

**A Pragmatic Analysis of Politeness Strategies in Monica Lewinsky's
TED Talk "*The Price of Shame*"**

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Abstract

This study examines politeness strategies in Monica Lewinsky's TED Talk "*The Price of Shame*" using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. It aims to identify the politeness strategies employed in the speech, determine the most commonly used strategy, and examine their communicative functions.

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive design supported by descriptive quantitative measures. The data consist of the transcript of *The Price of Shame* (2015), which is analyzed through a discourse-pragmatic approach and deductive content analysis.

The findings reveal the use of all four politeness super-strategies: positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record strategies. Positive politeness emerged as the most commonly used strategy, followed by negative politeness, while bald-on-record and off-record strategies occurred less commonly. The identified strategies function to establish audience rapport, express solidarity, mitigate face-threatening content, enhance credibility, and promote audience engagement.

The study concludes that politeness strategies serve as important discourse-pragmatic resources that enable speakers to communicate sensitive personal experiences effectively while maintaining interpersonal connection and persuasive impact.

Keywords: pragmatics, politeness strategies, Brown and Levinson, TED Talks, Monica Lewinsky.

Introduction

Pragmatics is concerned with the study of language in use and the ways meaning is shaped through the interaction between linguistic expressions, speaker intentions, and contextual factors (Levinson, 1983; Thomas, 1995). Within pragmatics, politeness has attracted considerable scholarly attention because communication involves not only the exchange of information but also the management of interpersonal relationships and social harmony. Politeness enables speakers to minimize potential threats to face and maintain cooperative interaction through various linguistic and discourse strategies (Leech, 1983).

Among the most influential approaches to politeness is Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory, which proposes four major politeness super-strategies: bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. The theory has been widely applied in the analysis of political discourse, institutional communication, media interactions, and public speeches due to its systematic classification of politeness phenomena and its explanatory value in understanding interpersonal communication.

Public speaking represents a particularly significant context for the study of politeness because speakers are required to communicate ideas persuasively while simultaneously maintaining audience engagement and rapport. In contemporary digital communication, TED Talks have emerged as a globally influential form of public discourse that combines information sharing, personal storytelling, and persuasive communication. TED speakers frequently employ various linguistic strategies to establish credibility, create audience alignment, and communicate potentially sensitive issues effectively.

One TED Talk that provides a particularly rich context for the examination of politeness strategies is Monica Lewinsky's *The Price of Shame* (2015). In her speech, Lewinsky reflects on her personal experiences of public humiliation and online shaming while addressing broader social concerns related to digital culture, empathy, and public accountability. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, the speech

offers valuable opportunities to investigate how politeness strategies are employed to manage interpersonal relations, negotiate potentially face-threatening content, and encourage audience engagement.

Previous studies on TED Talks have primarily focused on particular politeness strategies, especially positive politeness. However, limited attention has been devoted to the use of the four politeness strategies in Monica Lewinsky's TED Talk *The Price of Shame*. Moreover, few studies have explored how politeness strategies function within speeches that address highly sensitive personal experiences and social criticism.

Therefore, the present study investigates the politeness strategies employed in Monica Lewinsky's TED Talk *The Price of Shame* using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework. Specifically, the study aims to identify the politeness strategies used in the speech, determine the most commonly employed strategy, and examine the communicative functions performed by these strategies within the discourse.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to:

1. Identify the politeness strategies employed in Monica Lewinsky's TED Talk *The Price of Shame*.
2. Determine the most commonly used politeness strategy in the speech.
3. Examine the communicative functions of the identified politeness strategies.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What politeness strategies are employed in Monica Lewinsky's TED Talk *The Price of Shame*?
2. Which politeness strategy is most commonly used in the speech?
3. What communicative functions do the identified politeness strategies perform?

Literature Review

Politeness is one of the central areas of pragmatic inquiry because communication involves not only the exchange of information but also the management of

interpersonal relationships and social harmony. Goffman (1967) introduced the concept of face, referring to the public self-image individuals seek to maintain during interaction. Building on this notion, Lakoff (1973) viewed politeness as a mechanism for reducing friction in communication, while Leech (1983) regarded it as a set of principles that promote cooperative and socially appropriate interaction.

