

Politeness and Power In "*Of Mice and Men*"
A Sociopragmatic Study

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التأداب والسلطة في رواية " الفئران والرجال " دراسة تداولية اجتماعية

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Abstract

This research explores the theoretical framework of politeness strategies. It then shifts to analyze the employment of these strategies within an environment where politeness is not a personal luxury but rather a vital necessity for survival. By applying Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory to *John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men"*, the study employs a mixed-method approach to examine how characters navigate a predatory world.

The quantitative results reveal a significant dominance of the Bald On-Record strategy (47%), highlighting that linguistic directness is a byproduct of power struggles and the urgent need for efficiency. The Off-Record strategy (24%) emerges as a linguistic shield for the marginalized, while the marked decline in Positive (15%) and Negative Politeness (14%) underscores the collapse of social boundaries and mutual respect. Ultimately, the study concludes that in a world governed by survival, language serves as a visceral reflection of the emotional barrenness and cruelty imposed by the environment

Keywords: politeness, strategies , Bald On- Record, power

الملخص

يعتمد هذا البحث الإطار النظري لاستراتيجيات التأدب، والاختذ بعين الاعتبار نظرياتها اللغوية. حيث ينتقل إلى تحليل توظيف هذه الاستراتيجيات في بيئة لا يُعد فيها التأدب رفاهية شخصية، بل ضرورة حيوية للبقاء. ومن خلال تطبيق نظرية براون وليفنسون (1987) على رواية "الفئران والرجال" للكاتب جون شتاينبك، تعتمد الدراسة منهجاً مختلطاً لتحليل كيفية توظيف الشخصيات لاستراتيجيات التأدب أثناء تفاعلها داخل عالم تسوده القسوة والصراع من أجل البقاء.

تكشف النتائج الكمية عن هيمنة ملحوظة لاستراتيجية التصريح المباشر بنسبة (47%)، مما يشير إلى أن المباشرة اللغوية تُعد نتاجاً لصراعات القوة والحاجة الملحة إلى الكفاءة والسرعة في التواصل. كما برزت استراتيجية التلميح بنسبة (24%) بوصفها وسيلة لغوية يلجأ إليها الأفراد المهمشون لحماية أنفسهم، في حين يعكس الانخفاض الواضح في استخدام استراتيجية التأدب الإيجابي بنسبة (15%) واستراتيجية التأدب السلبي بنسبة (14%) انهيار الحدود الاجتماعية وتراجع مظاهر الاحترام المتبادل. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أنه في عالم تحكمه غريزة البقاء، تصبح اللغة انعكاساً مباشراً للقسوة والجذب العاطفي اللذين تفرضهما البيئة على الأفراد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التأدب، استراتيجيات ، استراتيجية التصريح المباشر و القوة

1.Introduction

Language is more than a mere collection of grammatical rules and vocabulary; it is a dynamic tool used by humans to achieve specific social goals. While semantics focuses on the literal meaning of words, Pragmatics ventures beyond the text to explore the 'unsaid.' It is the study of how context contributes to meaning, analyzing how listeners can understand a speaker's intended message even when it is not explicitly stated. By examining the relationship between linguistic forms and their users, Pragmatics shifts the focus from what is said to what is meant, making it an essential field for understanding the complexities of human communication, social interaction, and the fluid nature of meaning in real-world situations.

This study explores politeness strategies in J.Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men", focusing on how characters use language social dynamics during American great depression. This study tries to answer the following questions:

- 1-what are the most frequent type of politeness strategies used in the data?
- 2-How do politeness strategies reflect power relations and social status?

The study aims at identify politeness strategies , exploring the most frequent type of politeness strategy used in the data , and showing how the politeness strategies reflect power relations and social status.

Politeness and Power In "*Of Mice and Men*". A Sociopragmatic Study

Assistant Lecturer : Duaa Hamid Ali

2.Literature Review

2.1 Sociolinguistics

Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015), stated that sociolinguistics is "the study of our everyday lives – how language works in our casual conversations and the media we are exposed to, and the presence of societal norms, policies, and laws which address language".

Moreover, sociolinguistics highlights the differences found in a language. People from various backgrounds use language not only to share information but also to show (and even shape) their own identity or the identity of their group. (Hudson, 1996).

2.1.1 Social Power

Social power is a key concept in sociolinguistics and pragmatics since it shapes how individual use language during interaction. Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed that power (P) is one of the three major sociological variables that determine the degree of politeness employed by speakers. Similarly, Norman Fairclough (1989) emphasizes that language is both shaped by and contributes to social power relations.

