

LINGUISTIC POLITENESS IN THE DIGITAL ERA: MULTIMODAL COMMUNICATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

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Abstract

The rise of digital communication has transformed linguistic politeness from predominantly verbal interaction into increasingly multimodal practices involving text, emojis, memes, hashtags, reaction buttons, images, and short-form videos. Existing politeness studies largely rely on traditional face-to-face frameworks such as Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which falls short in explaining how people make meaning in social media contexts driven by algorithms. Previous studies tend to focus on single-platform textual interactions, impoliteness, cyberbullying, or isolated emoji use, while limited research examines cross-platform multimodal politeness practices. This study uses a multimodal pragmatic framework to examine how politeness strategies are created on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Between January and March 2026, 100 digital interactions were gathered via public comments, captions, video responses, and reaction features using qualitative multimodal discourse analysis. The results show that communication in the digital era is inherently multimodal. Users on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok strategically combine language with visual and audiovisual resources to express politeness, build relationships, and achieve communicative goals. The dominance of positive politeness across the three platforms suggests that social media users prioritize creating a friendly, supportive, and engaging environment. These findings support the view that effective digital communication depends on the interaction between linguistic and multimodal elements, which together shape meaning and social relationships in online contexts.

Keywords: politeness; multimodality; digital discourse; social media; pragmatics

1. Introduction

The emergence of social media has fundamentally transformed human communication practices. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have become central spaces where individuals establish interpersonal relationships, negotiate identities, exchange information, and construct social meanings. Unlike traditional face-to-face communication, digital communication is characterized by multimodal interaction, where verbal language is integrated with visual, auditory, and symbolic resources including emojis, GIFs, stickers, hashtags, images, and videos (Jovanovic & Van Leeuwen, 2018; Crystal, 2006; Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011). From a pragmatic perspective, communication is not merely concerned with the literal meaning of linguistic expressions but also with how meaning is

constructed and interpreted within particular contexts (Levinson, 1983). One of the most influential concepts within pragmatics is politeness, which refers to communicative strategies employed to maintain harmonious social relationships and avoid conflict during interaction (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967; Spencer-Qatey, 2008).

Brown and Levinson (1987) propose that speakers possess two fundamental face wants: positive face and negative face. Positive face refers to an individual's desire to be appreciated and approved of by others, whereas negative face concerns an individual's desire for freedom from imposition. To protect these face wants, speakers employ various politeness strategies, including bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies.

Although Brown and Levinson's framework was developed primarily within face-to-face communication settings, numerous studies have demonstrated its continuing relevance in technologically mediated communication (Kleiner, 1996; Sifianou, 2017). Recent empirical research suggests that politeness strategies remain essential in online interactions because users continuously negotiate interpersonal relationships despite the absence of physical co-presence (Cherbonnier et al., 2024).

However, digital communication introduces new challenges for politeness theory. Social media users frequently rely on multimodal resources such as emojis, reaction icons, memes, GIFs, and visual images to express emotions and interpersonal attitudes. These resources often function similarly to facial expressions, gestures, and prosodic features in face-to-face communication (Schandorf, 2013). Consequently, digital politeness is not only realized through linguistic expressions but also through multimodal resources such as emojis, images, gestures, videos, and platform-specific features.

It highlights that previous politeness studies have mainly examined verbal interaction, while fewer studies investigate how linguistic and non-linguistic resources jointly construct politeness across multiple social media platforms. This gap is significant because digital discourse is inherently multimodal and cannot be adequately explained through purely linguistic analysis (Jovanovic & Van Leeuwen, 2018).

Therefore, this study investigates linguistic politeness in multimodal communication across Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook by presenting these following questions (1) What politeness strategies are realized in Instagram, Facebook, and Tiktok interactions? (2) How do multimodal resources contribute to the construction of politeness in digital communication?, and (3) What differences exist among platforms in realizing multimodal politeness? Specifically, the study explores the interaction between verbal language and multimodal resources in the realization of politeness strategies within contemporary digital environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Pragmatic

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics concerned with how meaning is constructed and interpreted within particular contexts of language use. According to Stephen C. Levinson (1983), pragmatics studies the relationship between language and context, focusing on how speakers convey meanings that go beyond the literal interpretation of words. In pragmatic analysis, meaning is not only derived from linguistic structures but also from the social, cultural, and situational contexts in which communication occurs. Pragmatics studies meaning in context and how speakers communicate intended meanings (Yule, 2020). It

examines how language users interpret utterances based on context. According to Levinson (1983), pragmatics includes:

- deixis
- implicature
- speech acts
- presupposition
- politeness

In literary texts, pragmatics helps explain implied meanings behind fictional dialogue.

