Politeness Strategies Among University Students in Myanmar

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Abstract

This present research investigates the politeness strategies used by Myanmar university students while they are trying to request something from others. To collect the primary data, the researcher conducted surveys of 200 students from 12 Universities during the 2019-2020 academic year. The collected data are classified by Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness strategies. This research aims to examine whether there is a significant difference between male and female students in the use of politeness strategies and the correlation between language, gender, and culture. The statistical analysis results revealed that male students (over 60%) prefer negative politeness strategies and female students prefer positive politeness strategies more than negative ones.

Keywords: Politeness Strategies, Students, Male, Female, Gender

Introduction

A university student is a student who enrolled in a college or university to seek advanced knowledge. Burmese university student life can generally be defined as starting around 16-18 years of age and ending around 23-25 years of age. According to Erikson's psychosocial development theory (Erikson, 1994), this duration is a transitional age from childhood to adulthood. The adolescent mind is in a major stage of development between the morality learned by the child and the ethics to be developed by the adult. In this stage, adolescents search for a sense of self, what they want to do or be, and their appropriate gender role.

If we classify university students according to gender, they can be divided into two groups: male and female students. Gender roles have a lot of effects on the way a person's language usage. When people communicate with each other, gender is often taken into consideration as a priority to choose the most appropriate form of language they will use. "You are a girl and you are not supposed to say like this." "How could a man say something like that?" There are restrictions in verbal communication depending on the social situation of gender. The language we use is governed by social norms—politeness, impoliteness, appropriateness, inappropriateness, etc. It can be assumed that university students have reached an age where they can perceive and consider such traditional criteria of society.

What kind of politeness strategies do these young university students use the most to express their demands? Who cares more about the other person's situation, male or female? Who cares more about avoiding offense and keeping up with social harmony? This research is intended to answer these questions and it's based on the correlation between gendered culture and politeness strategies. The survey data required for the research is collected through questionnaires and interviews.

Review of Related Studies

Previous Theoretical and Practical Studies on Gender and Language

Male and female are different except that both of them belong to the "Homo Sapiens" species. They are different in their external body structures and their way of thinking, behaving, and responding. Boys are more likely to take risks, play rough, strive to dominate, confront others, and resist revealing their weaknesses to each other. On the contrary, girls have a greater willingness to listen to and participate in a talk about emotions. According to Maccoby (1998), girls are more open than boys to listening to their play partners, cooperating with them, and avoiding confrontation with them (p. 298).

Women are more capable of keeping a conversation going than men. Most women can talk about several topics at once. Sometimes they can describe various facts and emotions in just one sentence. Men's sentences are short and direct to the point, solution-oriented, and peppered with facts. When having a conversation with someone, women often observe the other person's expression and level of interest. When compared to women, men are weak in multi-tracking ability and simultaneous responding (Allan & Barbara, 2000). Men are more likely to put forward non-personal information. They tend to present only one clear thought or idea at a time. On the other hand, women emphasize their concerns in social relations and also use gestures to show that they are listening carefully (Thein Naing, 2007).

Following Shahrzad and Raouf (2017), women prefer to avoid conflict even more than men. They also would rather use the fake consent method or implied consent method than directly informing. In conversation, they often guess the other person's interest by saying childish words, seeking constant agreement, and joking around. Shahrzad and Raouf studied politeness strategies used in text messaging. They collected 300 English and Persian text messages sent by 40 BA and MA university students studying EFL. The chi-square procedure was utilized in their research to prove the validity of the sample analyzed data.

Based on the observations of these researchers, women seem to prefer politeness and peacefulness as they want to avoid conflict with the other party and try to observe the speaking partners' interest in the topic in conversation. As for men, genetically, they are strong human beings based on their body structure, so it seems that they have the desire to dominate and talk more straightforwardly than women. For that reason, the politeness strategies used by men and women in communicating with each other may be different.

