Analysis of Politeness Maxims in Indonesian Language Use in College Environments

Original Article

Anita Puspawati

Bandung Islamic University, Indonesia
Email: anitapuspawati@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the application of the principles of language politeness in the college environment, especially in Higher Education, using Geoffrey Leech's theory of politeness maxims. The main focus of this research is to describe the realization of the maxims of wisdom, generosity, respect, modesty, agreement, and sympathy in academic interactions on campus. The approach used is descriptive qualitative method with pragmatic approach, through data collection techniques of observation, interview, and documentation. The results showed that there were violations and compliance with the principles of politeness in communication. Violations such as the use of harsh diction, direct orders, and disrespect for interlocutors often occur, while compliance is found in the form of the use of polite language, appreciation, and sympathy. This study concludes that despite the violations, the awareness to apply politeness principles in order to create harmonious and effective interactions also exists in the campus environment. The findings of this study confirm the importance of language politeness in building effective communication in the academic environment. An understanding of the maxims of politeness can improve social interactions and enhance the quality of communication in higher education.

Keywords: Pragmatic, Language Politeness, Leech's Maxims of Politeness.

1. Introduction

Human life, which is inseparable from communication, necessitates the ability to articulate thoughts and ideas. Oral communication can have either a positive or negative impact on the listener, making it essential to have a firm grasp of language rules. It is crucial for both parties engaged in a conversation to consider the sequence of speech, the appropriate selection of words, the use of emphasis and intonation, and the ability to comprehend the topic at hand while also maintaining politeness in language.

The use of language in daily life requires a skill, primarily in speaking, to clearly express ideas and feelings to others in a communicative way. It is said to be communicative because the main purpose of speaking is to communicate in order to convey thoughts effectively (Tarigan, 2008).

Language and language proficiency have a great power that can elevate humans to higher levels. The ability to speak clearly and fluently is essential for effective communication. Clear speech plays a significant role in conveying something to others. Implicitly, the ability to speak plays a crucial role in communication.

Reading is one area of language use. Writing is a means of learning. What is written is, of course, language. Humans are taught through written language. All areas of language use have been formulated as theories in language learning today. All aspects of language use, both

active (speaking and writing) and passive (reading and listening), have been made the basis of current language learning theory.

Being polite in language is a cultural practice in Indonesia that should be applied whenever communicating with others. Politeness is not only associated with refined speech. Chaer (2010) states that speaking politely is not the same as speaking with politeness. Linguistic politeness emphasizes the creation of a situation that is good and beneficial for the conversational partner. Being polite is one of the cultural practices in Indonesia that should be applied in every communication (Wa'adi et al., 2024). The distinction between refined speech and polite speech, according to Chaer (2010), reflects a phenomenon in Indonesia, where some people speak gently but do not create a comfortable situation, which can be considered impolite due to deviations from the principles of politeness.

Zamzani (2011) state that the purpose of using politeness, including linguistic politeness, is to create an enjoyable interaction atmosphere, without threatening face, and to be effective. Nurjamily (2015) argues that speakers of Indonesian today often neglect the maxim of politeness in language. This is due to the limited knowledge of the speakers, which covers several factors: (1) the principle of politeness in language, (2) the principle of cooperation in language, and (3) the context of language use.

One of the speakers of Indonesian who must pay attention to politeness in their speech is the teacher. A lecturer is a person with relatively high knowledge acquired through both formal and informal education (Pranowo, 2009). Teachers carry out activities using the method of teaching. The language of a lecturer is something that requires thorough examination, as they must ensure that their speech is polite and does not intimidate any party when conveying the content of their material.

Indonesian language politeness in higher education in Indonesia faces some significant challenges. Students are often exposed to informal language through social media, which can erode the use of polite and appropriate language. Research by Nur & Rokhman (2017) shows that Tidar University students use various types of speech acts, including representative, directive, expressive, commissive, and isbati speech acts, with varying levels of compliance with politeness principles. In addition, students' understanding of language politeness is also a concern. Vidianingrum et al. (2024) found that Industrial Engineering students of UPN "Veteran" East Java have understood and applied the maxims of agreement and wisdom in language, showing their awareness of the importance of politeness in communication.

