Negative Politeness Strategies in Uglies Character Interactions

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Abstract

This study examines negative politeness strategies in character dialogue, aiming to reveal how linguistic choices minimize face-threatening acts (FTAs) to maintain social harmony. Using Brown and Levinsons politeness theory, the analysis draws from a qualitative descriptive design, with data sourced from the movie Uglies and collected through observational, non-participatory methods, recorded via note-taking. A pragmatic identity method and equalizing technique were applied to analyze 216 instances of negative politeness, identifying "Question, Hedge" as the most frequent strategy (41 instances), reflecting a strong preference for indirectness to soften statements and avoid imposing on the listener. This was followed by "Be Pessimistic" and "Apologize" with 25 instances each, indicating that expressions of doubt and regret were also commonly used to mitigate imposition. Other strategies included "Minimize the Imposition" and "Give Deference" (24 instances each), "Be Conventionally Indirect" (20), "Go on Record as Incurring a Debt, or as Not Indebting" (18), "Impersonalize" and "State the FTA as a General Rule" (14 each), and "Nominalize" (11). The findings suggest a consistent preference for indirectness and deference to protect negative face, supporting respectful interactions and reinforcing social balance among characters.

Keywords: Negative Politeness Strategies; Pragmatics; Uglies

INTRODUCTION

In a world increasingly defined by social expectations and cultural norms, the struggle for individuality often takes center stage. The quest for authenticity amid societal pressures invites exploration of profound themes such as identity, self-acceptance, and the complexities of human relationships. As individuals navigate these challenges, their interactions reveal the nuances of communication that shape their experiences and choices. According to Goffman (1959), social interactions are governed by the need to manage impressions, emphasizing the significance of communication strategies in maintaining one's identity within societal constraints. Central to understanding these interactions is the concept of negative politeness, a term introduced by sociolinguists Brown and Levinson (1987). Negative politeness strategies are designed to respect the listeners autonomy and minimize the imposition on their personal space. Characterized by indirectness, hedging, and mitigating language, these strategies allow speakers to convey their messages while acknowledging potential discomfort. As noted by Holmes (1995), the use of negative politeness is crucial in mitigating threats to face, making it particularly relevant in contexts where social hierarchies are at play. Within narratives exploring themes of conformity and resistance, negative politeness becomes a vital mechanism for characters to negotiate relationships and societal expectations. This article aims to analyze the manifestations of negative politeness in a contemporary film, exploring how these strategies contribute to character development and thematic depth.

In todays digital age, the dynamics of communication have evolved significantly, influencing how individuals express themselves while navigating social landscapes. One prominent issue is the rise of online interactions, where negative politeness plays a crucial role in managing

conflict and maintaining relationships. As social media platforms become primary venues for discourse, users frequently employ strategies of negative politeness to avoid direct confrontations and foster interpersonal harmony. For instance, in response to a video titled Donald Trump speaks after winning the 2024 Presidential Election on the Fox News YouTube channel, user @DanielleVasse-m9d commented, "*I'm from the UK and was praying for you all throughout the night. When I woke up, I was like phew Thank God*" This statement demonstrates the strategy of **giving deference**, as the commenter expresses empathy and reverence toward the U.S. election outcome, aligning emotionally with the audience in a respectful, indirect manner. Such comments highlight how negative politeness fosters understanding and mutual respect in diverse social contexts, underscoring its significance not only in personal exchanges but also in broader, international conversations.

In the movie Uglies, the theme of negative politeness is intricately woven into the characters interactions as they navigate societal expectations surrounding beauty. The protagonist, Tally Youngblood, grapples with the pressures to conform to the standards set by her society, which mandates cosmetic surgery at a certain age. This struggle is poignantly encapsulated in a scene where Tally expresses her frustrations, stating, "*I'm so tired of being pretty*" (timestamp: approximately 1:15:32). This statement exemplifies the strategy of **being conventionally indirect**, as Tally hints at her deeper dissatisfaction with society's values without directly challenging the norms. Her indirect expression of frustration reflects her inner conflict and desire for authenticity in a world that values superficial appearances.