Therefore, the analysis of politeness strategies cannot be separated from the examination of power relations within a particular social context. In literary discourse, social power is generally displayed through characters' interactions. Differences in status, economic position, age, gender, or authority influence how characters perform politeness strategies.

2.2 Politeness Theory

In pragmatics, Lakoff (1989: 102) defines politeness as "a means of minimizing confrontation in discourse - both the possibility of confrontation occurring at all, and the possibility that a confrontation is perceived as threatening".

Moreover, politeness refers to the ways in which the relational function in linguistic action is carried out or expressed. In this way, it is understood as a strategy or series of strategies the speaker employs in order to promote or maintain harmonious relations and avoid conflicts with others (Kasper,1994:32).

2.3 Brown and Levinson' Theory of Politeness'

Brown and Levinson, (1987: 5) present a more articulated pattern which takes into consideration the social behavior in particular developing the concept of *face* . In essence politeness serves as social lubricant that preserves the public self-image (face) of both participants, ensuing that communication remains harmonious and effective.

According to 'Brown and Levinson' (1987:62) is built on the concept of "face" means the (public self-image) of any humankind. The theory distinguishes between two types of "face, that every participant in a conversation tries to maintain positive face the desire to be liked, appreciated, approved, treated as a member of the same group negative face the desire to be autonomous independent, and free from imposition or interference by others .

2.3.1 Politeness Strategies

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), speakers select one of four linguistic strategies ranging from most direct to least direct to mitigate threats :

1-Bald on record : speaking directly and clearly without any attempt to soften the threat. This strategy used in emergencies or between very close relatives.

2- Positive politeness strategy : oriented toward the hearer's positive face, to make him feel valued and liked.

3-Negative politeness strategy : oriented toward the hearer's negative face to showing respect for his autonomy and minimizing imposition, by using apologies and indirectness.

4-Off record: dropping hints or being vague, so the speaker cannot be held responsible for a direct request

After what has mentioned, the choice of politeness strategy depends on the weightiness of the face threatening acts, which is calculated based on the social distance between participants ,the power scale, and the degree of the request's imposition.

2.4 " Of Mice and Men "

The novella explores the lives of two men, George and Lennie, and their hopes for finding purpose in their lives. The story focuses on George and Lennie's dream of having a small farm, which plays a key role in moving the plot forward. (Alnajm, 2020).

The novella presents many themes such as : loneliness, dreams, barriers, powerlessness, and fate. The novel explores themes of dreams, obstacles, helplessness, and destiny. It shows different kinds of powerlessness, including economic, social, and racial issues (Basu, D., 2020).

Lennie's lack of understanding makes him rely on George for guidance so he can make choices for himself. Meanwhile, George feels powerless as he tries to protect Lennie from dangers, especially from Curley and Curley's wife (Singh and Tyagi, 2021).

Moreover, the novel draws connections to classical literature, Arthurian legends, and Christian tales. These references highlight the traits of the characters and the themes present in the story.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach , quantitative frequency analysis supported by qualitative content analysis. The selected data consist of dialogues extracted from the novel. The analysis is based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Strategies theory, which classifies politeness into four main strategies: Bald on Record, Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness, and Off Record.

The frequency of each strategy is calculated to determine which type of politeness strategy is used most frequently throughout the selected text. While the qualitative dimension is applied to answer the second question. It contextually analyze and interpret hoe these frequencies reflect social status and power relation .

3.1 The Data

The proposed data is an American novella with the title "*Of Mice and Men* set by John Steinbeck' in 1937.

3.1.1 Data Collection

Politeness and Power In "*Of Mice and Men*". A Sociopragmatic Study

Assistant Lecturer : Duaa Hamid Ali

This novella has selected for analysis owing to its portrayal characters with disparate levels of power and social standing, thereby facilitating an examination of diverse politeness strategies. The inclusion of both authoritative figures and subordinate workers engenders a heterogeneous application of linguistic politeness mechanisms.

3.1.2 Data Description

The data description of this novella centered with two main points :

- **Length:** The data is short.
- **Language:** the language of the data is simple and direct.

4. Data Analysis

Extract (1) :

-Lennie looked timidly over to him. "George?"

"Yeah, what ya want?"

"Where we goin', George?"

