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A Pragmatic Study of Politeness Strategies in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Lect. Ali Ershad Rushdi *

College of Education for Humanities- Tikrit University

Ali.rushdi85@tu.edu.iq

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Abstract

This research is an examination of the usage of politeness strategies in official discourse. It uses Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory as the theoretical framework. Portrayal upon authentic written data collected from certain articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), this paper recognizes and labels different politeness strategies—positive, negative, bald on record, and off-record. The findings reveal that even within legal discourse, there are adaptations of politeness strategies based on social distance, power relations, and the level of imposition that are convoluted within such legal discourses. The analysis offers insight into how rigid and legal discourse employ politeness strategies in order to spread harmony and maintain acceptance.

Keywords: UDHR, politeness strategies, negative face strategy, positive face strategy, face threatening-act

* **Corresponding Author:** Ali Ershad Rushdi, **Email:** Ali.rushdi85@tu.edu.iq

Affiliation: Tikrit University - Iraq

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دراسة تداولية في استراتيجيات التهذيب في الاعلان العالمي لحقوق الانسان.

م. علي ارشاد رشدي

كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية / جامعة تكريت

المستخلص

يهتم هذا البحث استخدام استراتيجيات التهذيب اللغوي في الخطاب الرسمية. ويستخدم البحث نظرية التهذيب اللغوي للعالمين براون و ليفينسون (1987) كإطار نظري لتحليل هذه المقالات. جمعت الدراسة من قبل الباحث لمقالات محددة من اعلان العالمي لحقوق الانسان والتي من خلالها أدرك ان هنالك الكثير من الاستخدامات اللغوية التي تعكس التهذيب السلبي والايجابي في تلك المقالات. عكست الدراسة من ما وجد فيها على انه حتى في الخطاب القانونية هنالك استخدام كبير لاستراتيجيات التهذيب اللغوية تحمله في طياتها تلك النصوص التي تعتمد على البعد المجتمعي و علاقة القوة و مستوى العبء المتمحورة في هذه النصوص القانونية. يوفر هذا التحليل التداولي لهذه النصوص الخطابية القانونية معرفة كيفية استخدام التهذيب اللغوي و استراتيجياته والتي بالمحصلة تعكس انتشار التناغم المجتمعي والقبول لمن يقرأ هذه النصوص.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاعلان العالمي لحقوق الانسان, استراتيجيات التهذيب اللغوي, استراتيجية ماء الوجه السلبي, استراتيجية ماء الوجه الايجابي.

1. Introduction

Politeness is an essential feature of human communication, replicating not only linguistic selections but also cultural values and relational dynamics (Chapman, 2013). In the case of human rights legal texts, the use of polite and courteous strategies is one of the most noticeable linguistic components of accommodating laws, in addition to, regarding them and working using them willingly.

This research aims to analyze legal discourse through the lens of Politeness Theory to comprehend how and why these articles employ specific politeness strategies in addressing Human Rights field. This paper sheds lights on how specific strategies are used frequently in many articles and why such use leads to specific results such as solidarity, modality, equality, privacy and many other faces of human rights. The study tries to answer the following questions:

1. Do the FTA exist in Human Rights Declarations (UDHR)?
2. Do (UDHR) have Positive and Negative use of politeness strategies?
3. Are Politeness strategies employed in the accurate way in expressing such kinds of texts?

The study aims at the following:

1. introducing the use of politeness strategies in legal discourse, specifically (UDHR).
2. Shedding lights on the importance of employing politeness strategies when communicating social rules and norms.

Further, the study has the following hypotheses:

1. politeness strategies are exploited and expressed successfully in UDHR.
2. Positive politeness strategies are used to reflect solidarity and closeness within families and institutions.
3. The use of negative politeness is extremely preferable.
4. And, the kind of legal discourse tries to use a high degree of politeness in order to be acceptable, reliable, and applicable.

2. Literature Review

Focusing on politeness has occupied a central part in sociolinguistics and pragmatics. Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory considers one of the most powerful frameworks in these fields. It shapes upon Goffman's (1967) concept of "face" and summarizes how a speaker attends "face-threatening acts" (FTAs) by employing strategies that either mitigate or directly express threats to face.

