

Politeness Strategies in YouTube Comments on PragerU's Video : 'Israelis or Palestinians – Who's More Tolerant?'

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates politeness strategies in user-generated comments on the YouTube video "Israelis or Palestinians – Who Is More Tolerant?" by PragerU, situated within the polarized debate on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory and Herring's Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), the research employs a qualitative descriptive approach to examine 100 purposively sampled comments. The analysis identifies the patterned use of four politeness strategies: bald-on-record, positive, negative, and off-record. Findings reveal that highly engaged participants predominantly relied on positive politeness—particularly solidarity-building and appeals to shared values—while less engaged participants tended toward negative politeness, mitigating disagreement through indirectness. Bald-on-record strategies marked categorical ideological assertions, whereas off-record strategies, such as sarcasm and irony, allowed users to critique implicitly without direct confrontation. Unlike prior studies that conceptualize politeness merely as face management, this article demonstrates that in digital political discourse, politeness strategies are deeply ideological and function as markers of self-identification within polarized communities. The novelty of this research lies in its integration of pragmatics and digital discourse analysis to highlight how politeness in online debates not only negotiates interpersonal relations but also indexes ideological stance and group alignment. These findings underscore the significance of digital pragmatics in examining the intersection of language, ideology, and social relations in computer-mediated contexts, with implications for media literacy education to foster respectful and constructive engagement in polarized digital environments.

Keywords: politeness strategies, YouTube comments, ideological stance, CMDA, digital discourse

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, social media is an incredibly dynamic place of interaction, and YouTube has been not just a marketplace of videos but also one for public debate. The comments section provides the forum in which users can articulate ideas, values, and sentiment, sometimes directly and sometimes by insinuation. At the same time, this freedom democratizes speech and polarizes it at once, especially on politically sensitive issues.

Particularly in digital communication, politeness strategies function as a crucial factor to mitigate Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) and for helping users to maintain social relationships. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness is not just a set of rules but a social pragmatic system; it allows people to behave in ways that are socially acceptable. The use of politeness strategies in internet communication becomes especially crucial, as there are virtually no non-verbal signals due to the lack of face-to-face interaction and messages convey meaning completely through words used. Thus, comment sections on YouTube surrounding sensitive political topics are an ideal place to study the performance of ideological politeness. A case in point is this piece of propaganda from PragerU: "Israelis or Palestinians – Who's More Tolerant?". The video tackles a touchy subject by highlighting the story that Israel is more accepting than Palestine. This Point of View elicits an emotional and ideological response, making the comments section a space where divergent political positions and social identities meet. In these environments, emotive strategies work not only to regulate interpersonal relations but also to function as rhetorical instruments for the assertion of ideological affinity and identity negotiation.

The goals of this study are to discover what types of politeness strategies have been used in the comments on a video, which of these politeness strategies dominate among both camps supporting Israel and Palestine, and lastly to determine how such kinds/those linguistic forms may represent ideological positions.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The literature on applied theories in this study is described by the writer in this part, along with pertinent contributions made by a number of theorists. The writer describes and clarifies the Politeness Theory, Computer-Mediated Communication, and Political Discourse Analysis :

1. Politeness Theory

Central to this study is Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. Brown and Levinson separate face into two types: positive face, the want for approval [1], and negative face, the want to be autonomous or free from imposition. There are communicative acts that threaten these needs; these are called face-threatening acts (FTAs). Speakers use politeness strategies to minimize FTAs (bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, or off-record). These strategies are situation-specific and mediated by power, social/economic distance, and cultural norms.

2. Politeness in Digital Communication

In digital environments, the lack of paralinguistic cues renders politeness strategies particularly visible. Herring (2004) has developed Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis, a model of analysis to study how technologically enabled affordances and constraints, including anonymity, asynchronicity, and multimodality, reshape communication. Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2014) also note that politeness online frequently incorporates sarcasm, irony, or strategic impoliteness. This is the “relational work” (Locher & Watts 2005) that language does in mediating roles, faces, and ideology. These findings are particularly applicable to YouTube comments, where interaction occurs asynchronously and in public with a low level of subjection.

3. Politeness and Political Discourse

Politeness, then, isn't just a matter of keeping the peace; it operates ideologically too. Van Dijk (2006) suggests that political discourse tends to polarize between in-group and out-group, hence shaping facework. This has been demonstrated empirically, for example, in studies like Al-Rawi (2019) and Kampf (2020), where politeness and impoliteness strategies in the online political debate function as identity performances: users express solidarity with allies and take away legitimacy from opponents. Papacharissi (2015) develops the idea of “affective publics,” in which emotion and ideology are intertwined in digital discourse. These analyses indicate that the use of politeness in political discourse is both pragmatic and ideological.