Drawing on Goffman's concept of face, Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that individuals possess two fundamental face wants: positive face and negative face. Positive face refers to the desire to be appreciated, approved of, and valued by others, whereas negative face refers to the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. To protect these face wants, speakers employ various politeness strategies that help maintain social harmony and reduce potential face-threatening acts during interaction.

Among the various approaches to politeness, Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory remains the most influential and widely applied framework. The theory proposes four politeness super-strategies to manage potential face-threatening acts: bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. Bald-on-record strategies are characterized by directness and clarity, while positive politeness seeks to establish solidarity and emphasize common ground between speaker and hearer. Negative politeness is oriented toward respecting the hearer's autonomy and minimizing imposition, whereas off-record strategies rely on indirectness and implication, allowing meaning to be inferred rather than explicitly stated. Due to its systematic classification and explanatory power, the framework has been extensively applied in the analysis of public speeches, institutional discourse, media interaction, and political communication.

More recently, attention has been directed toward politeness strategies in TED Talks and public motivational discourse. Saragih et al. (2019) analyzed positive politeness strategies in a TED Talk delivered by Eddy Zhong and found that joking and intensifying hearer interest were among the most frequently used sub-strategies. Similarly, Putra et al. (2024) and Ristika (2023) examined TED Talks and reported the predominance of positive politeness strategies, which functioned to establish solidarity, motivate audiences, and create a shared sense of identity. These findings suggest that TED speakers frequently rely on positive politeness to enhance audience engagement and persuasive effectiveness.

Overall, previous studies have provided valuable insights into politeness in TED discourse. However, most have focused on particular politeness strategies, especially positive politeness, rather than examining the full range of politeness super-strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Furthermore, limited attention has been devoted to Monica Lewinsky's TED Talk *The Price of Shame* and to the communicative functions performed by politeness strategies in discourse addressing sensitive personal experiences and social criticism. Therefore, the present study investigates all four politeness super-strategies employed in Monica Lewinsky's TED Talk *The Price of Shame* and examines their communicative functions within the discourse.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative design with descriptive quantitative measures used to supplement the analysis. The analysis is grounded in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and employs a discourse-pragmatic approach to investigate politeness strategies in Monica Lewinsky's TED Talk *The Price of Shame*.

Monica Lewinsky is an American public speaker and anti-bullying advocate. Her TED Talk *The Price of Shame* (2015) addresses the consequences of public humiliation and online shaming in the digital age. Due to its personal and socially sensitive nature, the speech provides a valuable context for examining the use of politeness strategies in contemporary public discourse.

The data consist of the transcript of Monica Lewinsky's TED Talk *The Price of Shame* (2015), retrieved from the official TED platform and verified against the original video recording to ensure accuracy. The speech was selected purposively because it addresses sensitive issues of public shame, personal accountability, and social criticism, providing a rich context for the examination of politeness strategies.

The utterance is the primary unit of analysis. The data were analyzed using Brown and Levinson's (1987) four politeness super-strategies—bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record—serving as the analytical categories. Each utterance was identified, coded, and classified according to the strategy it predominantly realized within its communicative context.

To support the qualitative interpretation, frequency counts and percentage distributions were employed to determine the occurrence and relative prominence of

the identified politeness strategies. The analysis further examined the communicative functions performed by these strategies within the discourse.

Results and Discussion

Distribution of Politeness Strategies

The following table presents the distribution of politeness strategies identified in Monica Lewinsky's TED Talk *The Price of Shame*.

<i>Main Strategy</i>	<i>Sub Strategy</i>	<i>Raw Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Negative Politeness</i>	Strategy 2 — Question, hedge	1	5.26%
	Strategy 3 — Be pessimistic	1	5.26%
	Strategy 8 — State the FTA as a general rule	1	5.26%
	Strategy 4 — Minimize the imposition	1	5.26%
	Strategy 1 — Be conventionally indirect	1	5.26%
	Strategy 5 — Give deference	1	5.26%
<i>Sub total</i>		6	31.58%
<i>Bald -on-Record</i>		2	10.53%
	<i>Sub total</i>	2	10.53%
<i>Positive Politeness</i>	Strategy 7 — Assert common ground	1	5.26%
	Strategy 12 — Include both S and H	1	5.26%
	Strategy 13 — Give reasons	1	5.26%
	Strategy 15 — Give gifts to H	1	5.26%
	Strategy 8 — Joke	1	5.26%
	Strategy 2 — Exaggerate	1	5.26%
	Strategy 5 — Seek agreement	1	5.26%
	Strategy 11 — Be optimistic	1	5.26%
<i>Sub total</i>		8	42.11%