However, challenges remain, especially in the implementation of effective politeness strategies in learning. Banurea et al. (2022) identified four language politeness strategies used in Indonesian language learning at HKBP Nommensen University Medan, namely negative, positive, indirect, and frank politeness strategies. However, the application of these strategies requires in-depth understanding from both lecturers and students to achieve effective and polite communication. Overall, although there are efforts to improve language politeness in higher education, challenges such as the influence of social media, varied understanding among students, and effective application of politeness strategies still need further attention.

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that studies the external structure of language, namely how language is used in communication. The meaning studied by semantics is context-free meaning, while the meaning studied by pragmatics is context-bound meaning. Language and language skills have great power that can raise humans to a high degree. The ability to speak clearly, eloquently, is needed for the perfection of communication. The role of speaking clearly is indispensable in communicating something to others. Implicitly the ability to speak is very large role in communication. Language politeness is part of the study of pragmatics.

Politeness is the result of the affixation of the word 'polite' which means smooth and good (manners, behavior).

Leech Geoffrey (1993) theory was chosen as the analytical tool because his politeness maxims provide a two-way evaluation, focusing on both the speaker and the listener, making it suitable for interactions involving both parties. The discussion of Leech's theory is motivated by the interest to further research linguistic politeness in the campus environment at Unisba. Based on the background of the problem above, this study aims to describe the realization of language politeness in the college environment based on the maxim of wisdom; maxim of generosity; maxim of appreciation; maxim of simplicity; maxim of agreement; and maxim of sympathy.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Pragmatics

Pragmatics, as a branch of linguistics, began to develop within American linguistic theory in the 1970s, pioneered by Charles Morris. Pragmatics is the branch of linguistics that studies language used for communication in specific situations (Nadar, 2009). Wijana et al. (2009) state that pragmatics is the field of study that examines the external structure of language, i.e., how language is used in communication. The meaning studied by semantics is context-independent, while the meaning studied by pragmatics is context-dependent.

According to Soeparno (2002), pragmatics is a subdiscipline of linguistics that studies the application or use of language in social communication, which must always consider factors such as situational context, the speaker's intent, and the status of the interlocutor. From this perspective, linguistic politeness is related to the status of the interlocutor during communication. Thus, pragmatics is a part of linguistics that specifically discusses the relationship between language and social context.

Linguistic politeness is a part of pragmatic studies and is closely tied to pragmatics. Politeness is the result of affixation from the word 'santun' (polite) which, according to KBBI, means refined and good (in manners, behavior). Therefore, politeness is interpreted as the quality of being polite (Departemen Pendidikan Nasional, 2008). Linguistic politeness refers to the use of language in a refined and proper manner.

2.2. Leech's Principles of Politeness

2.2.1. Tact Maxim

The basic idea behind the maxim of wisdom in the principle of politeness is that participants in communication should adhere to the principle of always minimizing their own benefit and maximizing the benefit of others in their discourse (Rahardi, 2005). This maxim requires participants in communication to reduce harm to others and maximize the benefit of others.

Chaer (2010) adds that a person can avoid feelings of envy by following the maxim of wisdom. Acting in a way that benefits others is done to be perceived as polite and to protect the feelings of the interlocutor. Example:

Lecturer : "Please go ahead and enter the class first."
Student : "Oh, yes, thank you, Ma'am."

From the example above, it is clear that the lecturer is giving the student the opportunity to enter the class first. As the conversation partner, the instructor could have entered first, but this action was taken to make the student feel pleased.

2.2.2. Generosity Maxim

This maxim expects participants in communication to reduce their own benefits and maximize their self-sacrifice. Example:

Student   : "Sir, may I step out for a moment?"
Lecturer   : "Sure."

In the example above, if the lecturer violated this maxim, they might have responded with "No." However, since the instructor did not say that, it can be said that the principle of politeness in language is upheld.