4. Research Gap and Relevance

Studies of politeness on the internet (e.g., forums, news websites, and social media like Facebook) have existed before (e.g., Rosyidha et al., 2019); however, studies that explore online politeness within socially sensitive themes from YouTube comments are still very limited. Further, extensive use has been made of Leech's (1983) politeness maxims; few studies, however, have harnessed Brown and Levinson's framework in combination with CMDA to explore ideological positioning in user-generated content. This paper contributes to this gap by examining how politeness strategies in YouTube comments on the Israel–Palestine conflict conditionally treat face and function as ideological resources.

RESEARCH METHOD

1. Method Of Research

This research adopted a qualitative descriptive design to investigate politeness strategies in YouTube comments. The qualitative method was selected, as it provides further insights into how language users deploy linguistic strategies in digital discourses. The study was anchored on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, along with Herring's (2004) Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA). This design helped the researcher to recognize, categorize, and interpret politeness strategies within a politically charged online setting.

2. Data and Source of Data

One hundred comments were extracted from the YouTube video "Israelis or Palestinians – Who's More Tolerant?" uploaded by PragerU. This video was selected because it sparked a huge debate about the Israel–Palestine issue. Comments were taken from September 2022 to September 2024. Only level 1 comments identified to contain politeness were introduced into the corpus, while also filtering out any irrelevant or purely emotive comments (without pragmatic value) as they were deemed devoid of capturing politeness.

3. Technique of Data Collection

The following protocol was proposed to gather the data for this study. The researcher first downloaded the chosen video and its comments from YouTube. Among the comments, an initial screening was performed by inspecting the first 500 comments in order to identify obvious signs of politeness strategies (for instance, compliments, hedging, indirect criticism, or sarcasm). After collecting the comments, purposive sampling was used to sample 100 typical comments. These comments were selected to present two opposing ideological perspectives and the typology of politeness strategies. Every selected comment was meticulously logged in a data set that included the commenter's username, the full contents of the selected comment, and any notes on its context for purposes of interpretation. All results were subsequently tabulated in tables to enable analysis and to code the recorded responses.

4. Technique of Data Coding

The comments were then coded applying Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness strategies. This model categorizes utterances into four strategies: bald-on-record, which involves directness; positive politeness, which reflects solidarity and in-group membership; negative politeness, with approaches like hedging, rhetorical questioning, or deference; off-record strategies using implicit communications such as humor. A specific code for each comment was assigned based on its dominating politeness strategy. Furthermore, the ideological orientation of each comment (Pro-Israel, Pro-Palestine, or Neutral) was also recorded to better understand the relation between the use of strategy and political attitude.

Table 1. Example of Table Coding Data

No	Username	YouTube Comment	Politeness Strategy	Explanation	Context	Ideological Position
1.	@truthfinderID	"Sorry, but Palestinians are often portrayed unfairly in Western media."	Negative Politeness	The phrase "Sorry, but..." softens disagreement → indirect criticism without direct confrontation.	Responding to dominant narrative in video comments	Pro-Palestinian

5. Technique of Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in four major steps. The process of analysis proceeded in two stages—classification and coding—in which the identified comments were then integrated into one of the four categories, following a systematic categorization method. Stage 2: Qualitative content analysis was carried out to capture the type of language, words employed, and contextual dimensions that indicated how politeness materialized in the comments. The third phase was interpretative analysis based on the anonymity and asynchronicity of the YouTube environment. This analysis was a step towards discovering communicative intentions and ideological orientation in the use of specific politeness strategies. Lastly, the fourth phase was the comparison of politeness strategies between ideological groups. This juxtaposition brought out strategies used by Pro-Israel, Pro-Palestine, and Neutral posters during face work, criticism articulation, and solidarity production.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the formulated research questions, Discusses and interprets the research results. The present study investigates YouTube comments on PragerU's controversial video entitled "Israelis or Palestinians – Who's More Tolerant?" to shed light on how strategies of politeness are employed. It is informed by Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of politeness theory as well as Herring's (2004) CMDA framework to analyze the chosen YouTube responses for which four strategies constitute commitment: bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record.