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<i>Off-Record</i>	Strategy 10 — Rhetorical questions	1	5.26%
	Strategy 8 — Use hints	1	5.26%
	Strategy 3 — Be vague / ambiguous	1	5.26%
<i>Sub total</i>		3	15.79%
<i>Total</i>		19	100%

The findings reveal that all four politeness super-strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) are employed in the speech. Positive politeness is the most commonly used strategy, accounting for 42.11% of the identified instances, followed by negative politeness (31.58%). Bald-on-record and off-record strategies occur less frequently, representing 10.53% and 15.79% respectively. This distribution suggests that the speaker primarily relies on rapport-building and audience-oriented communication while discussing sensitive personal experiences.

Negative Politeness Strategies

Negative politeness is employed to communicate personal accountability while minimizing imposition on the audience. One example appears in the statement: “*Not a day goes by that I’m not reminded of my mistake, and I regret that mistake deeply.*” This utterance illustrates Strategy 3 (Be pessimistic), as the speaker emphasizes continuing regret and responsibility. The strategy functions to acknowledge personal accountability while avoiding self-justification, thereby enhancing credibility and encouraging reflective audience engagement. Another example appears when Lewinsky refers to external authorities such as Brené Brown and Serge Moscovici. By invoking expert voices, the speaker reduces the force of personal evaluation and supports her argument through established knowledge, thereby realizing Strategy 5 (Give deference).

Positive Politeness Strategies

Positive politeness represents the dominant strategy in the speech. For instance, the utterance: “*So like me, at 22, a few of you may have also taken wrong turns...*” illustrates Strategy 7 (Assert common ground). Through the expression “like

me,” the speaker minimizes social distance and presents personal failure as a shared human experience. This strategy promotes solidarity and strengthens audience rapport. Similarly, the statement: “*The more we click, the more numb we get...*” demonstrates Strategy 13 (Give reasons). The speaker supports her argument through causal explanation, encouraging audience involvement while presenting social criticism in a rational and accessible manner.

Bald-on-Record and Off-Record Strategies

Although less frequent, bald-on-record strategies are used when clarity and urgency are required. The statement: “*Public shaming as a blood sport has to stop,*” constitutes a bald-on-record strategy because it expresses an explicit and unmitigated moral stance. The strategy emphasizes the seriousness of the issue and reinforces the speaker’s evaluative position. Off-record strategies, on the other hand, are employed through indirect and inferential communication. For example: “*...phone calls that a supposed friend had made...*” illustrates Strategy 3 (Be vague/ambiguous). By avoiding direct identification, the speaker conveys criticism indirectly while minimizing interpersonal confrontation.

Communicative Functions of Politeness Strategies

The analysis indicates that politeness strategies perform several communicative functions in the speech. They contribute to audience rapport, solidarity construction, mitigation of potentially face-threatening content, credibility enhancement, and audience engagement. Through the strategic combination of positive politeness, negative politeness, directness, and indirectness, Lewinsky effectively communicates a sensitive personal experience while maintaining audience involvement and persuasive impact.

Conclusion

This study examined the politeness strategies employed in Monica Lewinsky’s TED Talk *The Price of Shame* using Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness framework. The findings revealed the use of all four politeness super-strategies: positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record strategies.

In response to the first research question, the analysis showed that politeness strategies were realized through a range of linguistic forms, including expressions of common ground, audience inclusion, deference, direct statements, and indirect references. Regarding the second research question, positive politeness emerged as the most commonly used strategy, followed by negative politeness, while bald-on-record and off-record strategies occurred less frequently. Concerning the third research question, the identified strategies performed several communicative functions, including audience rapport, solidarity construction, mitigation of face-threatening content, credibility enhancement, and audience engagement.

Overall, the study demonstrates that politeness strategies function as important discourse-pragmatic resources that enable speakers to communicate sensitive personal experiences effectively while maintaining interpersonal connection and persuasive impact.

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