The use of negative politeness is evident in this statement, as Tally indirectly communicates her dissatisfaction without directly confronting societal norms. As pointed out by Brown and Levinson (1987), negative politeness strategies help individuals mitigate face threats and show respect for the listeners autonomy. Additionally, Culpeper (1996) asserts that these strategies are essential in contexts where power dynamics exist, allowing individuals to navigate delicate social interactions. By framing her feelings in a way that acknowledges the prevailing beauty standards, Tally navigates the complexities of her identity while hinting at her resistance to conformity. This instance serves as a powerful example of how negative politeness strategies allow characters in Uglies to articulate their struggles without directly challenging the societal framework, showcasing the nuances of communication in a context of oppression and expectation.

Previous research has explored various aspects of negative politeness strategies, highlighting their significance in different contexts. One such study by Kholis et al. (2024) examined the factors influencing Trevor Noah's use of negative politeness in his stand-up comedy special Atlanta Afraid of the Dark (2016). Utilizing Brown and Levinsons theories on politeness, particularly negative politeness, the study revealed that Noah employed techniques such as indirectness, questioning, hedging, and depersonalization. The findings indicated that social context played a crucial role in his humor, as Noah often addressed pertinent social issues, showcasing how negative politeness strategies are essential for delivering punchlines effectively.

Another notable study by Ramadhan and Afriana (2024), focused on the negative politeness strategies employed in the movie How to Train Your Dragon: Homecoming. Similar to the first study, they used Brown and Levinsons framework to analyze the movies transcript, identifying 15 instances of negative politeness strategies. These included conventional indirectness, questioning, hedging, pessimism, and minimizing imposition. This research further illustrates the application of negative politeness in cinematic dialogue, emphasizing its relevance in conveying complex social interactions. Both studies contribute to a deeper understanding of how negative politeness strategies operate in different mediums, reinforcing their importance in communication.

The previous studies on negative politeness strategies share several similarities with the present study, particularly in their application of Brown and Levinsons politeness theory. Both Kholis et al. (2024) and Ramadhan and Afriana (2024) utilized qualitative descriptive approaches to analyze the use of negative politeness in different contexts, showcasing how these strategies facilitate communication while respecting the listeners autonomy. Additionally, each study highlights the significance of social context in shaping the content and delivery of communication, whether in stand-up comedy or animated film dialogue.

The present study aims to further explore negative politeness strategies, focusing on their manifestations within the character interactions in the movie Uglies. By analyzing specific instances where characters employ negative politeness, this research seeks to contribute to the understanding of how these strategies reflect broader themes of individuality and societal pressure. This study will examine the dynamics of communication in a contemporary narrative, providing insight into the nuances of negative politeness and its role in character development and thematic depth. Ultimately, the scope of the present study emphasizes the relevance of negative politeness strategies in navigating complex social interactions, reinforcing their significance in both comedic and dramatic contexts.

Pragmatics is a key field of linguistics concerned with the relationship between language and its users within specific social contexts. According to Yule (1996), pragmatics examines how listeners interpret utterances in context, focusing on the speakers intended meaning rather than the literal interpretation. Similarly, Levinson (1983) defines pragmatics as the study of language usage within a social framework, addressing how contextual factors shape the meaning and force of utterances. Both scholars emphasize the importance of pragmatics in understanding how communication goes beyond literal meanings to include implied intentions, social cues, and shared knowledge. Ultimately, pragmatics aims to analyze how speakers construct meaning within various social contexts, highlighting the significance of both linguistic and situational cues in communication.

In understanding pragmatics, context plays a pivotal role in shaping how messages are conveyed and interpreted. Flick (2014) argues that context not only influences what is said but also dictates what remains unsaid, guiding interlocutors in interpreting implied meanings and social expectations. Therefore, context is essential to pragmatics, serving as the foundation for interpreting language in its social and situational settings.