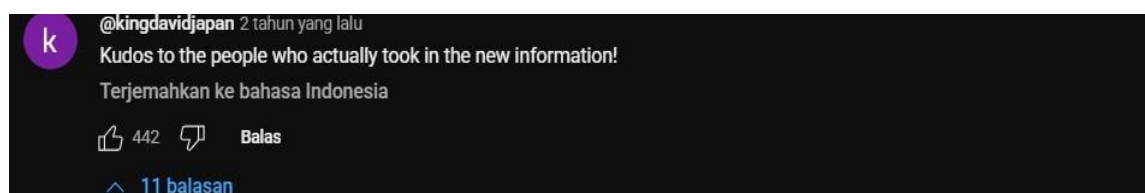
This parts seeks to answer the research questions and offer understanding of how politeness works in online political debate through this examination, with language being employed strategically not just to express views but also to construct stances, with personal resources, to indicate group membership and negotiate ideological battles in the digital public.

1. FINDINGS

1.1 The Use of Politeness Strategies by YouTube Users

The results demonstrate that YouTube users use a number of politeness strategies—positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and bald-on-record—to manage interaction on politically sensitive topics. So these are all different strategies and respond to different communicative intentions. From solidarity building to (ideological) distinction making, each strategy is guided by a different communicative purpose.

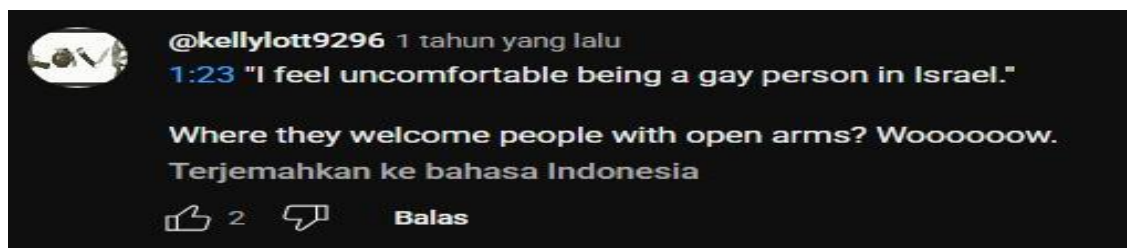
- Positive Politeness



Screenshoot 1. Example of Data Positive Politeness by YouTube User

One example comes from @kingdavidjapan *"Kudos to the people who actually took in the new information!"*. This comment contained Positive Politeness. The user praises those who changed their perspectives, reinforcing the value of openness and positioning themselves with the informed, "rational" group. The comment praises viewers who changed their views after watching the video, reinforcing the idea that the video delivers truth. This supports the creator's pro-Israel stance by implying that those who learn from it are rational and enlightened.

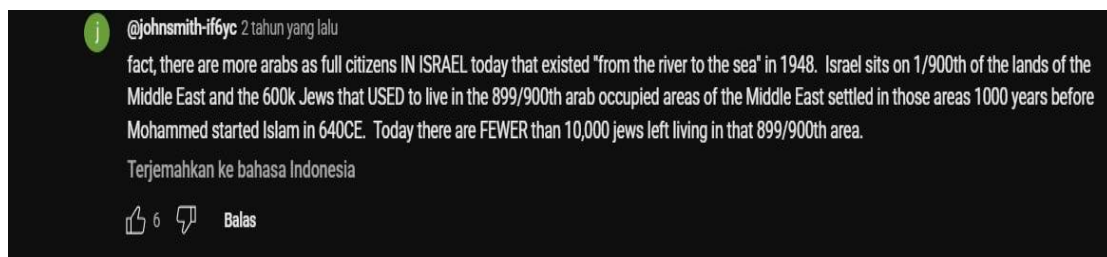
- Off-Record Strategy



Screenshoot 3. Example of Data Off-Record Strategy by YouTube User

Sarcasm is apparent in this reply, forwarded by @kellylott9296: *"Where they welcome people with open arms? Woooooow."* The over-the-top "Woooooow" is a signpost of irony and ridicule that doesn't call anyone out by name or attack them. And so, with this off-record technique, the commenter can disparage through the back door, letting inference inform while minimizing direct engagements.

- Bald-On-Record Strategy



Screenshoot 4. Example of Data Bald-On-Record Strategy by YouTube User

There are the 'emphatic assertion' instances such as @johnsmith-if6yc: *"Fact, there are more Arabs as full citizens IN ISRAEL today ..."* The blunt lead "Fact" presents the declaration as irrefutable truth, and typography further underlines conviction. This unsoftened style is a statement of ideological strength, an attempt to close down debate: clarity trumps politeness.

