Framing Conflict in Political Discourse: Positive and Negative Politeness of Bassem Youssef and Piers Morgan's Debate

Adinda Nurul Aulia Putri[1], Agus Salim Mansyur[2], and Fourus Huznatul Abqoriyyah[3]

[1], [2], [3] Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, West Java, Indonesia

✉ *adiinddaputri@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the use of positive and negative politeness strategies by Bassem Youssef and Piers Morgan in the YouTube video *"Wouldn't You Resist? Bassem Youssef Returns For More On Israel-Hamas War."* Employing Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, this research examines how linguistic strategies influence political discourse and shape audience perceptions. Through a qualitative descriptive approach, textual and contextual factors are analyzed to identify the types and communicative functions of politeness strategies. The findings reveal that both speakers strategically employ exaggeration, agreement-seeking, and conflict mitigation to engage their audience and maintain interpersonal relationships. These results highlight the vital role of politeness in fostering constructive dialogue, reducing tensions, and ensuring a respectful exchange of perspectives on sensitive political topics.

Keywords: Politeness Strategies, Political Discourse, Media Communication

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini meneliti penggunaan strategi kesantunan positif dan negatif oleh Bassem Youssef dan Piers Morgan dalam video YouTube *"Wouldn't You Resist? Bassem Youssef Returns For More On Israel-Hamas War."* Dengan menggunakan teori kesantunan Brown dan Levinson (1987), penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana strategi linguistik mempengaruhi wacana politik dan membentuk persepsi audiens. Melalui pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, faktor tekstual dan kontekstual dikaji untuk mengidentifikasi jenis dan fungsi komunikasi dari strategi kesantunan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kedua pembicara secara strategis menggunakan teknik melebih-lebihkan, mencari kesepakatan, dan meredam konflik untuk membangun keterlibatan serta menjaga hubungan interpersonal. Temuan ini menekankan pentingnya kesantunan dalam menciptakan dialog yang konstruktif, mengurangi ketegangan, dan memastikan pertukaran perspektif yang saling menghormati dalam diskusi politik yang sensitif.

Kata kunci: Strategi Kesantunan, Wacana Politik, Komunikasi Media

INTRODUCTION

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most prolonged and complex disputes in modern history, as it has deep-rooted historical, political, and socio-cultural dimensions. The conflict, primarily centered around territorial claims in the Middle East, has escalated over decades, leading to continuous tensions, significant casualties, and widespread international attention. Consequently, media platforms, including traditional and social media, have played a crucial role in shaping public discourse surrounding the conflict. According to Ramanathan & Hoon (2015), the mass dissemination of information through media often influences public perceptions, sparking both support and opposition from various audiences.

In contemporary digital discourse, journalists, political figures, and even comedians have leveraged their platforms to express perspectives on the conflict. Among these platforms, *Piers Morgan Uncensored* on YouTube has emerged as a significant space for political debates and discussions. The interaction between Piers Morgan, a British broadcaster known for his direct and assertive interview style, and Bassem Youssef, an Egyptian political satirist, in the video *"Wouldn't You Resist? Bassem Youssef Returns For More On Israel-Hamas War"* provides a compelling case for analyzing linguistic strategies in political conversations. Their exchange highlights the complexities of maintaining civility and engagement while addressing a highly sensitive geopolitical issue.

Since politeness is a fundamental aspect of communication, it plays a pivotal role in ensuring productive and respectful discussions, especially in contentious political dialogues. Yule (1996) defines politeness as a communication strategy that mitigates confrontation and fosters positive social interactions. Moreover, Brown and Levinson (1987) categorize politeness strategies into four types: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. These strategies function to maintain social harmony, manage face-threatening acts, and navigate power dynamics in communication.

Furthermore, Janicka (2020) emphasizes that politeness strategies in political interviews are crucial for maintaining credibility and audience engagement. Similarly, Kiss (2015) highlights the role of irony and strategic politeness in political discourse, demonstrating how subtle linguistic tools influence public perception. In addition, Dalimunte & Wen (2022) discuss how politeness strategies shape political images during presidential debates, showing that rhetorical choices impact voter trust and credibility. Moreover, Fracchiolla (2011) examines politeness as a strategy of attack in gendered political debates, illustrating its dual role in conflict escalation and mitigation.

Additionally, Schubert (2025) extends this discussion by analyzing positive politeness strategies in state dinner speeches by U.S. presidents, showing how political figures use language to create solidarity and appeal to diverse audiences. Meanwhile, Santoso (2015) explores linguistic politeness strategies in Javanese political discourse, emphasizing cultural variations in political communication. Likewise, Kádár, Liu, & House (2020) delve into politeness and impoliteness in Chinese political discourse, demonstrating how strategic politeness impacts political rhetoric and authority.

