

An Analysis Of Negative Politeness Strategies In Workplace Interaction In The Film Bombshell

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Abstract	This study aims to analyze the use of negative politeness strategies in workplace interactions as depicted in the film Bombshell (2019). Based on the politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), this study focuses on ten negative politeness sub-strategies and the social factors that influence them, namely social distance, power, and level of imposition. The approach used is qualitative with documentation method. Data in the form of utterances from the film's four main characters, namely Roger Ailes, Megyn Kelly, Gretchen Carlson, and Kayla Pospisil, were collected through dialogue transcription and verification with online scripts. Data analysis was carried out through reduction, presentation, and drawing conclusions. The results show that of the fifteen utterances analyzed, all ten negative politeness strategies emerged. The most frequently used strategies were Be Conventionally Indirect, Minimize the Imposition, Give Deference, Impersonalize Speaker and Hearer, and State the FTA as a General Rule, each appearing twice. Power proved to be the most dominant variable: speakers with lower power tended to use deference and minimization strategies, while speakers with higher power used indirectness as a means of control. This research contributes to the development of pragmatic understanding in professional contexts and offers practical implications for film-based English language teaching.
Keywords	Bombshell; negative politeness; pragmatics; power relations; workplace interaction
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INTRODUCTION

Humans use language not only as a tool for conveying information but also as a means of establishing, maintaining, and negotiating social relationships. In pragmatic studies, meaning is derived not solely from linguistic form but also from the surrounding social context. Nazeeva Yusrina and colleagues (2024) emphasize that context plays an essential and dynamic role in pragmatic interpretation, where both speakers and interlocutors rely on linguistic cues and social factors to interpret meaning. Thus, understanding meaning cannot be separated from the social context of

language use. One of the most important aspects of pragmatics is politeness, which plays a crucial role in maintaining harmonious social interactions, especially in situations where a statement could potentially threaten a person's self-image or face.

The politeness theory developed by Brown and Levinson (1987) is one of the most influential frameworks in pragmatics. This theory is rooted in the concept of face, introduced by Goffman (1967), which is the positive social value that an individual claims for themselves in an interaction. Brown and Levinson divide face into two types: positive face, which relates to the need to be appreciated, liked, and accepted, and negative face, which relates to the need to be free from interference, imposition, or restrictions on freedom of action. Every speech act has the potential to threaten one or both of these types of face, which are then referred to as Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs).

To minimize this threat, speakers can choose one of four politeness strategies: bald-on-record (direct without softening), positive politeness (emphasizing solidarity), negative politeness (respecting the interlocutor's freedom), and off-record (very indirect). Of these four strategies, negative politeness often appears in interactions characterized by hierarchy and authority inequality, as it is particularly appropriate for demonstrating respect, reducing the coercive or intrusive nature of a statement, and maintaining social distance, especially when the speaker is in a lower position than the interlocutor.

Previous research has shown that negative politeness often occurs in institutional and professional contexts such as the workplace due to differences in status, authority, responsibility, and access to resources among communication participants (Kádár & House, 2021; Kuzhevskaya, 2019). The workplace, as depicted in the film *Bombshell*, is a social environment heavily influenced by power relations and hierarchical structures. In this environment, language has a strategic, not a neutral, function, for example, to maintain authority, demonstrate compliance, and avoid conflict. Film, as a narrative medium, is capable of portraying social phenomena and communication styles that closely resemble real-life interactions, thus being considered a valid source of pragmatic data (Maysafira & Hidayatulloh, 2024).

The selection of the film *Bombshell* (2019) as the research object is based on three main reasons. First, the film explicitly depicts the highly hierarchical power relations and workplace dynamics in a major media environment, namely Fox News. Second, the film is relevant to language learning, particularly pragmatics, because it provides authentic examples of professional interactions in which speakers use various linguistic strategies to maintain politeness, reduce imposition, and manage interpersonal relationships. Third, although the film has been widely studied from the perspectives of feminism, sexual harassment, and audience reception (Christiana et al.,

2023), no research has systematically analyzed the use of negative politeness strategies in this film based on Brown and Levinson's theory. Therefore, this study aims to answer the question: how are negative politeness strategies constructed and used in workplace interactions in the film *Bombshell*? The scope of the study is limited to utterances containing negative politeness strategies from the four main characters: Roger Ailes (CEO of Fox News), Megyn Kelly (senior anchor), Gretchen Carlson (senior journalist), and Kayla Pospisil (junior employee). The analysis also considers three sociological variables that Brown and Levinson believe influence strategy choice, namely social distance, relative power, and degree of imposition.

Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the understanding of negative politeness strategies by providing insights into how these strategies are constructed and used in unequal workplace interactions. Practically, the results of this study are useful for students, English language learners, and educators in developing awareness of appropriate language use in professional communication. The analysis of negative politeness strategies in the film *Bombshell* can be used as a concrete example of how language is used strategically to manage FTAs, authority, and professional roles. In addition, this study can be a reference material for other researchers interested in similar studies.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen because the data analyzed are oral speech acts that require in-depth interpretation of meaning within their context (Creswell, 2018). The case study design allows the researcher to focus on one specific phenomenon, namely the use of negative politeness strategies, in one limited case, namely the film *Bombshell*. The primary data source is the film *Bombshell* (2019) released by Lionsgate, with a duration of one hour and forty-nine minutes. The data consists of verbal utterances produced by the four main characters: Roger Ailes, Megyn Kelly, Gretchen Carlson, and Kayla Pospisil. Data were obtained from transcripts of the film's dialogues, which were verified by watching the film live and comparing them with available online transcripts. Secondary data sources were journal articles and textbooks on pragmatics and politeness theory, which were used to strengthen the theoretical foundation.

The data collection technique used the documentation method with the following steps. The researcher watched the film *Bombshell* repeatedly, at least five times, to comprehensively understand the situation, interactions, and pragmatic context of each utterance. The researcher then transcribed the dialogue from the film and compared it with online transcripts from the subscene.com and imsdb.com sites to ensure accuracy. Next, the researcher coded by identifying, marking, and classifying utterances

containing negative politeness strategies and FTA based on Brown and Levinson's ten sub-strategies. Each datum was coded with a number, strategy, and character format, for example, 01/BCI/RA means the first data, the Be Conventionally Indirect strategy, spoken by Roger Ailes.

Analysis followed the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three components. First, data reduction, in which the researcher selected and focused on utterances relevant to the research question, namely those containing negative politeness strategies. Irrelevant or repetitive data were excluded. Each selected utterance was classified according to strategy type. Second, data presentation, in which the researcher presented the data in a table containing data codes, time of occurrence, utterance, character, and function of the strategy. Each data point was then described and analyzed based on its pragmatic context, including factors of social distance, power, and degree of imposition. Third, conclusion drawing, in which the researcher interpreted the overall findings by connecting them to Brown and Levinson's theory. Conclusions were verified by re-watching relevant scenes and double-checking for contextual accuracy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Throughout the entire film *Bombshell*, researchers found 15 utterances that clearly contained negative politeness strategies. All ten sub-strategies appeared with varying frequency. Table 1 presents the frequency of each strategy.

Table 1. Frequency of Negative Politeness Strategies in the Film *Bombshell*

No	STRAT EGY CODE	STRATEGY NAME	FREQU ENCY	PERCEN TAGE
1	BCI	Be Conventionally Indirect	2	13.3%
2	HQ	Question/Hedge	1	6.7%
3	BP	Be Pessimistic	1	6.7%
4	MI	Minimize the Imposition	2	13.3%
5	GD	Give Deference	2	13.3%
6	AP	Apologize	1	6.7%
7	ISH	Impersonalize Speaker/Hearer	2	13.3%
8	SGR	State FTA as General Rule	2	13.3%
9	NOM	Nominalize	1	6.7%
10	ID	Go on Record as Incurring Debt	1	6.7%

No	STRAT EGY CODE	STRATEGY NAME	FREQU ENCY	PERCEN TAGE
		Total	15	100%

Source: Researcher's analysis of Bombshell (2019).

Five strategies appeared with the highest frequency (2 times each, or 13.3%):

Be Conventionally Indirect (BCI), Minimize the Imposition (MI), Give Deference (GD), Impersonalize Speaker and Hearer (ISH), and State the FTA as a General Rule (SGR).

The other five strategies appeared once each. Table 2 shows the distribution of strategies by character.

Table 2. Distribution of Negative Politeness Strategies per Character

CHARACTER	POSITION	STRATEGY USED	NU MBE R
Roger Ailes	CEO (high power)	BCI (2), BP (1), ISH (1), NOM (1)	5
Megyn Kelly	Senior presenter	HQ (1)	1
Gretchen Carlson	Senior journalist	MI (1), SGR (1), ID (1)	3
Kayla Pospisil	Junior employee	MI (1), GD (2), AP (1), SGR (1)	5

Source: Researcher's analysis of Bombshell (2019).