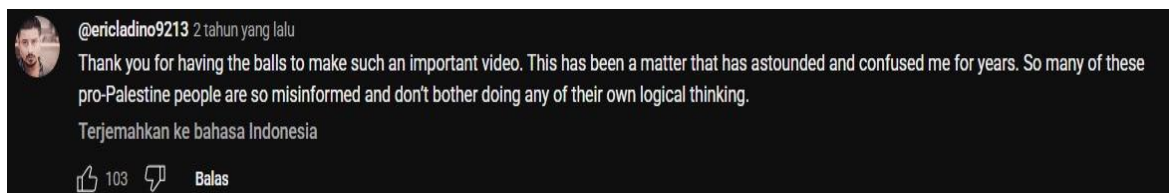
To summarize, with examination of data as such, the way politeness strategies are used on YouTube is various – whether for creating solidarity, downgrading disagreement, indirect critique via irony, or simply just making bold statements. These practices demonstrate how

digital discourse operates as a space in which language acts as a tool of connection and a weapon of ideology.

1.2 The Dominant Politeness Strategies in Each Ideological Group

The results show that each share of an ideology has a specific preference toward certain politeness strategies according to the communicative purposes that make user positioned through their ideological stand in the debate on Israel–Palestine.

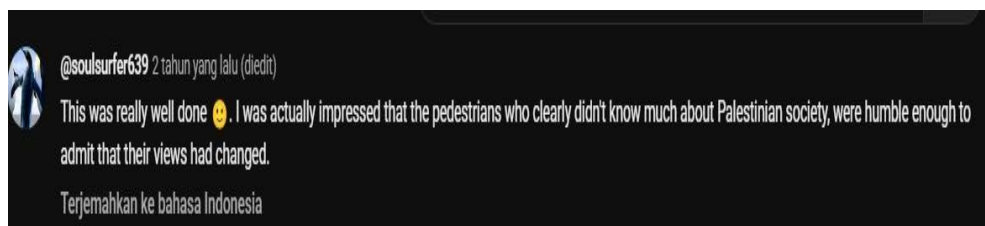
- Pro-Israel Users: Positive Politeness



Screenshoot 5. Example of Data Pro-Israel Users: Positive Politeness by YouTube User

A prime one this week is from @ericladino9213, who wrote: *"Thank you for having the balls to put out a very important video... these pro-PALESTINE people are sooo misinformed and don't care to do any of their own critical thinking."* This comment mashes up gratitude with praise, presenting the video-maker as brave for even having tackled such a controversial topic. The vernacular in "having the balls" creates solidarity through slang, while the open juxtaposition with "misinformed" Palestinians reinforces ideological allegiance with Israel. This indicates the presence of positive politeness among pro-Israel users, which reinforces in-group affiliation by praising and encouraging each other.

- Pro-Palestine Users: Negative Politeness



Screenshoote 6. Example of Data Pro-Palestine Users: Negative Politeness by YouTube User

Here is an illustrative case, from @soulsurfer639 *"This was really well done . I was impressed that the pedestrians who clearly didn't know much about Palestinian society were humble enough to admit that their views had changed."* Offers comprehensive praise while acknowledging the complexity of the issue, building rapport through recognition of intellectual honesty. This comment praises participants who changed their perspective after learning about Palestinians, showing support for their representation. The use of a smiley face adds emotional warmth, reinforcing sympathy with the Palestinian side.

1.3 The Function of Politeness Strategies by Other YouTube Users

As the analysis shows, politeness strategies are not just used to mediate interpersonal relations but also as militating ideological claims. Users use tactics like bald-on-record and negative politeness for the purpose of legitimation of self-positioning or de-legitimization of an opponent.

- Bald-on-Record (Identity/In-Your-Face Assertion, Pro-Israel Position)

User @rakata1987 wrote, *“As a gay man, I have always and will always support Israel.”* This comment exhibits a bald-on-record technique as an ideological stance is straightforwardly presented without qualification or mitigation. The declaration form (“always and will always”) expresses an example of loyalty. Referencing personal identity (“as a gay man”), the user calls upon experiential authority and positions support for Israel as a moral and identity-based imperative. The ideological work at play here is clear: the speaker in question legitimates Israel through its incorporation into a logic of LGBT inclusivity and thus casts the boycott as incompatible with liberal values.