Previous Theoretical and Practical Studies on Politeness Strategies

Robin Lakoff (1973) states that conversation has two main rules. Rule number one is to be clear and rule number two is to be polite. Lakoff is one of the first linguists who introduced the theory of politeness. She stated the "Politeness Principle", in which she added a sub-set of three rules: (1) don't impose, (2) give options, (3) be friendly. We must keep in mind not only the message we are trying to pass on but also the feeling of our conversation to maintain the social relation. Lakoff defined linguistics politeness as a pattern of social behavior designed to reduce conflict in interpersonal relationships.

People are inseparable from social relations. To consider the other person's feelings or maintain the relationship, we must pay attention to their faces when we communicate with others. In pragmatics, "face" indicates the public self-image of a person. The politeness theory raised by Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson (1978) related to the face. As stated in their theory, there are two types of faces: positive and negative. A positive face is a desire for one's self-image to be acknowledged, appreciated, and recognized by others. The speaker is working hard to meet the needs of the audience by using slang or jokes. To prove that they belong to the same cultural group or to gain more agreement in conversation, they may also use white lies, gossip, small talk, token agreement, pseudo agreement, etc. The word 'negative' here doesn't mean bad, it's just the opposite pole from 'positive'. (Yule, 1996, 61). Negative face is reflected in the desire to be independent, to have freedom of action, and not to be forced by others. The speaker aims not to influence, not to assume, or not to force the listener to do something.

To maintain someone's face, politeness strategies are used even in daily conversations. The types of proper politeness strategies vary from culture to culture. It is because the cultural norms accepted by each nationality are different. In Myanmar and most Asia countries, "Where do you go?", "Where are you from?", "Did you gain weight?" "Have you eaten yet?", "Are you in good health?" such kinds of questions are common greetings and we don't need to answer these questions seriously. However, in some Western countries and European countries, these kinds of greetings may be considered personal inquisitive questions.

Linguistic politeness means speaking properly and appropriately through the social relation between speaker and listener. Brown and Levinson (1978) stated politeness strategies; bald on record, off record, positive politeness, and negative politeness. Speakers choose a specific

strategy for performing face-threatening acts or according to which they structure their communicative contributions.

Bald on Record Strategy

In the following sections, we will discuss four excellent implementation strategies in turn and the first one is the bald on-record strategy. This strategy approaches all forms of direct command and the speaker openly expresses his wishes without embellishment. In other words, it is a direct way of speaking without reducing the rules. The speaker expresses the information directly, clearly, and precisely, without the desire to maintain the face of the other person or to minimize the efficiency of FTA. Direct imperatives are distinct and clear examples of bald on-record usage.

For example:

> (a) သတိထား။
>
> Watch out!
> (in case of great urgency)

> (b) ပန်းကန်တွေဆေးပြီး ထမင်းစားပွဲသုတ်ထားလိုက်ဦး။
>
> Clean the dishes and wipe down the dining table.
> (command/ S is powerful and does not fear non-cooperation from H)

> (c) ဆရာကြီးလို့ သုံးခါခေါ် ပြီး အရှိအသေပေးလိုက်စမ်း။
>
> Call me master three times and show your respect.
> (socially acceptable rudeness in teasing or joking)

Off-Record Strategy

Off-record strategy is an indirect way of speaking rather than referencing directly to keep the other person's face from being rude. The listener must think about what the speaker wants to inform, find the overall meaning, and conclude the intention of the dialogue.

Linguistic realizations of off-record strategies include metaphor and irony, rhetorical questions, understatement, tautologies, all kinds of hints as to what a speaker wants or means to communicate without doing so directly, so that the meaning is to some degree negotiable (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.69).