2.2.3. Approbation Maxim

This maxim suggests that a person who is polite in language is someone who always strives to show respect towards others. Each participant in the conversation maximizes their respect for others and minimizes criticism. Example:

Lecturer   : "Your idea is brilliant, we will conduct that research."
Student   : "It's nothing, Ma'am. You are amazing for being able to enlighten us."

In the example above, each participant has adhered to the maxim of approbation, which requires them to maximize praise for others and minimize criticism.

2.2.4. Modesty Maxim

In this maxim of simplicity, the speaker should minimize praise for themselves and maximize self-criticism. This maxim aims for the speaker to be humble and avoid giving the impression of arrogance toward the conversational partner. Example:

Vice Dean III : "Doni, I am assigning you to guide the Unisba anniversary event."
Doni   : "I am honored, Ma'am. But do you believe I am suitable for this task? In shaa Allah, I will carry out this responsibility."

In this example, it is clear that Doni follows the maxim of simplicity by expressing that he feels unworthy of the task. Although Vice Dean III may already know that Doni is skilled at hosting events, Doni is making an effort to minimize praise for himself.

2.2.5. Agreement Maxim

The maxim of agreement measures a person's politeness when there is alignment between the speaker and the addressee. Each participant in a conversation should not directly oppose a statement they deem incompatible or disagreeable. Example:

Sukma : "The presentation was excellent."
Rida   : "I feel it was poor."

In the above example, Rida violates the maxim of agreement. Rida should not have responded in such a direct manner to counter Sukma's opinion. It would have been more appropriate for Rida to explain her views on the paper first and then politely disagree with Sukma's statement. If Rida had adhered to the maxim of agreement, the exchange might have gone as follows:

Sukma : "The presentation was excellent."
Rida   : "Yes, but the content was not thoroughly covered."

In this revised exchange, Rida successfully applies the maxim of agreement, as she acknowledges Sukma's opinion while offering her own perspective that the paper was not presented in full.

2.2.6. Sympathy Maxim

The maxim of sympathy refers to the principle that signifies politeness when one is able to maximize the feelings of sympathy between oneself and others, while minimizing feelings of antipathy towards oneself and others. Example:

Student   : "Ma'am, I can't attend the seminar. My money is only enough to buy food for three days."
Lecturer   : "I understand that you really want to attend. You can use my money for now."

In this example, the lecturer demonstrates the maxim of sympathy by showing concern for the student's situation and offering assistance. The maxim of sympathy is evident here, as the instructor offers help to ensure that the student can still attend the seminar.

3. Methods

This research employs a descriptive qualitative method with a pragmatic approach. This method was chosen because the study focuses on analyzing language use in social interactions within an academic environment, particularly in the context of linguistic politeness based on Geoffrey Leech's politeness maxims theory. The descriptive qualitative method aims to provide an in-depth understanding of linguistic phenomena without manipulating variables, ensuring that the collected data is natural and contextual (Mahsun, 2005).

The data collection techniques in this research include observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation is conducted by directly monitoring verbal interactions in a university setting, such as during lectures, academic discussions, seminars, or daily communication between students and lecturers. This technique allows the researcher to understand the use of linguistic politeness in real-life situations. Additionally, interviews are conducted with lecturers, students, and academic staff to explore their understanding of the importance of politeness in academic communication, as well as the factors influencing their language use. Documentation is used to supplement the data by collecting written materials, such as speech transcripts, conversation recordings, or relevant academic documents.

