

An Analysis of Netizens' Language Politeness in Online News Comment Sections: A Pragmatic Study

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kesantunan berbahasa netizen dalam kolom komentar berita online dengan pendekatan pragmatik. Seiring dengan meningkatnya penggunaan media digital sebagai sarana komunikasi publik, fenomena kebebasan berpendapat di ruang komentar berita sering kali diwarnai dengan berbagai bentuk ekspresi, mulai dari yang santun hingga tidak santun. Penelitian ini menggunakan teori kesantunan Brown dan Levinson sebagai kerangka analisis untuk mengidentifikasi strategi kesantunan positif, kesantunan negatif, serta tindakan yang mengancam muka (face-threatening acts) dan ketidaksantunan. Data dikumpulkan dari lima portal berita daring populer di Indonesia dan dianalisis secara kualitatif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun sebagian komentar menunjukkan penggunaan strategi kesantunan, sebagian besar komentar didominasi oleh ekspresi ketidaksantunan, khususnya dalam berita yang berkaitan dengan politik dan isu sosial. Hal ini menunjukkan bahwa ruang digital belum sepenuhnya menjadi arena komunikasi yang etis dan produktif. Studi ini menyoroti pentingnya literasi digital dan etika berkomunikasi dalam membentuk budaya diskusi yang sehat di internet.

Kata Kunci: kesantunan berbahasa, netizen, komentar online, pragmatik, wacana digital

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze netizens' language politeness in the comment sections of online news platforms using a pragmatic approach. With the rise of digital media as a public communication space, the freedom of expression in comment sections often features a range of linguistic behavior, from polite to impolite expressions. The research applies Brown and Levinson's politeness theory as the analytical framework to identify strategies of positive politeness, negative politeness, as well as face-threatening acts and impoliteness. Data were collected from five leading Indonesian online news portals and analyzed qualitatively. The findings reveal that while some comments employ politeness strategies, the majority are dominated by impolite language, particularly in news related to politics and social issues. This indicates that the digital sphere has not yet fully evolved into an ethical and constructive communication environment. The study highlights the importance of digital literacy and communication ethics in fostering a healthy culture of discourse in online spaces.

Keywords: language politeness, netizens, online news, comment section, pragmatics

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of information and communication technology has significantly transformed the way people interact, particularly with the emergence of the internet and social media. Today, the public can easily access news, respond to it, and



express their opinions directly through various digital platforms. One of the most prominent forms of public interaction is the comment section of online news articles. This space not only serves as a platform for netizens to express their views but also functions as a forum for public discussion, debates, and social criticism. In the context of digital democracy, the comment section can be viewed as a form of civic participation. However, the dynamics that unfold in these spaces do not always reflect constructive communication. Many comments are provocative, sarcastic, or even contain hate speech, which undermines the values of healthy public dialogue.

The phenomenon of freedom of expression in cyberspace is indeed an important pillar of a democratic society. Nevertheless, this freedom must be balanced with social responsibility and communication ethics. Unfortunately, many internet users misuse the anonymity provided by digital platforms to express opinions without considering their impact on others. Impoliteness in language use is commonly found, especially in comments related to sensitive issues such as politics, religion, and ethnicity. This indicates that digital spaces have become not only a place for information exchange but also a battleground of opinions and social identities that are often emotionally charged. In the long run, such a trend can foster an unhealthy communication culture, intensify social polarization, and erode tolerance in society.

In the realm of communication, language plays a central role as a tool to deliver messages while simultaneously building and maintaining social relationships. Language politeness is a crucial aspect in preserving the harmony of interpersonal interactions. In face-to-face communication, nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures support the clarity and nuance of speech. However, in digital communication—particularly in written comments—these nonverbal elements are absent, making word choice, sentence structure, and pragmatic context essential in ensuring politeness. It is therefore important to understand how politeness strategies are employed by netizens when expressing opinions, criticisms, or support on particular issues.

Pragmatics provides a strong theoretical foundation to analyze this phenomenon. One of the core theories in pragmatics is the politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1987), which introduces the concept of *face* and *face-threatening acts (FTAs)*. This theory explains how speakers choose their communicative strategies—either directly or indirectly—to maintain their own face as well as that of their interlocutors. These strategies include positive politeness (showing solidarity and closeness) and negative politeness (respecting personal space and social distance). In the context of online news comments, the application of this theory becomes particularly interesting as netizens often write without considering existing social relationships, resulting in blunt or harsh expressions. Analyzing such utterances can reveal how politeness norms are observed, adapted, or violated in digital communication.