For example:

> (a) သူက မြွေဟောက်မ။
>
> She is a cobra.   (c.i. She $\begin{cases} \text{is poisonous like} \\ \text{is as dangerous as} \\ \text{is truly outrageous as} \end{cases}$ a cobra.
>
> (Using metaphors)

(b) မင်း တော်တော် တော်တာပဲ။ (စာမေးပွဲကျပြီးနောက်)

You are so great. (after he had failed the exam)
(Be ironic)

(c) ဒီနေ့ နေ့လယ်စာ ဘယ်လိုနေလဲ။

ကြက်သားဟင်းလေးကတော့ ကောင်းပါတယ်။ (တခြားဟင်းများ မကောင်းပါ။)

How was your lunch today?
Chicken curry is delicious. (c.i. The others are not good enough.)
(Understatement)

(d) မင်းပိုက်ဆံက မင်းပိုက်ဆံ၊ ငါ့ပိုက်ဆံက ငါ့ပိုက်ဆံ။ (မင်းပိုက်ဆံက ငါ့ပိုက်ဆံမဟုတ်ဘူး)

Your money is yours, my money is mine. (c.i. Your money is not mine.)
(Using tautologies)

Positive Politeness Strategies

Positive politeness is redress directed to the addressee's positive face, his perennial desire that his wants (or the actions/acquisitions/values resulting from them) should be thought of as desirable. (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.101) Positive politeness strategies are usually found in familiar relations like groups of friends.

This kind of strategy is a way of expressing a desire to get along with someone. It can be said that it is a form of communication that focuses on the need for friendship and the need for cooperation. Positive politeness strategies include the following: attending to the hearer, exaggerating with the hearer, having a strong interest in the hearer, using in-group identity markers, seeking agreement and avoiding disagreement, gossiping, joking, presupposing with small talk, offering or promising, being optimistic, including both the speaker and the hearer in the activity, giving or asking for a reason, etc.

For example:

(a) မင်း အဝတ်တွေ လျှော်ဖွပ်ပြီး လှန်းထားလိုက်ဦးနော် (အချစ်လေး/ ကလေး/ အသည်း)။

Do the laundry, (darling/ baby/ sweetheart).
(Use in-group identity markers)

(b) အဲဒီကောင်မလေးက လှတယ် မဟုတ်လား။

လှပါတယ်။ သိပ်တော့ အလှကြီးမဟုတ်ပေမယ့် ရုပ်ဆိုးပန်းဆိုးတော့ မဟုတ်ပါဘူး။

That girl is pretty, isn't she?
Yes, she is. …uhm not very pretty, but not ugly.
(Use token agreement and avoid disagreement)

(c) ငါနဲ့ အပြင်သွားရအောင်။ ဘာဘယ်တီး ဝယ်တိုက်မယ်။

Hang out with me and I will buy you some bubble tea.
(Offering or promising)

(d) ငါ့အိမ်က ပိုက်ဆံမပို့သေးလို့ မင်းဆီက ခဏ ချေးထားဦးမယ်။

My family has not yet sent money, so I will borrow from you for a while.
(Giving reason)

Negative Politeness Strategies

Negative politeness is redressive action addressed to the addressee's negative face: his desire to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.129). It commands people's respect and refrains from harassing them. Positive politeness is shown by the shortening of distance and negative politeness is indicated by social distance and respect for status differences. Indirect directive questions are distinct examples of negative politeness.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), negative politeness can be carried out by following strategies: Being Conventionally Indirect; Questions, Hedges; Being Pessimistic; Minimizing the Imposition; Give Deference; Apologizing; Impersonalizing S and H; Stating the Face Threatening Acts (FTA) as General Rule; Nominalizing; and Going on Record as Incurring a Debt.

For example:

(a) စိတ်မရှိဘူးဆိုရင် ငါ့ကို ခဏလောက် ကူညီပေးနိုင်မလား။

Would you please mind a minute to help me? (Being Conventionally Indirect)

(b) ငါ့ကို မင်းအိမ်ခေါ်ပါဦး၊ ခေါ်မယ်မဟုတ်လား ဟင်။

Take me to your home, will you? (Using Hedges)

(c) ပေါင်မုန့်လေး တစ်ချပ်တလေလောက် ရနိုင်မလား မေးချင်လို့ပါ။

I want to ask you if I can get just a slice of bread.
(Minimizing the Imposition)