The character with the highest power (Roger Ailes) used five strategies, dominated by BCI, which functions as criticism and control. The character with the lowest power (Kayla Pospisil) also used five strategies, dominated by GD (deference). Gretchen Carlson, in the middle position, used three strategies. Megyn Kelly used only one strategy (HQ). Table 3 presents a complete classification of the speech data.

Table 3. Classification of Speech Data Based on Strategy and Context

Code Data	Time	Chara cter	Speech	Strat egy	Pragmatic Function	Dominant Factor
01/BCI/ RA	00.01. 47	Roger	"What'd you do piss off Trump?"	BCI	Indirect accusation	P (power)
02/BCI/ RA	00.02. 00	Roger	"What, the future of Fox News is now a	BCI	Criticism and sarcasm	P (power)

Code Data	Time	Character	Speech	Strategy	Pragmatic Function	Dominant Factor
			goddamn feminist?!"			
03/HQ/ MK	00.10. 34	Megyn	"I think it was the coffee"	HQ	Avoiding full commitment	R (high imposition)
04/BP/ RA	1.26.2 7	Roger	"I don't know if women can be good interviewers"	BP	Questioning competence	P, R high
05/MI/ KP	1.24.5 9	Kayla	"I just need to talk to someone..."	MI	Minimizing the emotional request	P low, R high
06/MI/ GC	00.20. 59	Gretchen	"I'm hoping for a little loyalty"	MI	Minimizing the request for loyalty	R moderate
07/GD/ KP	00.40. 47	Kayla	"Mr. Ailes, I'd appreciate it if..."	GD	Showing deference in a request	P low, D high
08/GD/ KP	00.38. 20	Kayla	"...I want to convince you... Mr. Ailes"	GD	Showing deference while promoting oneself	P low
09/AP/ KP	00.20. 59	Kayla	"Sorry. I saved my number..."	AP	Acknowledging a boundary violation	D low (friends)
10/ISH/ RA	00.37. 47	Roger	"A liberal is somebody who..."	ISH	Generalizing an opinion	P high
11/ISH/ MK	00.14. 47	Gretchen	"This behavior has to stop. Someone has to speak up"	ISH	Impersonal criticism	R high
12/SGR /GC	1.12.3 0	Gretchen	"Rule One in corporate America: you don't get to sue your boss!"	SGR	Criticizing the system as a general rule	R high
13/SGR /KP	00.30. 43	Kayla	"Well, yeah, you don't wanna be gay at Fox"	SGR	Stating environmental	P low, R high

Code Data	Time	Character	Speech	Strategy	Pragmatic Function	Dominant Factor
					pressure	
14/NO M/RA	01.01.47	Roger	"I have reason to believe... discussions... of having me killed"	NO M	Objectifying a conspiracy accusation	R very high
15/ID/GC	00.20.07	Gretchen	"...I thank the other brave women who came on today's show sans makeup"	ID	Building solidarity through indebtedness	R high, D solidarity

Source: Researcher's analysis of dialogue data from Bombshell (2019).

Findings per Strategy

For the Be Conventionally Indirect strategy, two data points were found from Roger Ailes. The first data point (01/BCI/RA): "What'd you do piss off Trump?" Roger used an interrogative question to convey an indirect accusation that Megyn had angered Donald Trump. Pragmatically, this question functions as both criticism and a warning. With its indirect form, Roger avoids explicit accusations while still asserting his authority. The second data point (02/BCI/RA): "What, the future of Fox News is now a goddamn feminist?!" This rhetorical question contains sarcasm and a sharp criticism of Megyn's professional identity. The BCI strategy allows Roger to deliver criticism that is very threatening to Megyn's positive face while maintaining indirectness.

For the Question/Hedge strategy, one example is from Megyn Kelly (03/HQ/MK): "I think it was the coffee." In the scene where Megyn is sick and suspects the coffee is poisoned, the safety word "I think" reduces her epistemic commitment. Without the hedge, the statement would be a serious accusation that could potentially cause panic. The hedge protects Megyn from liability if the accusation is false.

For the Be Pessimistic strategy, one piece of data from Roger Ailes (04/BP/RA): "I don't know if women can be good interviewers." The phrase "I don't know if..." is a marker of doubt. Roger implicitly doubts Megyn's competence without making a direct declarative statement. This statement is very threatening to the positive face of Megyn and all women.