Once the data is collected, the next stage is data analysis, which is carried out through three main steps: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involves selecting and grouping relevant information based on Leech's politeness maxims, namely the tact maxim, generosity maxim, approbation maxim, modesty maxim, agreement maxim, and sympathy maxim. The reduced data is then presented in the form of descriptions or tables to facilitate analysis. Subsequently, the researcher interprets the data by considering the social and cultural context of the academic environment. This interpretation aims to understand how politeness principles are applied in university communication and their impact on the effectiveness of academic interactions (Sudaryanto, 1993).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Violation of Leech's Principle of Politeness

4.1.1. Tact Maxim
(+)   maximize the benefit of others
(-)   minimize the harm of others
Violations:
a.   Using harsh diction.
b.   Giving direct orders.
c.   Reprimanding with harsh words.
d.   Giving advice directly (without using polite phrases such as "sorry" or others).
e.   Rejecting with a high tone.

f.   Rejecting with harsh diction.

4.1.2. Generosity Maxim
(+)   maximize self-sacrifice
(-)   minimize self-gain
Violations:
a.   Disrespecting the interlocutor (interrupting the conversation).
b.   Not giving the interlocutor the opportunity to express their opinion.
c.   Having negative assumptions about the interlocutor.
d.   Embarrassing the interlocutor.

4.1.3. Approbation Maxim
(+)   maximize praise for others
(-)   minimize criticism of others
Violations:
a.   Offering criticisms that degrade others.
b.   Speaking in ways that hurt others' feelings.
c.   Failing to thank others when receiving advice or criticism.
d.   Not respecting the opinions of others.

4.1.4. Modesty Maxim
(+)   maximize self-criticism
(-)   minimize self-praise
Violations:
a.   Forcing one's will.
b.   Showing off personal strengths.
c.   Lack of sincerity.

4.1.5. Agreement Maxim
(+)   maximize agreement between oneself and others
(-)   minimize disagreement between oneself and others
Violations:
a.   Not offering choices to the interlocutor.
b.   Speaking off-topic.
c.   No agreement between the speaker and the interlocutor.

4.1.6. Sympathy Maxim
(+)   maximize sympathy between oneself and others
(-)   minimize antipathy between oneself and others
Violations:
a.   Failing to offer sincere sympathy to the interlocutor.
b.   Showing antipathy when the interlocutor is in mourning.

4.2. Adherence to Leech's Principles of Politeness

4.2.1. Tact Maxim
(+) maximize the benefit of others
(-) minimize the harm of others
Adherence:
a.   Focusing on others.
b.   Using interrogative and declarative sentences for requests.

c.   Offering something to benefit others.
d.   Providing information that does not harm others.
e.   Reducing expressions that imply harm to others.

4.2.2. Generosity Maxim

(+)   maximize self-sacrifice
(-)   minimize self-gain

Adherence:

a.   Focusing on oneself.
b.   Implying personal loss.
c.   Offering something to others in a way that suggests no loss for the one offering.
d.   Providing assistance through personal action.
e.   Offering help by giving advice.

4.2.3. Approbation Maxim

(+)   maximize praise for others
(-)   minimize criticism of others

Adherence:

a.   Offering sincere appreciation, such as admiration, praise, respect, not mocking, and not belittling.
b.   Avoiding saying things that may displease others.

4.2.4. Modesty Maxim

(+)   maximize self-criticism
(-)   minimize self-praise

Adherence:

a.   Not displaying one's own strengths or abilities.
b.   Showing personal weaknesses and demonstrating humility in the praise received.
c.   Attempting to criticize oneself without exaggerating.

4.2.5. Agreement Maxim

(+)   maximize agreement between oneself and others
(-)   minimize disagreement between oneself and others

Adherence:

a.   Seeking mutual agreement, consent, or harmony between oneself and others.
b.   Not always agreeing, but showing disagreement with reasons.

4.2.6. Sympathy Maxim

(+)   maximize sympathy between oneself and others
(-)   minimize antipathy between oneself and others

Adherence:

a.   Sharing in the emotions of others.
b.   Offering condolences in times of others' misfortunes.
c.   Offering congratulations in response to positive events.