(d) မင်း စိတ်မရှိဘူးလို့တော့ မျှော်လင့်ပါတယ် ဒါပေမယ့် ချေးထားတဲ့ပိုက်ဆံပြန်ပေးပါဦး။

I hope you don't mind me saying this, but pay the money you borrowed back.
(Apologizing)

Circumstances determining
Choice of strategy:

Lesser

Estimation of risk of face loss

Do the FTA

On record

1. without redressive action, badly

with redressive action

2. Positive politeness

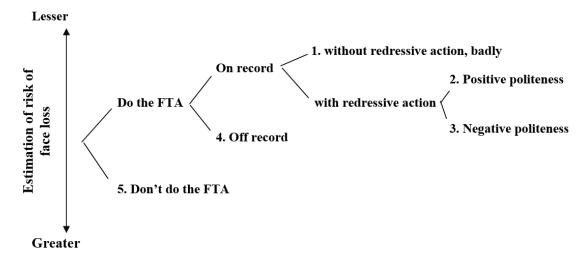3. Negative politeness

4. Off record

5. Don't do the FTA

Greater

Figure 1: Brown and Levinson's (1987) model for politeness strategies

Method

Procedures for Data Collection and Data Analysis

This quantitative research is designed through these steps: conducting surveys, analyzing the collected data, re-examining frequencies by sample data-based inferential statistics, and making conclusions.

100 male students and 100 female students, a total of 200 students from 12 different universities: University of Mandalay (UM), Yadanabon University, Mandalar University, Mandalay University of Foreign Languages (MUFL), University of Medicine (Mandalay)(UMM), University of Pharmacy (Mandalay), University of Dental Medicine (Mandalay), University of Computer Studies (Mandalay) (UCSM), Computer University (Mandalay) (CU), Mandalay Technological University (MTU), Technological University (Mandalay) (TUM), Sagaing University of Education (SUOE) and University of Co-operative and Management (Sagaing) were conducted surveys and the age group of the respondents ranged from 17 to 24 years.

In surveying with questionnaires, students' responses were divided into (3) types of help-seeking conditions: Borrowing money from a friend; Asking a friend to go out; Renting clothes from a friend. We analyzed the collected data based on Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies, which were mentioned above. Afterward, we applied sample data-based inferential statistics to test whether the results we obtained from data analysis were solid and significant or not. To confirm whether there is a significant mean difference in the results of the two paired samples, we used the paired sample t-test approach in comparing and analyzing data. In both cases, we have the same subjects/items in both groups. Each subject has a pair of measurements. A paired t-test determines whether the mean difference of these pairs equals zero (no effect).

Result and Discussion

No.	Politeness Strategies	Samples from Survey Questionnaires	M	F
1.	Bald on record	M 096 Loan me. F 057 Loan me money.	3%	3%
2.	Off record	M040 Do you wanna donate to me? F028 Donate me a bowl of rice or a cup of milk tea.	1%	5%
3.	Positive politeness	M 027 Brother-in-law, lend me money. I will pay it back. F 055 Love, lend money to this pretty one.	34%	52%
4.	Negative politeness	M 016 If you are okay, lend me some money? F044 I'm sorry, but could you lend me some money?	62%	40%

Table 1: Borrowing money from a friend

No.	Politeness Strategies	Samples from Survey Questionnaires	M	F
1.	Bald on record	M 005 Let's go out. F 094 Let's go out!	13%	10%
2.	Off record	-	-	-
3.	Positive politeness	M 027 My dear friend, let's go out. I will feed you. F 009 Hey beauty, stop hiding in the room. Let's go out.	28%	47%
4.	Negative politeness	M 059 If you have time, could you go out with me for a while? F 033 If it's okay with you, could you come over there with me?	59%	43%

Table 2: Asking a friend to go out

No.	Politeness Strategies	Samples from Survey Questionnaires	M	F
1.	Bald on record	M 036 Lend me your shirt. F 094 Lend me your coat.	5%	3%