Politeness refers to the strategies individuals use to communicate in ways that preserve social harmony and mutual respect. Brown and Levinson (1987) define politeness as a universal feature of language that involves managing face, the self-image that individuals project in social interactions. They argue that speakers strategically choose their words to avoid face-threatening acts (FTAs) and maintain interpersonal relationships. Similarly, Leech (1983) emphasizes the role of politeness in minimizing potential conflicts and promoting social cooperation. By applying politeness strategies, speakers can navigate sensitive topics and express their thoughts in a manner that considers the listeners feelings and social expectations. These strategies are crucial for achieving smooth communication and avoiding misunderstandings or offense. Among these strategies are four primary kinds, which form the basis for understanding how politeness is enacted in language.

Brown and Levinson (1987) outline four kinds of politeness strategies: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. Bald on-record strategies involve direct language with no effort to minimize threats to the listeners face. In contrast, positive politeness aims to establish camaraderie by acknowledging shared values or interests, thus minimizing social distance. Negative politeness, on the other hand, is characterized by indirectness, hedging, and expressions of deference to respect the listeners autonomy and minimize imposition. Finally, off-record strategies involve indirect hints or suggestions, leaving room for the listener to interpret the intended meaning. This article focuses specifically on negative

politeness strategies, as these are vital in managing interactions where the speaker seeks to acknowledge and respect the listeners personal space and autonomy.

Negative politeness strategies, as described by Brown and Levinson (1987), are communication techniques aimed at minimizing the imposition on the listener and showing respect for their personal autonomy. These strategies are essential when the speaker acknowledges potential threats to the listeners "negative face," or their desire for freedom from imposition or external pressure. By utilizing negative politeness, speakers attempt to avoid causing discomfort or embarrassment, demonstrating sensitivity to the listeners needs and preferences (Brown & Levinson, 1987; G. Leech, 2014). Negative politeness strategies often involve indirectness, hedging, and cautious language, all of which prioritize the listeners autonomy and personal space.

Negative politeness strategies encompass various ways to reduce the imposition on the listener while maintaining their autonomy and face. Brown and Levinson (1987) provide a framework of ten specific strategies used in communication to show respect, mitigate threats, and address the listeners negative face needs. These strategies aim to achieve politeness by being indirect, cautious, and deferential. The ten strategies are as follows:

1. **Being conventionally indirect**: Employing indirect phrasing to make requests or statements (e.g., "Could you open the window?").
2. **Questioning and hedging**: Using hedges and questions to lessen assertiveness (e.g., "Maybe you could help with this?").
3. **Be pessimistic**: Expressing doubt about the listeners willingness to comply (e.g., "You probably wouldnt want to lend me your book, would you?").
4. **Minimizing the imposition**: Downplaying the significance of the request (e.g., "Just a small favor…").
5. **Giving deference**: Demonstrating respect for the listeners status (e.g., "Excuse me, maam, could I ask for your advice?").
6. **Apologize**: Showing regret for the imposition (e.g., "Sorry to bother you, but…").
7. **Impersonalize**: Creating distance by avoiding personal pronouns (e.g., "It would be best if this was handled promptly").
8. **State the FTA as a General Rule**: Framing requests as standard practices (e.g., "According to policy, reports should be submitted by Monday").
9. **Nominalize**: Using formal language to reduce directness (e.g., "Your cooperation is requested").
10. **Go on Record as Incurring a Debt, or as Not Indebting**: Acknowledging the listeners favor (e.g., "Id be very thankful if you could do this").

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the use of negative politeness strategies in the movie Uglies. Qualitative research is characterized by its emphasis on examining social phenomena, language, and behavior through in-depth analysis, making it particularly suitable for exploring the pragmatic features of politeness (Leavy, 2017). The descriptive approach enables a comprehensive examination of dialogues to understand how characters employ politeness strategies to minimize face-threatening acts (Ary et al., 2009). By utilizing Brown and Levinsons (1987) politeness theory as the primary framework, this study aims to describe and analyze how negative politeness strategies are manifested in the interactions between characters to maintain social harmony and mitigate threats to face.

