatan sa pamamagitan ng diplomasya at dignidad." ("Let's defend our sovereignty and rights through diplomacy and dignity."). The use of "natin" ("us") emphasizes collective responsibility and collaboration, portraying the defense of sovereignty as a joint endeavor rather than a unilateral action.

Moreover, the choice of powerful and positive words such as "ipagtatanggol" ("defend"), "soberanya" ("sovereignty"), "Karapatan" ("rights"), and "dignidad" ("dignity") evokes a sense of shared national pride and purpose. This statement subtly encourages audience support by implying a mutual commitment to defending national interests, appealing to collective responsibility and national pride.

3. Creating Friendly Atmosphere

This politeness strategy, which includes two utterances, aims to establish a relaxed and comfortable tone to put the audience at ease, making them more receptive to the message. For instance, the utterance "Magsiupo po tayo at mga dalawang oras itong speech ko." ("Please take a seat, as my speech will be about two hours long.") injects a playful note regarding the expected length of the speech, lightening the mood and eliciting laughter, which helps create an enjoyable atmosphere for the audience.

Off-Record

Off-record politeness in communication is characterized by indirectness and a reliance on the audience's interpretation. This approach minimizes imposition but may sacrifice clarity. The nine identified utterances are organized into two main strategies—rhetorical questions and complaints—highlighting this subtle method of persuasion.

1. Rhetorical Question

Rhetorical questions imply answers without explicitly stating them. In the political discourse analyzed in this study, there are seven identified utterances that pose rhetorical questions. For example, the inquiry "Kung sa pambabatas naman, anong magagawa ng mga abogado na hindi naman bihasa sa paggawa ng batas?" ("In terms of legislation, what can lawyers who are not skilled in making laws do?") does not directly assert the inadequacy of unskilled lawyers but instead prompts the audience to consider the implications for themselves.

The effectiveness of this strategy lies in the audience's ability to draw the intended conclusion: that lawyers lacking legislative expertise may be less effective. By avoiding direct criticism, the speaker reduces the potential for confrontation. This indirect approach allows the audience to arrive at the conclusion independently, fostering a sense of involvement in the reasoning process, which can lead to greater acceptance of the implied critique. The collaborative nature of guiding the audience to this conclusion is central to the strategy's persuasive power.

2. Complaint

This strategy exemplifies off-record politeness by indirectly criticizing others without resorting to direct confrontation. For instance, the statement “Wala po kayong maririnig na masasamang salita. Wala po kayong maririnig na panakot.” (“You will not hear any bad words. You will not hear any threats.”) serves as an indirect complaint. While it appears positive, it implicitly critiques opposing candidates by highlighting the absence of negativity in the speaker's campaign.

By focusing on the lack of “masasamang salita” (“bad words”) and “pananakot” (“threats”), the speaker subtly suggests that other campaigns may engage in such tactics. This is accomplished without directly naming or accusing any specific opponent, thereby minimizing the potential for confrontation. Additionally, this sets a positive benchmark for the speaker's own campaign, implicitly contrasting it with the negative practices of others.

Furthermore, the implied criticism resonates with the audience's values, associating negative campaigning with unethical behavior while aligning the speaker's approach with integrity. This strategy is persuasive because it relies on the audience to infer the intended critique. By avoiding direct confrontation, the speaker effectively conveys a disapproving message, positioning their campaign as morally superior. The strategy's success hinges on the audience's understanding of the implicit message being communicated.

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzed politeness strategies in the speeches of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., employing Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987) as its framework. The study used a descriptive-qualitative approach, analyzing three speeches delivered during the “Alyansa Para sa Bagong Pilipinas” rallies in February 2025. The core finding is the multifaceted and strategic use of politeness strategies by the President, demonstrating a sophisticated approach to political communication.

Moreover, the study identified a wide range of politeness strategies across four main levels of politeness: Bald On-Record, Negative Politeness, Positive Politeness, and Off-Record. This variety suggests a calculated approach to communication, adapting strategies to different contexts and audiences. In addition, the balanced distribution across politeness levels indicates a deliberate attempt to blend assertiveness with respect and rapport-building, aiming for effective persuasion within a socially acceptable framework. This contrasts with research that may focus on the predominance of one type of politeness strategy in certain political contexts (Balogun & Murana, 2018; Injuki & Ireri, 2021; Santoso, 2015).

The analysis also revealed that the President strategically employed each politeness level to achieve specific communicative goals. For example, Bald On-Record strategies (e.g. statements of confidence and calls to action) were used to project authority and directly persuade the audience. Similarly, Negative Politeness strategies (e.g. hedging, indirectness, apologies) were employed to demonstrate respect for the audience's autonomy, mitigating potential face threats. Likewise, Positive Politeness (e.g. building rapport, negotiating requests) fostered a sense of connection and solidarity. Finally, Off-Record strategies (e.g. rhetorical questions, complaints) conveyed indirect criticism or persuasion, relying on the audience's interpretation. Consequently, this multifaceted approach is a key contribution, enriching understanding of how politeness strategies are deployed strategically in political discourse beyond simple categorizations.

In the same vein, the study noted how politeness strategies varied across different rhetorical contexts and locales, indicating a nuanced understanding of audience engagement by the speaker. Therefore, this highlights the importance of considering the context in analyzing politeness, a vital aspect often overlooked in broader politeness studies.

This research extends the existing literature by providing a detailed, context-specific analysis of politeness strategies in contemporary political communication. It challenges simplistic views of political language as either entirely assertive or entirely deferential, revealing a complex interplay of politeness strategies aimed at achieving multiple goals simultaneously: maintaining a public image, securing support, and influencing public perception. The findings have important implications for understanding how power dynamics operate in political communication and how language shapes political engagement.

5.1 Study Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the analysis focused on a limited number of speeches, which may not fully represent the diverse communicative strategies employed by the President throughout his political career. Second, the context-specific nature of the study may restrict the generalizability of the findings to different cultures or political systems. Additionally, the qualitative approach may introduce subjectivity in the interpretation of politeness strategies, highlighting the need for a more diverse methodological framework in future analyses.

Future research should explore several avenues to expand upon these findings. Comparative studies could examine political speeches across diverse cultures and political systems to determine the cross-cultural applicability of Brown and Levinson's model and identify variations in strategic politeness deployment. Furthermore, cross-modal analysis incorporating non-verbal cues such as body language and tone would provide a richer understanding of how politeness is conveyed in political discourse. Investigating audience reception through surveys, focus groups, or textual analysis of audience responses would illuminate how different politeness strategies influence perception and engagement. Finally, longitudinal studies tracking the usage of politeness strategies over time could reveal their effectiveness in shaping public opinion and achieving political objectives.

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ORCID iD: 0009-0001-5773-6639

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