4.3. Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study reveal that within the campus environment, there are both violations and adherence to Leech's Politeness Principle in communication. Violations of politeness often occur in various forms, such as the use of harsh diction, direct commands without considering courtesy, inappropriate reprimands, and rejecting or criticizing in a harsh

tone. Additionally, other forms of violations were identified, including disrespecting the interlocutor, not allowing others to express their opinions, and displaying antipathy toward others. However, on the other hand, the study also found instances of adherence to politeness principles in communication. Some examples of adherence include the use of more polite language, giving appreciation and praise to others, and showing sympathy in various situations. Furthermore, there were efforts to build consensus in communication and avoid unnecessary debates. Overall, the results of this study illustrate that although various politeness violations are still found in campus communication, there is also an awareness of applying politeness principles to create more harmonious and effective interactions.

These findings reinforce the concept that linguistic politeness is an important aspect of communication that can influence the effectiveness of social interactions (Leech, 1983). Violations of politeness maxims, such as the use of harsh diction, direct commands, and rejections in a harsh tone, indicate that within the campus context, there are still challenges in implementing polite and effective communication. This aligns with previous research that emphasizes that linguistic politeness not only reflects social norms but also impacts the dynamics of interpersonal relationships (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

This study highlights the importance of cohesion in academic interactions, emphasizing the role of social and cultural contexts in shaping linguistic habits. Cohesion, as a linguistic principle, facilitates effective communication between students and lecturers, influencing how meaning is constructed and understood in educational settings. Cohesion in academic discourse involves grammatical and lexical elements that connect different parts of a text, playing a crucial role in creating coherence in communication (Tanskanen, 2004). In an academic context, the use of explicit cohesive markers helps students and lecturers navigate complex ideas, thereby enhancing understanding and fostering clearer collaboration (Bianchi & Gesuato, 2016). Furthermore, social and cultural contexts also significantly influence academic communication patterns. Cultural backgrounds shape how individuals use language, creating variations in communication styles even among speakers of the same language (Barron & Schneider, 2009). Cultural conventions determine how students and lecturers interact, influencing their linguistic choices and communication dynamics (Huth, 2020). Understanding cohesion and its contextual influences can enhance pedagogical approaches, leading to more effective communication in diverse academic environments (Piirainen-Marsh, 1998).

This study also contributes to the development of a linguistic politeness model in the Indonesian context, which has its own unique cultural communication characteristics. This strengthens the theory that politeness is contextual and can vary based on the social norms prevalent in a community (Watts, 2003). Linguistic habits are not merely a matter of language proficiency but are also heavily influenced by social and cultural factors. Yet, although cohesion is a crucial aspect of academic communication, some perspectives argue that excessive emphasis on linguistic structure can overlook the dynamic and fluid nature of communication. In real-life interactions, meaning is often negotiated spontaneously, reflecting broader social relationships and power dynamics (Piirainen-Marsh, 1998). Therefore, pragmatic studies of academic interactions must consider a balance between linguistic cohesion and communicative flexibility in practice.

In the field of education, particularly in language teaching and character education, linguistic politeness can be taught more explicitly in higher education curricula to raise students' awareness of the importance of polite and effective communication. As Yule (1996) suggests, politeness in communication is not just about using good language but also about how language is used to maintain social harmony and avoid conflict. Thus, the findings of this

study can serve as a foundation for further research in pragmatics and communication studies, particularly in developing strategies to enhance linguistic politeness in academic environments.

5. Conclusion

Linguistic politeness is an essential aspect of communication, especially within the context of pragmatics, which examines how language is used in daily communication with meanings that are context-dependent. Leech's politeness principles, such as tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy maxim, are still frequently violated within campus environments. Therefore, it is crucial for individuals to understand and implement the theory of linguistic politeness proposed by Leech in everyday life. Further research on linguistic politeness, particularly in the context of utterances by public figures who serve as societal role models, is also necessary to enrich the study of pragmatics. Additionally, the concept of linguistic politeness should be incorporated into educational curricula at both schools and universities to ensure its widespread application in society.