(J. Steinbeck ,1937 :4)

This dialogue serves as a compelling illustration of how Politeness Strategies function within a high-stakes power imbalance. George consistently employs the Bald On-Record strategy, utilizing blunt imperatives and insults (e.g., "Give it here!") because the urgency of their survival supersedes the need for face-saving. Conversely, Lennie maneuvers through his vulnerability by using Positive Politeness to seek George's approval and Negative Politeness—through submissive gestures and apologies—to mitigate the burden of his forgetfulness. Even his failed Off-Record attempt at deception regarding the mouse highlights a desperate effort to avoid a direct confrontation. Ultimately, the text demonstrates that in relationships defined by total dependency, politeness is less about social etiquette and more about a strategic struggle for emotional and physical security.

Extract (2) :

He looked into his box shelf and then picked a small yellow can from it.

"Say. What the hell's this?"

"I don't know," said the old man.

"Says 'positively kills lice, roaches and other:, scourges.'"

(J. Steinbeck ,1937 :30)

"The discourse reflects a sharp contrast in face-management; George employs the Bald on-record strategy to assert immediate dominance, voicing his grievances without mitigation to project power and establish control over his environment. Conversely, the old man initially adopts an Off-record strategy to evade accountability for the site's conditions, but as the interaction intensifies, he shifts toward Positive Politeness to de-escalate tension and foster a sense of familiarity, aiming to absorb George's hostility and secure social harmony."

Extract (3):

The boss licked his pencil. "What's your name?"
"George Milton."
"And what's yours?"
George said, "His name's Lennie Small."
"No, he aren't, but he's sure a hell of a good worker. Strong as a bull."
(J. Steinbeck ,1937 :36)

The discourse highlights a tense power struggle mediated through distinct linguistic maneuvers. The Boss employs a strict Bald on-record strategy, using aggressive interrogation and direct commands to assert institutional authority and strip the newcomers of their 'face.' To counter this, George fluctuates between two strategies: he uses Positive Politeness to emphasize Lennie's work value to secure the job, while simultaneously retreating into an Off-record strategy—using deception (the cousin story and the horse-kick lie)—to shield their true history and protect their Negative Face from the Boss's suspicion. Meanwhile, Lennie remains linguistically vulnerable, unable to employ any strategy and constantly subjected to direct 'face-threatening acts' from both the Boss's authority and George's reprimands. These shifts effectively illustrate the perpetual state of caution and the necessity of social camouflage for survival within a hostile hierarchy."

Extract (4) :

"God almighty, that dog stinks. Get him outa here, Candy! I don't know nothing that stinks as bad as an old dog. You gotta get him out."
(J. Steinbeck ,1937 :71)

The discourse illustrates a sophisticated interplay of face-management strategies dictated by the characters' social standing. George maintains a strategic balance between Bald on-record commands and Positive Politeness, using directness to ensure Lennie's safety while employing solidarity-building cues to preserve their vital emotional bond. In stark contrast, Carlson utilizes a harsh Bald on-record strategy, imposing his will upon Candy with no effort to mitigate tension or acknowledge the old man's emotional distress. As the most vulnerable figure in this hierarchy, Candy resorts to Off-record indirectness, attempting to use non-committal evasion to protect his dog, though his efforts prove futile against the ranch's brutal pragmatism. Meanwhile, Slim operates from a position of absolute social power, primarily employing a Bald on-record style that reflects his natural authority, while occasionally integrating Positive Politeness to maintain rapport and ensure his leadership remains rooted in collective respect. Together, these linguistic choices serve to reinforce the rigid power dynamics and social stratification inherent in the ranch environment.

Extract (5) :

"Well, go see your pup, then. Don't come in a place where you're not wanted."
Crooks said, "Well, you been taken' ' me out of the nest all the time. I wonder the old lady don't move ' someplace else."

Politeness and Power In "*Of Mice and Men*". A Sociopragmatic Study

Assistant Lecturer : Duaa Hamid Ali

(J. Steinbeck ,1937 :120)

This dialogue vividly illustrates a linguistic struggle between Crooks and Lennie, where politeness strategies shift dynamically based on the balance of power and the perception of danger. Initially, Crooks employs a harsh Bald On-Record strategy to explicitly "order" Lennie out, viewing his presence as a threat to the only private sanctuary where he holds any authority. This forces Lennie into a defensive position, utilizing Positive Politeness through justifications and a fawning smile to mitigate the confrontation. However, the dynamic shifts entirely when Lennie reacts with sudden anger and a blunt, aggressive strategy to defend his dream. At this moment, the element of physical danger—manifested in Lennie's immense strength—becomes a tangible threat to Crooks' safety. This existential risk compels Crooks to immediately abandon his offensive stance and switch to redressive strategies aimed at de-escalating Lennie's rage, such as inviting him to sit and softening his tone.