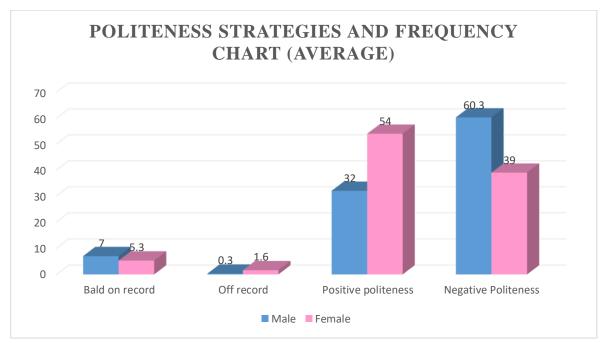| 2.	Off record	-		-	-
3.	Positive politeness	M 074 I want to donate my handsomeness, so borrow me your shirt. F 019 My sister-in-law, I don't have any warm clothes, so please borrow some.		35%	63%
4.	Negative politeness	M 049 If you don't mind me, could I wear your pants? F 018 I'm sorry my friend, but could you lend me some clothes.		60%	34%

Table 3: Renting clothes from a friend

Figure 2: Politeness strategies and frequency chart (average)

According to the survey, the majority of male students use negative politeness strategies. They ask the permission of the addressee first: "If it's okay, …", " If it's all right,...", "If you are okay, …", "If there's anything left,…", "If there's more,…", "If there's some time,…", "If you don't mind,…"; and then express what they want. Instead of making specific demands, they approached it in a way of politeness that can be negotiable or adjustable.

For example:

M 049   If you don't mind me, could I wear your pants?

M085   I would like to rent a shirt. A shirt that you don't wear is also fine. And, I'm sorry to ask like this.

M076   I'm afraid to ask for your help, my friend; if you have any money, lend me some.

To be patient and concerned is a practice of Burmese politeness that considers the feelings of the other party. Women also use negative politeness strategies. However, compared to men, the amount is small and only 39 percent is used on average. Men use negative politeness strategies up to 60.3%, so the difference is 3:2.

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Male	60.3333	3	1.52753	.88192
	Female	39.0000	3	4.58258	2.64575

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Significance	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
					Lower	Upper				
Pair 1	Male - Female	21.33333	5.03322	2.90593	8.83011	33.83655	7.341	2	.009	.018

Table 4 & 5: Paired Sample T-Test Results (Negative Politeness Strategies)

The output indicates that the mean for the Male is 60.33, and for the Female is 39.00. The null hypothesis states that the mean difference in negative politeness strategies used by males and females is 0. And the alternative hypothesis states that the mean difference in negative politeness strategies used by males is greater than by females. If the p-value is less than or equal to the standard significance level of 0.05, the decision is to reject the null hypothesis. In the results, our p-value (0.009) for the paired sample t-test is less than the standard significance level. Therefore, we can reject the null hypothesis and conclude that there is a significant difference in the use of negative politeness strategies by males and females. Specifically, our sample data support the notion that men use negative politeness strategies more than women do.

Some ask for a request directly without concerning the other party's feelings or conditions. Speaking in this way is often found in close relationships between the speaker and the listener, as well as in relationships with different statuses, such as seniors and youths, superiors and subordinates, etc. Here too, these politeness strategies used by men and women differ slightly.

	Male		Female
M007	Come on, follow me.	F071	Hey buddy, let's hang out together.
M085	You, join me.	F087	Let's go! Have fun together with us.
M087	Buddy, go out with me.	F094	Let's go together.

Table 6: Examples of positive politeness strategies used by male and female

As shown in the examples above, even where they speak directly, men tend to be more straightforward and women speak in the sense of working together as a group. It can be said

that women are eager to be harmonious. Many of them used positive politeness strategies to request something from others.