Politeness Theory theorizes two sorts of face:

- Positive Face: The necessity to be liked, respected, and involved.
- Negative Face: The desire to be independent and not enforced

Legal discourse chooses strategies from a variety, depending on the real risk of an FTA:

1. Bald on Record: Direct, without mitigation (e.g., "Get rid of that car.")
2. Positive Politeness: Strive for solidarity (e.g., "Hey, bro, mind passing salt?")
3. Negative Politeness: Admits imposition (e.g., "Would you please send it to me?")
4. Off-Record: Indirect strategies (e.g., "Oh, it's hot in here." suggesting someone should turn on the air conditioner)

Current work in pragmatics (Locher & Watts, 2005; Holmes & Stubbe, 2003) has examined the universality of Brown and Levinson's ideal, proposing that politeness is growing as that attempt of Brown and Levinson in their famous book (*Politeness: Some Universals of Language Usage*) who endeavor introducing such notion of universality when they apply their theory onto three languages: English, French and Tanzanian. Nonetheless, their framework remains to be a suitable tool in experimental analysis, especially when investigating how dissimilar strategies are useful across social contexts.

3. Theoretical Framework: B & L's Politeness Theory

Politeness Theory offers a set of strategies that are used to moderate FTAs. The theory deals with in three main sociological variables:

- Power (P): The virtual power of the reporter over the listener.
- Distance (D): The amount of familiarity or understanding between participants.
- Rank of Imposition (R): The significance of the act in a specific context.

The larger the sum of these variables, the more face-threatening the action, and the more polite and indirect the strategy are likely to be (Brown and Levinson, 1987). For example, to ask a superior a certain personal favor could require richer negative politeness than to ask a friend who is closer (Wardhaugh, 2006).

This paper takes on the politeness strategies drawn by Brown and Levinson as an essential framework for analyzing legal discourse of Human Rights. This study investigates how legal texts employ different politeness strategies in certain contexts, particularly how social roles and expectations influence linguistic choices of politeness strategies (Leech, 2014), (Yule, 1996) (Watts, 2006).

4. Methods of Research

4.1 Data Collection

The data which has been chosen in this study are gathered from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), main international legal articles approved by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948. The UDHR includes thirty articles, which are written in formal legal English, and assist as a universal standard for human rights ethics internationally. The official version employed in this analysis has been recovered by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) website, confirming the authenticity, truthfulness, and reliability of the data.

For real, each article in the UDHR signifies an isolated and self-contained legal statement. For the purpose of this research, the articles have been preserved as independent components of analysis. The linguistic data have been mined literal and surveyed at the level of sentence structure, lexical choices, modality, and rhetorical tone. It has been argued and taken for granted that the preparatory condition of human rights is felicitous because it has the authority to give advice declarations and directives whether directly or indirectly

4.2 Reasons of Article Selection

This study, as appeared, does not try to analyze the entire UDHR corpus. Instead, it emphasizes a typical sample of 10 articles, designated based on thematic breadth, linguistic richness, and pragmatic worth. The articles were selected to contain a range of social, civil, political and economic rights, as well as initial normative statements that construct the document.

Chosen Articles :

- Article 1: Human dignity and brotherhood
- Article 3: Right to life, liberty, and safety
- Article 5: Protection from torture
- Article 7: Equality
- Article 9: Protection from random arrest
- Article 12: Right to privacy and status
- Article 13: Freedom of movement
- Article 18: Freedom of religion and morality
- Article 19: Freedom of beliefs and expression
- Article 25: Right to an satisfactory standard of living

In sum, the selected articles signify a balanced cross-section of the UDHR, appropriate for exploring how formal and legal language translates politeness in ways that reduce imposition, sustain dignity, and promote common human values.

5. Data Analysis

Ten selected articles from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) through the lens of Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory are going to be analyzed. Each article is surveyed for the existence of politeness strategies—mainly how the formal legal language instantaneously states rights while handling face through modality, indirectness, and solidarity cues.