The data collection method employed in this study is the observational method, which involves carefully observing and identifying the use of negative politeness strategies in the dialogues of the movie Uglies. Sudaryanto (2015) describes the observational method as a non-participatory

technique, where the researcher acts as an observer without intervening in the natural occurrence of the data. The data collection process followed three main steps. First, the researcher watched the movie attentively to gain an overall understanding of the context and interactions between characters. Second, specific scenes containing dialogues relevant to negative politeness strategies were transcribed verbatim, ensuring the accuracy of the spoken words. Third, the researcher employed note-taking techniques to categorize instances of negative politeness strategies based on the theoretical framework of Brown and Levinson (1987).

This study utilizes the pragmatic identity method and the equalizing technique as proposed by Sudaryanto (2015) for analyzing the use of negative politeness strategies in the movie Uglies. The pragmatic identity method allows for a detailed examination of how characters construct their social identities through language, providing insight into the pragmatic aspects of politeness. The equalizing technique, a key component of this method, focuses on how characters employ language to minimize social distance and create solidarity in their interactions. The analytical steps involve first selecting relevant dialogues that exemplify negative politeness strategies. Next, the context of each dialogue is analyzed to understand the social dynamics at play. Following this, the pragmatic identity method is applied to interpret how identities are constructed in these exchanges. Finally, the equalizing technique is employed to assess the role of these strategies in fostering connection and mitigating face threats within the narrative.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The analysis of dialogue in this study identified the use of various negative politeness strategies, revealing distinct patterns in how characters preserve social distance and minimize imposition. Each instance was categorized according to Brown and Levinsons negative politeness strategies, providing insight into the characters methods for addressing face-threatening acts (FTAs) respectfully and maintaining interpersonal harmony. The table below presents the frequency of each negative politeness strategy observed across the analyzed dialogue, highlighting the strategies most and least frequently used by the characters to protect the listeners negative face.

Table 1. Frequency of Negative Politeness Strategies in Uglies (2024)

Negative Politeness Strategy	Frequency
Be Conventionally Indirect	20
Question, Hedge	41
Be Pessimistic	25
Minimize the Imposition	24
Give Deference	24
Apologize	25
Impersonalize	14
State the FTA as a General Rule	14
Nominalize	11
Go on Record as Incurring a Debt, or as Not Indebting	18
Total	**216**

The analysis of negative politeness strategies in the dialogue reveals a varied distribution across Brown and Levinsons categories, totaling 216 instances. The most frequently used strategy was "Question, Hedge" (41 instances), indicating a strong preference for softening statements through indirect questions and hedging. This was followed by "Be Pessimistic" and "Apologize," each with 25 instances, suggesting a recurrent emphasis on expressions of doubt and regret to reduce imposition. The strategies "Minimize the Imposition" and "Give Deference" also appeared frequently, each with 24 instances, reflecting consistent efforts to respect others autonomy. In contrast, "Nominalize" was used least frequently, with 11 instances, suggesting limited reliance on abstract language to depersonalize actions. Overall, the results highlight a focus on strategies that protect negative face, with a particular emphasis on indirectness and hedging to manage social dynamics and maintain respectful interaction.

These findings reflect the strategic choices characters make to navigate face-threatening situations, with a clear emphasis on indirectness and minimizing imposition. Following Sugiyono (2013) guidance on processing raw data, the data collection in this study involved careful categorization and coding of dialogue to ensure accuracy in identifying each instance of negative politeness. This approach allowed for a systematic analysis of the raw data, ensuring each instance was accurately classified according to Brown and Levinsons framework. The observed frequencies provide a foundation for further interpretation, as outlined in the following Discussion section, where each strategys implications and underlying social dynamics are examined in depth.

Discussion

Analyzing the characters interactions through the lens of Brown and Levinsons politeness theory provides insight into how face-preserving strategies are employed within the context of conflicting social expectations, power dynamics, and personal relationships. Each instance of dialogue reveals a nuanced application of politeness strategies, serving to manage social distance, minimize imposition, and maintain respect between characters navigating complex interpersonal challenges. The selected examples represent various aspects of negative politeness and provide a foundation for understanding how language functions to balance autonomy and authority. This analysis demonstrates how these strategies influence communication outcomes and reflect deeper thematic elements of trust, control, and autonomy within the narrative.