For the Minimize the Imposition strategy, two data points. Kayla (05/MI/KP): "I just need to talk to someone, to ask if this is the right thing to do. I gave in to him." The word "just" minimizes the emotional demand in the context of sexual harassment (very high imposition). Gretchen (06/MI/GC): "I'm hoping for a little loyalty." The phrase "a

little" minimizes the demand for loyalty, which is actually large and risky.

For the Give Deference strategy, two data points are from Kayla. The first data point (07/GD/KP): "Mr. Ailes, I'd appreciate it if... if you didn't mention..." The formal greeting "Mr. Ailes" and the pause show respect when delivering a sensitive request. The second data point (08/GD/KP): "I want to convince you that's where I belong, Mr. Ailes." Despite promoting herself, Kayla still uses a formal greeting to maintain a respectful distance.

For the Apologize strategy, one data from Kayla (09/AP/KP): "Sorry. I saved my number on your phone under his name. As a joke." The apology acknowledges a minor violation of personal boundaries, attempting to repair the negative face of the interlocutor.

For the Impersonalize Speaker and Hearer strategy, two data points. Roger (10/ISH/RA): "A liberal is somebody who wants to live in a future he's too lazy or too arrogant to actually create." Generalizing opinions without naming specific individuals. Gretchen (11/ISH/MK): "This behavior has to stop. Someone has to speak up." Using "someone" instead of "you" or "I" avoids direct accusations against the superior.

For the State the FTA as a General Rule strategy, two data points. Gretchen (12/SGR/GC): "Rule One in corporate America: you don't get to sue your boss!" Framing the prohibition against suing superiors as a general rule, criticizing the system without making personal accusations. Kayla (13/SGR/KP): "Well, yeah, you don't want to be gay at Fox." "You don't want" is a generic way of stating environmental pressure as an implicit rule.

For the Nominalize strategy, one data from Roger (14/NOM/RA): "I have reason to believe... there have been discussions... of having me killed." The words "reason", "belief", "discussions" turn actions into abstract entities, making the conspiracy accusation sound more objective and indirect.

For the strategy of Go on Record as Incurring a Debt, one data from Gretchen (15/ID/GC): "I thank the other brave women who came on today's show sans makeup." Explicit expressions of gratitude acknowledge debts of gratitude, building solidarity in protest against beauty standards.

DISCUSSION

Indirect Strategy Dominance and Deference

The finding that the strategies Be Conventionally Indirect (BCI), Minimize the Imposition (MI), Give Deference (GD), Impersonalize Speaker and Hearer (ISH), and State the FTA as a General Rule (SGR) each appeared twice suggests that in a hierarchical and stressful work environment like Fox News, characters rely on

indirectness and deference as primary means of managing FTAs. Interestingly, BCI is used by a superior (Roger) to criticize and control, while GD is used by a subordinate (Kayla) to demonstrate deference. This highlights that the same strategy can serve different functions depending on the speaker's power position. For Roger, indirectness serves as a tool of power because he can deliver sharp criticism without making a fully direct statement, allowing him room to rebut if necessary. For Kayla, deference is a form of acknowledgment of power inequality and a means of surviving in a professionally hostile environment.

The Role of Power (P) as the Most Dominant Variable

Of the three social variables (P, D, R), power proved to be the strongest influence on strategy choice. Roger Ailes, with near-absolute institutional power, used BCI to criticize, BP to belittle, ISH to generalize opinions, and NOM to indirect accusations. In contrast, Kayla Pospisil (very low power) used GD twice, AP once, and MI once. Gretchen Carlson (medium power) used SGR and ID when speaking in public, and MI in private interactions. This pattern supports Brown and Levinson's prediction: the greater the power difference, the greater the need for negative politeness. Speakers with low power are more cautious to avoid the risk of violating hierarchical norms, while speakers with high power can use bolder language because their position protects them from negative consequences.

The Influence of Social Distance (D) and Imposition Level (R)

The social distance between Roger and Megyn is relatively low because they have worked together for years, allowing Roger to use direct questions like "What'd you do piss off Trump?" without excessive politeness. However, despite the low social distance, the extreme power difference still forces Megyn to respond defensively. In contrast, the social distance between Kayla and Roger is very high (they have just met), so Kayla consistently uses "Mr. Ailes" and displays extra caution. This suggests that social distance amplifies the effects of the power difference.