This study aims to analyze the politeness strategies employed by Piers Morgan and Bassem Youssef in their discussion of the Israel-Hamas conflict. By examining how these strategies are used to facilitate argumentation, build interpersonal relationships, and navigate ideological differences, this research provides

insights into the role of language in political discourse. Given the polarizing nature of the topic, understanding the impact of politeness strategies on audience perception is crucial for fostering meaningful and respectful public discussions. Furthermore, this study aligns with contemporary linguistic pragmatics research, as it emphasizes the significance of politeness in mediating conflicts and promoting cross-cultural understanding. By situating this analysis within the broader context of political communication, the findings contribute to ongoing discussions on the intersection of language, media, and international relations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach, focusing on textual and contextual discourse analysis. As Creswell (2017) asserts, qualitative research is particularly suitable for examining complex phenomena, as it enables researchers to gain a deeper understanding of human behavior and interaction within specific contexts. Given the intricate nature of political discourse and the subtlety of politeness strategies, this methodological framework allows for an in-depth exploration of how language shapes political communication.

In this research, data are collected through discourse analysis of the selected YouTube interview between Bassem Youssef and Piers Morgan. The analysis involves identifying politeness strategies based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, including bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. Furthermore, the study examines the linguistic choices of both speakers, considering the political, social, and cultural context that influences their discourse.

To ensure the validity of findings, a systematic coding process is employed to categorize

instances of politeness strategies, with cross-referencing to existing studies on political discourse and pragmatics (Janicka, 2020; Kiss, 2015; Dalimunte & Wen, 2022). The integration of multiple perspectives enhances the reliability of the analysis, providing a comprehensive understanding of the role of politeness in political interviews.

Ultimately, this research methodology facilitates a nuanced interpretation of how politeness strategies contribute to effective political communication. By combining theoretical insights with empirical analysis, the study offers valuable contributions to the broader field of linguistic pragmatics and media discourse analysis. The findings are expected to provide implications for future research on political rhetoric and the strategic use of language in sensitive discussions.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents an in-depth analysis of the politeness strategies employed by Bassem Youssef and Piers Morgan, based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. The discussion focuses on how both speakers utilize politeness strategies to present arguments, maintain interpersonal relationships, and mitigate potential face-threatening acts. Furthermore, the findings are elaborated through specific examples from their conversation, demonstrating the nuanced application of these strategies.

Datum 1

Piers Morgan: *It was a brilliantly devastating technique you used in that interview, which took me a while to work out. It's very powerful and resonated with many people closely. Where do you think we are with this war now, not just in Gaza but the wider war in Lebanon, the threats against Iran, and the whole situation?*

Bassem Youssef: *Israel is defending itself, right? I mean, that's what the Western media is telling.*

Piers Morgan: *They would say they are.*

In this context, Piers Morgan acknowledges Bassem Youssef's rhetorical style and strategic argumentation by employing positive politeness through exaggeration (e.g., "brilliantly devastating" and "very powerful"). These expressions demonstrate his appreciation and serve to foster a cooperative dialogue. Moreover, the intention behind this strategy is to establish familiarity, reinforce a sense of rapport, and ensure that Youssef feels valued within the conversation.

Datum 2

Piers Morgan: *Can you find criticism of your own side in this argument, going back to 1948—proper criticism—where if things had been done differently, perhaps we wouldn't be where we are?*

Bassem Youssef: *Okay, so if you were British and you had a million Ukrainians arriving at your home, and over 30 years that number increased to 30% of the population, and then the UN gave you less than half of your country, wouldn't you fight? Wouldn't you resist?*

Here, Piers Morgan employs the negative politeness strategy of questioning and hedging, as he gives Youssef room to formulate his response without feeling pressured or cornered. Additionally, by using the phrase "perhaps we wouldn't be where we are," he conveys tentativeness, ensuring his question does not impose a strong ideological position.

Meanwhile, Youssef utilizes the positive politeness strategy of assume or assert reciprocity, constructing a hypothetical scenario to make his argument more relatable. By shifting perspectives and inviting Morgan to envision a parallel situation, Youssef

strengthens his argument while simultaneously appealing to Morgan's understanding and empathy.

Datum 3

Piers Morgan: *Can you find anything to criticize? You know the history better.*

Bassem Youssef: *I mean, there's a lot to criticize. Of course, there are a lot of mistakes. The Middle East has been plagued by military dictatorships. But having made mistakes, should we be penalized by having our land taken away just because the other side is stronger? What are you teaching your kids—that if you're strong enough and have enough weapons, you can take whatever land you want? That's not why the UN was formed. That's not why the Security Council exists.*

Morgan again employs negative politeness by framing his question in an open-ended manner, thereby allowing Youssef to express his stance freely. Furthermore, he mitigates potential face-threatening implications by acknowledging Youssef's superior historical knowledge. In contrast, Youssef adopts negative politeness through indirectness, as he structures his criticism carefully to avoid direct confrontation while maintaining a strong rhetorical stance.