6. References

Banurea, E. G. N. ., Siagian, B. A., & Hasibuan, R. (2022). Strategi Kesantunan Berbahasa dalam Pembelajaran Bahasa Indonesia di Prodi Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia Universitas HKBP Nommensen Medan. *JIIP - Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Pendidikan*, *5*(10). https://doi.org/10.54371/jiip.v5i10.960

Barron, A., & Schneider, K. P. (2009). Variational pragmatics: Studying the impact of social factors on language use in interaction. In *Intercultural Pragmatics* (Vol. 6, Issue 4). https://doi.org/10.1515/IPRG.2009.023

Bianchi, F., & Gesuato, S. (2016). *Pragmatic issues in specialized communicative contexts* (Vol. 29). Brill.

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage. In *Press Syndicate of The university of Cambridge* (Vol. 22, Issue 4).

Chaer, A. (2010). *Kesantunan Berbahasa*. Rineka Cipta.

Departemen Pendidikan Nasional. (2008). *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*. Gramedia Pustaka Utama.

Geoffrey, L. (1993). *Prinsi-Prinsip Pragmatik Terjemahan oleh MDD Oka*. Penerbit Universitas Indonesia.

Huth, T. (2020). Interaction, Language Use, and Second Language Teaching. In *Interaction, Language Use, and Second Language Teaching*. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003017356-5

Mahsun, M. S. (2005). *Metode penelitian bahasa*. PT Raja Grafindo Persada.

Nadar, F. X. (2009). *Pragmatik & penelitian pragmatik*. Graha Ilmu.

Nur, D. C., & Rokhman, F. (2017). Kesantunan Berbahasa Mahasiswa dalam Berinteraksi di Lingkungan Universitas Tidar: Kajian Sosiopragmatik. *Seloka: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Dan Sastra Indonesia*, *6*(1).

Nurjamily, W. O. (2015). Kesantunan berbahasa indonesia dalam lingkungan keluarga (kajian sosiopragmatik). *Jurnal Humanika*, *3*(15), 1–18.

Piirainen-Marsh, A. (1998). Meaning and the social context: Notes on the pragmatics of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural intelligibility. *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia: International Review of English Studies*, 333–342.

Pranowo. (2009). *Berbahasa secara santun*. Pustaka Pelajar.

Rahardi, R. K. (2005). *Pragmatik: kesantunan imperatif bahasa Indonesia*. Erlangga.

Soeparno, S. (2002). *Dasar-Dasar Linguistik Umum*. Tiara Wacana Jogja.

Sudaryanto. (1993). *Metode dan aneka teknik analisis bahasa: Pengantar penelitian wahana kebudayaan secara linguistis*. Duta Wacana University Press.

Tanskanen, S. (2004). Patterns of cohesion in spoken and written dialogue. *Discourse Patterns in Spoken and Written Corpora*, *120*, 89.

Tarigan, H. G. (2008). *Membaca Sebagai Suatu keterampilan Berbahasa*. Angkasa.

Vidianingrum, P. R., Putri, D. C., Aulia Putri, N. D., Shankara, B. O., Zerlinda, E. D., & Satria, M. H. (2024). Analisis Pemahaman Kesantunan Berbahasa Indonesia Pada Mahasiswa Teknik Industri UPN "Veteran" Jawa Timur . *Jurnal Pendidikan West Science*, *2*(03 SE-Artikel), 170–176. https://doi.org/10.58812/jpdws.v2i03.1230

Wa'adi, A., Subaweh, A. M., & Muthmainnah, F. (2024). Analysis of Language Policy in the Social Interactions of Pondok Pesantren Darul Ma'arif Kaplongan. *Review of Multidisciplinary Education, Culture and Pedagogy*, *3*(3), 218–227. https://doi.org/10.55047/romeo.v3i3.1282

Watts, R. J. (2003). *Politeness*. Cambridge University Press.

Wijana, I., Putu, D., & Rohmadi, M. (2009). *Analisis wacana pragmatik*. Yuma Pustaka.

Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford university press.

Zamzani, Z. (2011). Pengembangan alat ukur kesantunan bahasa Indonesia dalam interaksi sosial bersemuka. *Litera*, *10*(1).