The level of imposition (R) in this film's FTAs is very high: accusations of causing conflict, criticism of feminist identity, doubts about women's competence, admissions of sexual harassment, demands for loyalty, accusations of conspiracy, and protests of beauty standards. The higher the R, the more subtle the strategy used. Kayla uses MI ("just") for sexual harassment (very high R). Roger uses NOM for accusations of conspiracy (very high R). Gretchen uses SGR to criticize the system (high R). This pattern suggests that R is crucial in determining the extent of politeness efforts.

Comparison with Previous Research

Table 4 presents a comparison with previous research.

Table 4. Comparison with Previous Research

Study	Data Source	Strategies Found	Similarity	Difference
Marfirah & Afriana (2023)	Film The Menu	BCI, HQ, MI, GD, ISH (15 strategies)	BCI, MI, GD, ISH dominant	SGR less, ID not found
Chaerdiani & Ekawati (2023)	Film Enola Holmes 2	Positive & negative politeness	Negative politeness emerges	Focus on family relationships, not work
Li & Wongwaropakorn (2024)	Chinese TV drama	Politeness in refusal	The role of context and power	The focus of the speech act of rejection
Singh & Kundra (2024)	Fijian Hindi conversation	Hedging & negative politeness	Use of hedges as a strategy	Cultural contexts are different
THIS RESEARCH	Bombshell Movie	All 10 strategies	-	Complete analysis with P, D, R

Source: Comparison synthesized from previous studies and the present research.

This finding aligns with Marfirah and Afriana (2023), who also found a dominance of BCI, MI, GD, and ISH. However, this study found a significantly higher use of SGR (2 instances compared to 1 instance in *The Menu*), likely because the context of *Bombshell* emphasizes criticism of corporate systems and regulations. Furthermore, this study found the ID (indebtedness) strategy absent in *The Menu*, suggesting that public expressions of gratitude can be a negative politeness strategy for building solidarity in situations with gender-based politics.

Linguistic Markers of Each Strategy

Table 5 summarizes the linguistic markers that characterize each strategy.

Table 5. Linguistic Markers of Each Strategy

Strategy	Main Linguistic Markers	Example of Data
Be Conventionally Indirect	Interrogative questions	"What'd you do piss off Trump?"
Question/Hedge	Hedge/safety phrase (I think, maybe)	"I think it was the coffee"
Be Pessimistic	Hedge/safety phrase (I think, maybe)	"I don't know if women can be good interviewers"
Minimize the Imposition	Minimizing words (just, a	"I just need to talk", "a little loyalty"

Strategy	Main Linguistic Markers	Example of Data
	little)	
Give Deference	Formal greetings (Mr., Ms.)	"Mr. Ailes"
Apologize	Sorry (sorry)	"Sorry"
Impersonalize Speaker/Hearer	Generic pronouns (somebody, someone)	"A liberal is somebody...", "Someone has to speak up"
State FTA as General Rule	General rule phrase (Rule One, you don't wanna)	"Rule One in corporate America", "you don't wanna be gay at Fox"
Nominalize	Abstract noun from verb	"reason", "belief", "discussions"
Go on Record as Incurring Debt	Expression of gratitude (I thank)	"I thank the other brave women"

Source: Researcher's analysis of linguistic markers in the selected utterances.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This research provides strong empirical support for Brown and Levinson's theory, particularly in the context of workplace interactions with extreme power inequality. This theory has been shown to explain why certain characters choose certain strategies. However, this research also shows that negative politeness strategies are not always "condescending" or "distance-maintaining." In the case of ID, these strategies actually build closeness and solidarity, deepening the understanding that negative politeness has a broad spectrum of functions, from avoiding imposition to building alliances. Furthermore, indirectness can be used as a tool of power, not just as a form of weakness.

Practically, the film *Bombshell* can be integrated into English language teaching, particularly English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Business English, or Pragmatics courses. Activities can be developed: analyzing politeness strategies from scene clips, role-playing with variations in power, rewriting dialogues using different strategies, and professional

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of 15 utterances in the film *Bombshell*, all ten of Brown and Levinson's negative politeness strategies emerged. The five most frequent strategies (2 times each) were Be Conventionally Indirect, Minimize the Imposition, Give Deference, Impersonalize Speaker and Hearer, and State the FTA as a General Rule. The power factor (P) was the most dominant: low-power speakers (Kayla) tended to

use GD, AP, MI; high-power speakers (Roger) used BCI, BP, ISH, NOM. Negative politeness strategies not only reduced imposition but also conveyed veiled criticism, built solidarity, and protected themselves from professional risks. The film *Bombshell* proved to be a rich source of pragmatic data for professional English teaching.

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