Datum 4

Piers Morgan: *I'm saying the original charter stated the eradication of Israel, and the Hamas spokesman said after October 7th, "We want to keep doing this again and again." He said on camera that this is an existential threat to all of Israel.*

Bassem Youssef: *There are a lot of horrible things that Israelis say on camera, Piers.*

Piers Morgan: *I agree!*

In this exchange, Morgan utilizes the negative politeness strategy of stating the FTA as a

general rule, which allows him to avoid direct accusations while still bringing forward a factual argument. Simultaneously, Youssef mirrors this approach by generalizing the counterargument, thereby making it more palatable. Consequently, Morgan shifts to positive politeness through seeking agreement, as he acknowledges common ground to maintain an amicable tone despite the contentious nature of the discussion.

Datum 5

Piers Morgan: *Med, do you accept people were beheaded on October 7th?*

Bassem Youssef: *Piers, my point is that on October 7th, there were a lot of sensational reports that made people turn a blind eye to what's going on in Gaza.*

Here, both speakers use positive politeness strategies by incorporating in-group identity markers (e.g., "Med" and "Piers"), which serve to build solidarity even in a serious and confrontational context. Consequently, this approach helps diffuse tension and maintain civility while discussing highly emotional issues.

Datum 6

Piers Morgan: *I have great respect for you, Bassem! If you're going to use a woman's quotes to prove your point, you've got to use the rest of the quotes where she actually proves the opposite.*

In this instance, Morgan employs positive politeness through noticing and attending to H's interests, as he first expresses his respect for Youssef before introducing criticism. By prefacing his critique with appreciation, Morgan softens the potential impact of his argument, ensuring that the conversation remains constructive rather than adversarial.

CONCLUSION

By analyzing the politeness strategies used by Bassem Youssef and Piers Morgan in their discussion of the Israel-Hamas conflict, this research highlights the critical role of linguistics in sensitive political discourse. Both speakers employed a combination of positive and negative politeness strategies, such as exaggeration, seeking agreement, and self-defense, to maintain argument balance and foster interpersonal relationships. These strategies facilitate constructive discussions on controversial topics and illustrate how language can mitigate potential conflicts and enhance understanding.

The findings suggest that politeness practices are essential not only for maintaining respectful exchanges in high-level discussions but also for shaping audience perception and engagement. A deeper understanding and application of these techniques can contribute to resolving complex issues more effectively. Future research could explore politeness strategies in broader media systems or multicultural contexts to better understand their impact on global audiences. Additionally, investigating the relationship between politeness strategies and power dynamics in political discourse could provide further insights into persuasive communication and its role in shaping public opinion.

REFERENCES

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage publications.

Dalimunte, N., & Wen, X. (2022). Politeness Dalimunte, A. A., & Wen, F. (2022). Shaping political image through politeness strategies in the presidential debates. *JEES (Journal of English Educators Society)*, *7*(1), 102-109. https://doi.org/10.21070/jees.v7i1.1660

Fracchiolla, B. (2011). Politeness as a strategy of attack in a gendered political debate—The Royal–Sarkozy debate. *Journal of pragmatics*, *43*(10), 2480-2488. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2011.02.006

Janicka, A (2020). *An analysis of politeness strategies in political interviews–a case study.*, ruj.uj.edu.pl, https://ruj.uj.edu.pl/xmlui/handle/item/216529

Kádár, D. Z., Liu, F., & House, J. (2020). (Im) Politeness and Chinese political discourse–An introduction. *Discourse, Context & Media*, *35*, 100384. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2020.100384

Kiss, A. (2015). Irony and the face (s) of politeness. A linguistic approach to contemporary political discourse. *Analele Universităţii din Craiova. Seria Ştiinţe Filologice. Lingvistică*, (1-2), 323-336.

https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=305028

Ramanathan, R., & Hoon, T. B. (2015). Application of Critical Discourse Analysis in Media Discourse Studies. *3L: Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, *21*(3), 57-68. https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:56085898

Santoso, D. (2015). *Linguistic politeness strategies in Javanese political discourse* (Doctoral dissertation, La Trobe). Retrieved from https://opal.latrobe.edu.au/articles/thesis/Linguistic_politeness_strategies_in_Javanese_political_discourse/21845826?file=38768997

Schubert, C (2025). Performing positive politeness: political rhetoric in state dinner speeches by US-American presidents. *Journal of Politeness Research*, degruyter.com, https://doi.org/10.1515/pr-2024-0011

Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics.* Oxford University Press.

YouTube. (2023). *Wouldn't you resist? Bassem Youssef returns for more on Israel-Hamas war* [Video]. Piers Morgan Uncensored. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/live/9Dr0FgjvGtQ