▪Article 1: Human Dignity and Brotherhood

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

Analysis of Article 1:

- Positive Politeness: The phrase “in a spirit of brotherhood” works as a technique of solidarity-bridging. It suggests mutual moral values and shared inclusion which shows strengthening positive face desires.

- Negative Politeness: The modal verb “should” works as advisory rather than imperative state which may affect or damage face. It moderates the power of the directive, respecting the listener’s independence and freedom to act—thus keeping negative face.

- FTA: there is a form of FTA in this declaration form because though it is a declaration, it has an intentionality to give an advice in a rather indirect way, or in other words a mitigated way. FTA strategies are explained in Brown and Levinson (1987: 65) when they explain the strategies of doing FTAs. They stress that suggestions, advices and requests are all strategies of negative face threatening acts. But in so doing, the article tries through mitigation to hedge and mitigate the effect on the negative face of the readers or hearers.

- The tone in general is inclusive and non-confrontational, offering ethical potentials without imposition.

- Article 3: Right to Life, Liberty, and Security

“Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”

Analysis of Article 3:

- Bald on Record: The construction is a direct declarative statement stating entitlement without hedging.

- Though, it eludes imposition by not pointing anyone to act. It can be described as informational rather than behavioral in its main illocutionary force.

- FTA: no FTA is revealed because it is a form of declaration speech act which does not communicate an intentional threat or suggestion to anyone.

- Positive Politeness (Implicit): The collective subject “everyone” encourages inclusivity and mutual identity.

- Article 5: Protection from Torture

“No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”

Analysis of Article 5:

- Negative Politeness: The passive structure “shall be subjected” avoids requiring the agent. This indirectness would lead to soften blame or opposition.

- FTA: there is not any form of FTA explicitly for the defended by split group. Here, the human rights perform an action of commissiveness. It gives a promise of a future solidarity.

- Off-Record Strategy: The exclusion of a direct actor (e.g., a state or government) services preserve influential face, allowing for overall applicability without accusatorial.

- The use of legal expressions (e.g., “degrading treatment”) enhances formality, further isolation of personal attack and supporting negative face protection.

- Article 7: Equality Before the Law

“All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law.”

Analysis of Article 7:

- Positive Politeness: The phrase “all are equal” in a direct way demands to equality and social inclusion, an in-group solidarity change.

- The recurrence of “equal” and “without any discrimination” signs an explicit effort to make everyone included under the legal roof, improving positive face.

- Negative Politeness: The power is framed passively (“are entitled”) rather than actively necessitated—an implicit respect to formal autonomy.

▪Article 9: Protection from Random Arrest

“No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.”

Analysis of Article 9:

- Negative Politeness: As shown in Article 5, the usage of the passive voice avoids directly opposing the possible violator. It defends the face of potential agents (e.g., governments) by eliminating accusatory tone.

- Off-Record Strategy: The term “arbitrary” suggests unjust act but without specifying any perpetrator, depending on indirect criticism.

▪Article 12: Right to Privacy and Reputation

“No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation.”

Analysis of Article 12:

- Negative Politeness: Heavy presence of hedging rapports like “arbitrary interference” and passive wording determine institutional attention—defending individuals' negative face and eluding direct opposition.

- Off-Record Strategy: No subject is allocated blame; the phrasing permits interpretation while keeping a normative tone.

- Positive Politeness (Implicit): The protection of “honour and reputation” identifies the importance of one's dignity, reinforcing positive face desires.

▪Article 13: Freedom of Movement

“Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.”

Analysis of Article 13:

- Bald on Record: This is a forthright true assertion without explicit mitigation.

- Conversely, its formal tone and third-person construction exclude any direct face-threat, as it does not comprise a critique or command.

- Positive Politeness (Implicit): The emphasis on “everyone” once again encourages solidarity and inclusivity.

Article 18: Freedom of Religion and Conscience

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom... to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

Analysis of Article 18:

- Negative Politeness: The phrasing confirms freedom from constraint—respecting individuals' independency and self-autonomy. Here, the negative face wants is preserved by giving the right and freedom to anyone.