For example:

Samples from Survey Questionnaires	Positive politeness strategies
F098 You know, clothes mean something you have to share with your friend. So, you have to borrow me your cardigan. F092 Go out with me because I'm pretty and crowds will follow me and I'm afraid, so you have to escort me. F039 By lending 20,000 kyats to this Friday-born girl, let's get rid of your bad luck.	Using jokes based on mutually shared backgrounds to put the hearer at ease
F095 Sweetheart, I already like your skirt. Rent me. F015 Honey, let's go somewhere with me. F055 Hey dear, lend money to this pretty girl.	Using in-group identity markers to soften the difference between herself and the hearer
F026 The trainee is tomorrow and my shirt is still in the laundry. Please, borrow me yours. F022 I would like to buy a shirt, so go together with me and help me to choose. F056 I don't have enough money for this book, so lend me 10,000 kyats, please.	Giving reason to show why she wants and what she wants
F091 If you lend me this shirt, I'll share this dessert. F044 Sister, I will buy a cold one for you. Please accompany me. F036 Sissy sissy, lend me money. I will pay you back.	Using an offer or promise to demonstrate her good intention and to satisfy the hearer

Table 7: Examples of positive politeness strategies used female

Female students are fond to use such kind of positive politeness strategies and the most common form is using in-group identity markers to soften the difference between herself and the hearer. Male students also use positive politeness strategies to show harmony. It is 32% on average. The commonly used form is giving a reason to show why he wants and what he wants. It's shown that men tend to focus on facts rather than emotions.

As for women, it can be said that social relations and cooperation are more important. The average frequency is up to 54%. Therefore, it can be proposed that women are more willing to be in harmony with the other person than men when expressing their needs and asking for help. When we check whether the proposition is correct or not, the result is as follows.

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Female	54.0000	3	8.18535	4.72582
	Male	32.3333	3	3.78594	2.18581

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences							Significance	
			Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
		Mean			Lower	Upper	t	df		
Pair 1	Female - Male	21.66667	5.50757	3.17980	7.98510	35.34823	6.814	2	.010	.021

Table 8 & 9: Paired Sample T-Test Results (Positive Politeness Strategies)

The output indicates that the mean for the Females is 54.00, and for the Males is 32.33. The null hypothesis states that the mean difference in positive politeness strategies used by females and males is 0. And the alternative hypothesis states that the mean difference in positive politeness strategies used by females is greater than by males. In the results, the p-value (0.01) for the paired sample t-test is less than the standard significance level of 0.05. Therefore, we can reject the null hypothesis and conclude that there is a significant difference in the use of positive politeness strategies by females and males. The paired sample t-test results support the notion that female students use positive politeness strategies more than male students do. Women emphasize the desire to cooperate with the other person and it can be concluded that they use positive politeness strategies more than men.

Conclusion

Politeness strategies can be chosen and used differently depending on the context and the time. Depending on the other person's social status, there may be changes. This paper examines the politeness methods used by university students when asking for mutual help.

According to the survey, University students in Myanmar are more likely to ask for help directly. However, rather than using an open way of speaking, they often express harmony or gentleness. Most female students tend to use positive politeness strategies when seeking help or a request from someone. It is 54% on average. In conversation, female students express a desire to be friendly with the other person. They tend to emphasize that it is not a burden to help them in the direction of cooperation. It can be said that female students are more powerful in the case of organizing and speaking to make them want to help.

Male students prefer to use negative politeness strategies more than the other strategies. On average, it is up to about 60.3%. Men are naturally stronger than women. They tend to be in the place of the leader and the caretaker. Because of that nature, in conversation, male students

tend to speak condescendingly so as not to infringe on the other person's freedom and interests. Based on this survey, male students seem to be willing to have their freedom of action unhindered and their attention unimpeded.

Talking vaguely and hinting methods are rarely used. It may be because of the relationship between friends and friends. On average, female students use up to 0.3% and male students use 1.6%. They are also in the age group that tends to want independence, so they seem to prefer a way of saying what they want clearly without being too vague.

In conversation, male students tend to express freedom and social distance; female students tend to express the desire of shortening distance and cooperation. In this paper, we can see the influence of gender and social conditions on the use of politeness strategies. Depending on various social conditions, the way of choosing and using politeness methods can also change. So, in addition to the situation of asking for help, asking for permission, refusing, and insisting: various forms of social relations can be analyzed.

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