- Negative Politeness Strategy (Appraisal for Understanding, Pro-Palestine)

One user, who goes by @firefly_night, wrote: *“Please open your heart and mind, just that little bit more and see that things are not as black and white as the media view us.”* This statement constitutes an instance of negative politeness by resorting to a polite request (‘please’) and downgraders (‘not as black and white’). Instead of directly challenging adversaries, the tack taken by the commenter is to politely request reconsideration without as much attacking a face threat. Ideologically, the tactic works to discredit mainstream pro-Israel stories by eliciting empathetic identification with Palestinians as misrepresented in the media. The politeness strategy used here allows room for criticism without causing confrontation and can be seen as a safe but clear pro-Palestine stance.

Altogether, these examples help show in what ways politeness strategies reflect ideological positioning. Bald-on-record tactics for representing as categorical certitude and author identity-based authority, often readymade assert pro-Israel positions. On the other hand, negative politeness serves as a more cautious preface for different viewpoints that enable pro-Palestinian users to question the hegemonic narratives without confrontation. As in both cases, strategy follows from ideological intention, politeness in digital discourse thus clearly serves double duty as a relational and political instrument.

2. DISCUSSIONS

The results of the study suggest that politeness strategies in YouTube comments are not only interpersonal tools, but also ideological weapons. Brown and Levinson’s (1987) strategies—positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and bald-on record—are used here not only to save face but also as battlefield tools in the polarized Israel–Palestine debate.

Positive politeness was the preferred tactic among pro-Israeli users. Stewart: Words of praise, thanks, and compliments served to create a sense of oneness among Israeli identity while

simultaneously sanctioning Israel's position. This shows that in this camp, politeness is a tool of ideological bonding.

Pro-Palestinian and neutral users tended to use negative politeness. These commenters preferred careful and respectful dissent, using hedging and polite requests to hint that they wanted to avoid confrontation directly. This is a strategic decision that demonstrates what men know of their controversial or marginalized status (or perceived lack thereof), through which politeness is wielded as an identificatory shield to maintain credibility and facilitate conversation under adversity.

Strategies for "off-the-record" (e.g., sarcasm and rhetorical questions) were fully utilized by all ideological groups. These techniques enabled commenters to disparage opponents obliquely while stretching the limits of plausible deniability, as well as that of the comments section's editors—though they could still deliver and receive messages to their ideological allies. This kind of detour mirrors the affordances of YouTube, where irony serves as both a mode of humor and an ideological weapon. Bald-on-record tactics were primarily in the context of strong pro-Israel positions. These unqualified, absolute statements were a stance of certainty and ideological force, and they often came with the intent of clamping down on debate and delegitimizing dissent. This candor exhibits the ways in which politeness (or not) is deployed to assert authority in digital political discourse.

In conclusion, among politeness strategies in YouTube comments, the following co-occurring patterns have emerged: face-supporting issues on the one hand and (power) tools of ideological alignment, identity work, as well as community-barring techniques on the other hand. Hence, civility in online debates should be seen as a relational habitus action and politically motivated in that users strategically move around digital public discourse.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that PragerU's video "Israelis or Palestinians – Who's More Tolerant?" is not only subjected to linguistic choice but mirrors ideological stance, identity performance, and (strategic) face-work in a deeply divided digital public.

The study of 100 purposively selected comments reveals that Positive politeness strategies, such as praise, solidarity markers, and in-group identity reference, were mostly utilized by pro-Israel commenters to enhance bonding and sustain a shared worldview. Negative politeness strategies, hedging, indirect questioning, and appeals for fairness, were most frequent among pro-Palestinian commenters and moderate voices to reduce disagreement and show respect. Both confrontational off-record strategies, such as sarcasm or irony, were used by both sides to avoid direct confrontation while users were still persuasively aligned with severe ideological opinionatedness. Bald-on-record strategies, on the other hand, were used typically by strong assertive users who presented categorical claims, blunt criticism, or direct ideological positioning with no face mitigation.

These results confirm that, in online political discourse, traditional politeness serves as both a pragmatic means of preserving interactional equilibrium and an ideological resource for in-group identity marking and the legitimation of one's own political claims at the expense of others. Based on the findings, further studies may consider expanding this inquiry to other

platforms and across intercultural contexts for enriched knowledge on how politeness strategies evolve in online media.

Educators and media literacy promoters are advised to include politeness knowledge in critical digital literacy education that would support civil and constructive engagement with online discussion. Platform developers and policymakers should consider the possibility of features that can inspire dialogic rather than polarized exchanges.

Lastly, digital citizens themselves are encouraged to critically think about their verbal and nonverbal behavior, realizing that a courteous choice in politeness strategy can either drive or enhance conflict or stimulate understanding, inclusion, and democratic dialogue within the digital public sphere.

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