The following discussion explores each instance in detail, examining how specific strategies, such as conventional indirectness, hedging, and deference, shape interactions and highlight underlying motives and relational tensions.

Be Conventionally Indirect

> Cable: "Well, maybe a night back at the dorms will help you remember?"

This instance appears at 00:33:39, as Dr. Cable is questioning Tally about Shays disappearance and attempting to prompt her to disclose any information that might aid in locating her friend. Tally appears hesitant to provide details, so Cable subtly suggests that time back at the dorms might "help" jog her memory. This indirect implication introduces a consequence for Tally, who desires access to a long-awaited surgery.

Cables suggestion, phrased indirectly as "maybe a night back at the dorms will help you remember," exemplifies the "Be Conventionally Indirect" strategy. This phrasing avoids a direct demand, letting Tally interpret the consequence (that she might lose access to the surgery) without explicit pressure. This indirect approach maintains Cables authority while also safeguarding Tallys negative face, as Tally doesnt feel overtly accused of withholding information. By being indirect, Cable signals the expectation subtly, allowing Tally to understand the stakes on her own.

Question, Hedge

Cable: "Do you remember anything she said that would help us find her?"

At 00:33:24, Dr. Cable attempts to extract information from Tally by carefully posing a question that could reveal clues about Shays location. This query appears after Cable has set up the importance of finding Shay, framing her question in a way that allows Tally the choice to offer information without feeling overtly pressured.

Phrasing her request as a question, Cable employs the "Question, Hedge" strategy, which softens the requests impact on Tallys autonomy. By asking "Do you remember anything…?" Cable avoids making assumptions and allows Tally the room to offer information voluntarily. This mitigated approach respects Tallys negative face by not imposing a direct obligation to comply, which can often lead to a more cooperative response in sensitive situations.

Be Pessimistic

David: "Cable could kill you, Tally."

This warning from David appears at 01:27:50, as he cautions Tally about the severe risks posed by Dr. Cable, especially as she considers opposing Cables authority. Tally contemplates rebelling against Cable, and Davids statement emphasizes the potentially fatal consequences of such an action.

Davids use of the "Be Pessimistic" strategy, "Cable could kill you" expresses doubt about Tallys ability to act without facing severe consequences. This pessimistic framing conveys caution and concern for Tallys safety, implying she should weigh her actions carefully. By emphasizing potential negative outcomes, David allows Tally to interpret the risks independently, reinforcing her negative face by not directly instructing her, while subtly urging caution.

Minimize the Imposition

Cable: "Im so sorry to delay your surgery. I know how excruciating that can be."

At 00:32:25, Dr. Cable delays Tallys long-anticipated surgery, a situation that is emotionally distressing for Tally. Cable preemptively apologizes, showing an awareness of the inconvenience caused, as she acknowledges Tallys discomfort with empathy.

By apologizing for the delay and empathizing with Tallys frustration, Cable utilizes the "Minimize the Imposition" strategy. Her phrasing acknowledges the disruption caused but downplays it, suggesting that the delay is minor relative to Tallys patience. This polite phrasing respects Tallys negative face by signaling that Cable recognizes her sacrifice and inconvenience, reducing potential resentment or confrontation.

Give Deference

David: "Youre lucky we found you."

This instance appears at 00:43:06 when David has just discovered Tally in a dangerous situation. His comment about her "luck" acknowledges Tallys vulnerability and indirectly respects her need for support, showing appreciation for both her resilience and the groups role in aiding her. In stating, "Youre lucky we found you," David employs the "Give Deference" strategy, subtly acknowledging the value of his assistance while validating Tallys need for support. His statement signals respect for Tallys resilience but also implies that her well-being relies on the support shes received, balancing appreciation with the acknowledgment of her own efforts. This reinforces social bonds and mitigates any impression of superiority.

Apologize

Tally: "Im so sorry, Shay."

At 01:21:01, Tally apologizes to Shay, acknowledging her actions that may have damaged their friendship and broken Shays trust. This apology represents Tallys awareness of her role in recent events and expresses remorse for any unintentional harm caused to Shay.