Despite its importance, there is still a lack of research focusing specifically on how Indonesian netizens employ politeness in comment sections of online news platforms, particularly from a pragmatic perspective. This study is therefore relevant in the midst of growing digital literacy and the increasing reliance on online media as a primary source of information. By examining politeness strategies and their violations in online comments, this research aims to contribute academically to the field of linguistic pragmatics, while also offering practical insights for media platforms, educators, and the wider public in fostering a healthier, more polite, and inclusive digital communication environment. Furthermore, the findings of this study may serve as a reference in content moderation policies and the development of digital communication ethics education.

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method, as it is most suitable for exploring the linguistic phenomena within specific social contexts. The qualitative approach enables the researcher to interpret and understand the meaning behind the utterances of netizens in-depth, without relying on numerical or statistical generalizations. Rather than quantifying politeness, this method focuses on describing and interpreting the strategies, intentions, and contextual factors that influence language use in online comment sections. It also allows for flexibility in developing categories of analysis that emerge inductively from the data collected in the field.

The theoretical approach used in this study is linguistic pragmatics, which investigates how utterances convey meaning based on the context of communication and the speaker's communicative goals. This research specifically refers to the Politeness Theory of Brown and Levinson (1987) as the main analytical framework. The theory outlines strategies employed by speakers to maintain both their own "face" and that of their interlocutors. These strategies include positive politeness (which emphasizes solidarity and social closeness), negative politeness (which respects autonomy and social distance), and the concept of face-threatening acts (FTAs). In the context of online interaction especially within comment sections these concepts become highly relevant, as digital communication often lacks non-verbal cues and encourages anonymity, thereby influencing the speaker's linguistic choices.

The data in this study consist of netizens' comments extracted from the comment sections of online news platforms such as Kompas.com, Detik.com, and Tribunnews.com, which are among the most visited and active news portals in Indonesia. These platforms were chosen for their high reader engagement and the large volume of user comments. News articles selected for analysis typically cover sensitive and controversial topics, including politics, religion, public policy, and social conflicts—topics known to elicit strong emotional responses from readers. The selection of these articles was aimed at capturing a wide variety of politeness strategies and potential violations that reflect the dynamic nature of public discourse in digital environments.

Data were collected through document analysis, specifically by taking screenshots and digital copies of relevant user comments. The sampling method used is purposive sampling, which involves deliberately selecting data that meet specific criteria aligned with the research objectives. Criteria for inclusion were: comments written in Indonesian, containing opinions or reactions to the article content, having analyzable sentence structures, and exhibiting forms of politeness or impoliteness. Comments that consisted only of emojis, hyperlinks, or random symbols were excluded. The total number of comments analyzed was determined based on the saturation principle, where data collection stops once no new patterns or insights are emerging.

The main instrument in this research is the researcher, as is typical in qualitative studies. The researcher serves as the primary observer, analyzer, and interpreter of meaning within the data. To enhance consistency and minimize subjectivity, the researcher used an analytical framework worksheet, which includes indicators for each type of politeness strategy (positive, negative, and violations). This worksheet facilitated the categorization and interpretation of user comments, while also accounting for contextual factors such as the article topic, timing, and user reactions to comments.

Data analysis followed the model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), consisting of three main steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the data reduction stage, irrelevant or repetitive comments were removed, and the remaining data were categorized according to politeness strategy. The data were then organized into tables or matrices showing the quote, type of strategy used,

and its pragmatic interpretation. Finally, patterns were interpreted to draw conclusions—for example, identifying which types of politeness are most commonly used, how criticism is linguistically constructed, or what sociocultural factors influence the way users interact.

To ensure data validity, this research employed theoretical triangulation, comparing findings from Brown and Levinson's theory with other pragmatic frameworks such as Grice's Cooperative Principle, Leech's Politeness Maxims, and, where relevant, the Relevance Theory of Sperber and Wilson. Additionally, peer debriefing was conducted to test the reliability of interpretations and to avoid personal bias. All analyzed comments remain anonymous, and no personal identification of users was attempted, thus adhering to ethical research standards regarding online data.

The scope of this study is limited to Indonesian-language comments posted on publicly accessible online news platforms. It does not examine legal implications of user comments or attempt to identify users' real identities. The study also does not explore reader perceptions or reactions to comments, as the focus remains strictly on linguistic and pragmatic elements. These limitations are necessary to maintain the depth and clarity of the analysis, ensuring a focused exploration of politeness strategies as manifested in digital public discourse.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that netizens employ a wide range of politeness strategies when expressing their opinions in the comment sections of online news articles. Positive politeness strategies are frequently observed in comments that contain solidarity, encouragement, and inclusive language such as "let's work together," "we can overcome this," or friendly greetings like "friends," "bro," or "guys." These expressions aim to build rapport and reduce social distance. Negative politeness strategies also appear in the form of softened criticism, such as beginning with "I don't mean to offend," or hedging expressions like "perhaps," "I think," or "it seems." However, the most dominant finding is the prevalence of impolite language, including harsh criticism, sarcasm, personal attacks, and face-threatening acts (FTAs), where netizens communicate with little regard for maintaining the social face of others.