Extract (6)

"What you got there, sonny boy?"
Lennie glared at her. "George says I ain't to have nothing to do with you-talk to you or nothing."
She laughed "George giving you orders about everything?"

(J. Steinbeck ,1937 :149).

In this text, Curley's wife acts as a tactical manipulator, skillfully shifting between politeness strategies to dismantle Lennie's defenses. She initiates the interaction with Positive Politeness, using endearments and an approachable tone to lure him in. Lennie, however, counteracts this with an Off-Record strategy; he avoids direct confrontation by hiding behind George's prohibitions as a shield to evade the situation. Sensing his resistance, she abruptly shifts to a Bald On-Record strategy to assert her dominance and destabilize his resolve, criticizing his blind obedience to orders. Once she senses his confusion, she adopts Negative Politeness to dissipate his fears, minimizing the perceived danger by assuring him that the other men are preoccupied outside. Through this, she successfully creates a calculated balance between control and intimacy, transforming Lennie from a resistant character trying to protect his "face" into a captive listener completely surrendered to her strategic influence.

4.1 The Result

Table 1. Frequency of Politeness Strategies

politeness strategy	frequent	percentage
Bald on-record	99	47%
Off record	51	24%

positive politeness strategy	32	15%
Negative politeness strategy	29	14%

Table 2. Distribution of Politeness Strategies According to Social Power

Social Power Relation	Most Frequent strategy
Higher → Lower	Bald On Record
Equal → Equal	Positive Politeness
Lower → Higher	Negative Politeness

4.2 Discussion

The quantitative results prove that linguistic interaction in *Of Mice and Men* is not merely a means of communication but a sharp reflection of a predatory environment governed by power struggles and social alienation. The overwhelming dominance of the Bald On-Record strategy, accounting for 47% of the data, confirms that power is the primary currency on the ranch, where characters bypass 'politeness' in favor of efficiency and control. This was clearly evidenced in our analysis when George utilized such bluntness to ensure survival and when Curley's wife employed it to shatter Lennie's resistance, proving that maintaining 'face' in this world is a luxury unavailable to those under the constant pressure of survival. Shifting to the Off-Record strategy, which ranked second at 24%, we find it representing the language of the weak and marginalized who resort to maneuvering and evasion to avoid direct confrontation. This is seen in Lennie's attempts to hide the mouse and the puppy, as well as in Crooks' indirect venting of his sorrows, suggesting that indirectness serves as a 'linguistic shield' used to mitigate the weight of face-threatening acts in a system that does not tolerate vulnerability. In contrast, the marked decline in Positive and Negative Politeness (15% and 14%, respectively) embodies the theme of isolation and the collapse of social boundaries; Positive Politeness appeared only as a tool of forced solicitation born from an emotional hunger for companionship, as seen with Curley's wife, while Negative Politeness vanished due to the lack of privacy and mutual respect among the migrant workers.. The analysis shows that social power influences the choice of politeness strategies. Characters with higher social power tend to use more direct strategies, whereas characters with lower social power generally employ more indirect or polite strategies.

5. Conclusion

Based on the result, It concludes the followings :

1-Bald on-record is the most frequent type of politeness strategy in "*Of Mice and Men*". This suggests that under extreme or desperate conditions, social formalities and face-saving efforts are often abandoned in favor of directness and communicative efficiency.

2- Social power influences the choice of politeness strategies. Characters with higher social power tend to use more direct strategies, whereas characters with lower social power generally employ more indirect or polite strategies. Direct strategies reflect power or a

Politeness and Power In "*Of Mice and Men*". A Sociopragmatic Study

Assistant Lecturer : Duaa Hamid Ali

prestigious social status, indirect strategies often signal weakness or social marginalization. However, the immediate situational context can be the decisive factor; in the face of a direct threat or a sense of danger, characters resort to indirect strategies to ward off imminent peril. This is evident in the encounter between Lennie and Crooks, where the power dynamics shifted in favor of Lennie's physical prowess, overriding Crooks's situational authority as the 'owner' of the place. Consequently, in the world of "*Of Mice and Men*" politeness strategies serve as a survival mechanism rather than a mere personal attribute.

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