- Bald on Record: in this vein, the utterance is explicitly certain that it explicates the right to have a personal life full of freedom and of choice which supports and makes a preservation of negative face needs.
- FTA: no FTA is found in this context because it is directed to those who must have freedom of choice. Besides, no suggestions for other parties is pointed to, no requests let alone commands.
- Positive Politeness: The insertion of diverse modes of religious terms (e.g., “teaching, worship”) carries respect for cultural diversity and religious miscellany—highlighting social and cultural values and acceptance.
- Off-Record (mild): There is no inflexible language or action necessitated from states, allowing informative space.

▪Article 19: Freedom of Expression

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference...”

Analysis of Article 19:

- Negative Politeness: The reference to “without interference” defends negative face. In this regard, the phrase without interference unveils the non-imposition and the right to be as he/she wishes and think to believe.
- Positive Politeness: The construction embraces inclusivity—“everyone has the right...”—once more aligning with collective values and mutual entitlement. Further, this inclusiveness shows equality and reveals solidarity.
- FTA: again, because there are no commands, suggestions, or requests, the utterance is not advocated to give any FTA.
- Off-Record Strategy: The term “interference” proposes violation slightly, without accusing anybody.

▪Article 25: Right to Standard of Living

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family...”

Analysis of Article 25:

- Positive Politeness: The anxiety for family and well-being calls to universally mutual human values—reinforcement of group cohesion. In one way or another, this fortifies and establishes solidarity and reduces the degree of imposition.
- FTA: no FTA is shown in this utterance.
- Negative Politeness: The abstract phrase “adequate standard of living” is ambiguous and non-directive, decreasing perceived demand on institutions or governments.
- Off-Record Strategy: Leaves interpretation open for what constitutes “adequate”—a hedge that respects various state dimensions and contexts.

Article No.	Politeness Strategy	Basic Features
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1	Positive and Negative Politeness strategies	Modality + Solidarity ("should act")
3	Bald on Record strategy (institutional)	Direct entitlement; no imposition
5	Negative politeness strategy and Off-Record	Passive voice; avoids blame
7	Positive Politeness strategy	Stress equality and non-discrimination
9	Negative Politeness strategy and Off-Record	Avoids agents; protects institutional face
12	Negative Politeness strategy and Off-Record	Protects privacy; indirect critique of interference
13	Bald on Record + Positive politeness strategy (implicit)	Assertive yet inclusive
18	Negative and Positive Politeness strategy	Affirms individual independence and religious diversity
19	Negative and Positive Politeness strategy	Highlights non-interference and mutual values
25	Positive and Negative Politeness strategy	Caring tone; hedged expectations

Table (1) Politeness strategies by article

6. Findings

The study of rigid legal texts of UDHR is found to carry the following:

1. There is an FTA in article 1.
 2. Negative politeness is highly reflected in most of the articles as seen in articles 1, 3, 5, 9, 12, 13, 18, 19, and 25. It is proved that negative politeness in these articles aforementioned reflect privacy and a high degree of expressing protection, safety and security. Those articles, as a result, are found to be self-esteemed.
 3. Positive politeness is mirrored in most of the articles too. The very fact that positive politeness reflects solidarity and closeness is found in articles 1 and 7. Article 7 shows equality which is an ingredient of positive politeness strategy.
- The findings approve that the hypotheses mentioned above are proved.

7. Conclusions

This research determines that even within rigid legal discourse, politeness strategies are crucial to successful communication, predominantly in a universal, multicultural context.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, while well-founded in its ethical attitude, wisely controls its language to respect the face desires of both individuals and institutions.

By relating Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, this research shows that:

- Negative politeness strategy controls, reflecting respect and sensitivity to independence. This point corresponds hypothesis 2 above.
- Positive politeness strategy is obvious in references to family, dignity, and community, strengthening solidarity.
- In certain contexts, FTA is intentionally occurred for the purpose of enhancing solidarity.
- The tone and construction of the UDHR reveal a deliberate struggle to assert ethics without isolation, making it a powerful pattern of diplomatic legal rhetoric.

This analysis donates to the broader consideration of how linguistic pragmatics overlaps with legal and human rights discourse, arguing that politeness theory can enhance not only solitary but also institutional communication trainings.

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