By saying, "Im so sorry, Shay," Tally employs the "Apologize" strategy to express her regret directly, seeking to restore rapport and respect. This acknowledgment of fault is crucial for preserving positive face, as it shows Tallys commitment to taking responsibility. The apology underscores her respect for Shays feelings, reinforcing the sincerity of their friendship and Tallys recognition of the impact her actions have had.

Impersonalize

      Cable: "The lesions in the frontal cortex, they dull you."

This statement from Dr. Cable appears at 01:05:10, as she discusses the effects of a specific surgery on individuals in a detached and clinical manner. By describing the process in an impersonal way, Cable avoids emotionally engaging with the individuals affected, focusing instead on the scientific aspect of the procedure.

Cables reference to "The lesions in the frontal cortex" instead of directly addressing the people affected exemplifies the "Impersonalize" strategy. By focusing on the technical process, she avoids discussing individual cases, which can reduce emotional engagement and mitigate responsibility. This distance maintains a formal tone, aligning with negative politeness to avoid invoking negative emotions from Tally or others who may feel personally affected.

State the FTA as a General Rule

      Maddy: "Freeing them of choice saved them."

At 01:22:02, Davids mother, Maddy, explains the philosophy behind limiting individual freedom within society. By framing it as a general rule, she justifies these actions as beneficial to the collective rather than targeting specific individuals.

Maddys statement, "Freeing them of choice saved them" uses the "State the FTA as a General Rule" strategy, presenting societal control as a broadly applicable necessity. By generalizing the statement, she avoids directly imposing on Tallys personal beliefs or preferences, instead presenting it as a universal truth. This approach reduces potential defensiveness, framing the idea as a collective benefit rather than a personal imposition.

Nominalize

      Cable: "Your procedure has been scheduled."

This statement occurs at 01:13:30, when Dr. Cable informs Tally about her upcoming surgery. By using the term "procedure," Cable creates emotional distance from the personal impact of the surgery, focusing on the technical aspect rather than Tallys individual experience.

The phrase "Your procedure has been scheduled" exemplifies the "Nominalize" strategy, where Cable reduces the emotional impact by referring to the surgery as a generic "procedure." This phrasing implies routine and inevitability, minimizing the impact on Tallys identity or autonomy. By focusing on the schedule rather than the individual, Cable reinforces the notion of control while mitigating direct personal imposition.

Go on Record as Incurring a Debt, or as Not Indebting

      Tally: "Maddy, please. Shay cant choose anymore, but I can"

This direct appeal from Tally appears at 01:27:44, as she urgently requests Maddys support to achieve an important goal. Tallys use of Maddys name, combined with the word "please," implies her willingness to be indebted to Maddy in return for her help, underscoring the urgency and sincerity of her plea.

Tallys direct plea, "Maddy, please," demonstrates the "Go on Record as Incurring a Debt" strategy. By directly appealing to Maddy, Tally acknowledges the imposition her request entails, signaling that shes prepared to owe Maddy for any assistance. This explicit statement shows deference and respect for Maddys autonomy, emphasizing Tallys vulnerability and need for support, which strengthens their bond and shows Tallys readiness to reciprocate.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of negative politeness strategies in this study reveals the nuanced ways in which characters employ linguistic techniques to navigate social interactions while preserving face. Among the strategies identified, "Question, Hedge" emerged as the most frequently used, reflecting a strong tendency toward indirectness in communication to soften statements and avoid direct imposition. "Be Pessimistic" and "Apologize" also featured prominently, suggesting that expressions of doubt and regret are central to mitigating the impact of face-threatening acts. This prevalence of indirect and deferential language underscores the characters efforts to maintain respect and autonomy within their interactions, aligning with the principles of negative politeness as outlined by Brown and Levinson.

The findings demonstrate a preference for strategies that subtly manage social dynamics, with particular emphasis on minimizing imposition. This analysis contributes to understanding how negative politeness functions within dialogue, offering insights into how characters balance assertiveness with sensitivity to others needs for autonomy and respect. Future studies may build on these findings by exploring how these strategies shift across different social contexts or vary between characters of differing social status, further enriching the understanding of politeness in interpersonal communication.

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