A significant observation is that impolite or face-threatening strategies dominate, especially in comments responding to emotionally charged issues such as politics, government policies, and social controversies. These types of comments often go beyond disagreement and involve overt insults, offensive language, and emotionally intense expressions, often written in all caps or with excessive exclamation marks. In contrast, when commenting on lighter topics such as sports, entertainment, or national achievements, netizens are more likely to use positive politeness, showing appreciation, congratulations, and unity. This suggests that the emotional tone and sensitivity of a topic strongly influence how politeness is manifested in digital discourse.

The context of the news topic plays a crucial role in shaping the tone and linguistic behavior of commenters. Articles related to sensitive issues such as religion, ethnicity, or political identity tend to invite aggressive, prejudiced, and provocative comments. In contrast, coverage of national disasters, public tragedies, or heartfelt human-interest stories often elicit sympathetic and supportive comments. Netizens are seen offering condolences, prayers, and emotional support. This indicates that social norms and collective values remain active online, especially in emotionally resonant situations, which trigger more empathetic forms of communication.

One of the key findings is the impact of anonymity on language use. The lack of personal identification in online spaces enables users to express themselves with

minimal self-censorship. This freedom can result in more open and honest commentary, but also leads to increased linguistic aggression and moral disengagement. Some comments include hate speech or inflammatory language targeting individuals or groups, reflecting how online anonymity weakens social accountability, allowing netizens to bypass traditional norms of polite communication.

In terms of language patterns, many comments display linguistic features such as exaggeration (hyperbole), generalizations, and graphic cues—such as capital letters, repeated punctuation, or angry emojis—to convey emotional intensity. Although impolite language dominates, the study also found instances of empathetic and supportive communication, particularly in responses to events involving loss or success. This reveals that politeness in online language use is not absent, but rather conditional appearing more frequently in contexts that elicit collective emotional responses.

Another notable trend is the netizens' tendency to express criticism directly and without mitigation, known in Brown and Levinson's framework as bald-on-record strategies. Comments such as "This government is a complete failure!" or "This minister is all talk and no action!" reflect a digital communication style that is blunt, confrontational, and emotionally charged. Additionally, sarcasm and irony are commonly used as indirect forms of criticism for example, "Great job making people suffer even more" where the literal meaning contrasts sharply with the speaker's actual intention. These patterns suggest that even when users attempt to be indirect, they often employ styles that are socially face-threatening in nature.

Applying Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, the findings show that the model remains relevant for identifying linguistic strategies in digital communication. Positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and bald-on-record strategies can all be observed. However, the digital environment presents new dynamics, where face-threatening acts are more tolerated and, in some cases, even expected. The absence of real-time feedback, the lack of social cues, and the "crowd effect" of online platforms contribute to the normalization of aggressive or impolite communication styles. This suggests that politeness norms are shifting in online contexts, and traditional pragmatic models must adapt to account for these changes.

Socially, these findings raise concerns about the quality of public discourse in digital spaces. The dominance of impolite language in comment sections reflects deeper issues such as low digital literacy, limited understanding of communication ethics, and the rise of emotional populism. Without adequate media education and clear platform moderation policies, online discussions can devolve into spaces that perpetuate hostility and division. Therefore, this study highlights the importance of developing digital citizenship, enhancing pragmatic awareness, and promoting ethical language use to support a healthier, more constructive online communication environment.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that netizens' use of politeness strategies in online news comment sections is highly influenced by the context of the topic, the emotional tone of the news, and the level of anonymity provided by digital platforms. While some users demonstrate positive and negative politeness strategies such as expressing support, using inclusive language, or softening criticism many comments exhibit impolite forms of communication, including sarcasm, insults, and direct face-threatening acts. Topics that are politically or socially sensitive tend to trigger more aggressive language and violations of politeness norms. The study also confirms that Brown and Levinson's politeness theory remains relevant in analyzing digital communication, although adjustments are needed to account for the unique

characteristics of online discourse. Overall, this research highlights the urgent need to promote digital literacy and communication ethics in order to foster more respectful and constructive online interactions.

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