2.2 Politeness Theory

The most influential framework for politeness research was developed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Drawing upon Goffman's concept of face, they propose that individuals possess two universal face wants:

- 1) Positive Face
- 2) Negative Face

Positive face refers to an individual's desire to be appreciated, liked, and approved by others. Negative face refers to an individual's desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

To mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs), speakers employ four major politeness strategies:

1. Bald-on-record strategy

This strategy involves performing the act directly without minimizing the threat to the hearer's face. It is often used when clarity or urgency is more important than politeness. For example: "Leave now."

2. Positive Politeness Strategy

Positive politeness strategies aim to build solidarity and closeness between the speaker and the hearer. These strategies often include expressions of appreciation, shared identity, or emotional connection. For example "You are amazing-could you help me?"

3. Negative Politeness Strategy

Negative politeness strategies aim to respect the hearer's autonomy and minimize imposition. These strategies often involve indirectness, hedging, or formal language. For example "I am sorry to bother you, but I really need your help"

4. Off-record strategy

Off-record strategies involve indirect communication where the speaker implies meaning without stating it explicitly. These strategies rely heavily on context and interpretation. Off-record strategies rely on indirect communication and implicature (Grice, 1975). For example "It is quite cold here..."

2.3 Multimodal Communication

The concept of multimodality originates from social semiotics and refers to communication through multiple semiotic modes including language, images, gestures, sounds, and visual symbols (Halliday, 1978; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Kress, 2010).

Social media communication is inherently multimodal because users simultaneously employ:

- a) Written text
- b) Emojis

- c) GIFs
- d) Images
- e) Videos
- f) Hashtags
- g) Reaction icons

According to Jovanovic and Van Leeuwen (2018), meaning in social media interactions emerges from the integration of multiple communicative resources rather than from language alone.

In online environments, emojis frequently function as politeness markers. They can soften criticism, intensify compliments, express empathy, and reduce ambiguity. Consequently, multimodal resources play crucial roles in the construction of interpersonal meanings and face management.

2.4 Digital Pragmatics

Digital pragmatics investigates how pragmatic phenomena operate within technologically mediated communication environments. The rapid growth of social media has generated new forms of interaction characterized by:

- a) Asynchronicity
- b) Reduced physical cues
- c) Audience scalability
- d) Multimodal affordances

As a result, users increasingly rely on visual and symbolic resources to perform communicative functions traditionally achieved through prosody, facial expressions, and gestures (Schandorf, 2013).

Recent studies indicate that emojis and emoticons function as important pragmatic devices for expressing emotions, maintaining relationships, and signaling politeness in online communication (Cherbonnier et al., 2024; Danesi, 2016). Furthermore, emerging research demonstrates that multimodal politeness has become a central feature of digital discourse and requires theoretical approaches that integrate linguistic and visual analyses.

3. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative multimodal discourse analysis design informed by Fairclough (1995), Jewit (2014), and Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) to examine linguistic politeness in digital communication. The data consisted of 100 public interactions collected from Instagram (35), Facebook (30) and TikTok (35), between January and March 2026. The dataset included captions, comments, reel replies, TikTok duets, Facebook reactions, meme responses, and emoji responses. Data were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) publicly accessible content, (2) high user engagement, and (3) multimodal richness involving linguistic and non-linguistic elements. These criteria ensured that the data were relevant for analyzing politeness strategies across different social media platforms.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Result

This study analyzed multimodal communication on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok to identify the realization of linguistic politeness strategies in digital interactions. The findings reveal that users across the three platforms employ various politeness strategies, particularly positive politeness, to establish social closeness, maintain harmonious

relationships, and increase audience engagement. The integration of verbal and non-verbal modes significantly contributes to the effectiveness of these strategies.

a. Instagram

Data

Caption: “Thank you so much for your continuous support. We are grateful to have such amazing customers. Please share your thoughts in the comments below”

Visual Elements: Product image displayed with bright colors, smiling model, and heart emojis.

From the linguistic analysis, the Instagram data demonstrate that users frequently employ positive politeness through expression of gratitude (“Thank you so much”), positive evaluation of followers (“amazing customers”), and inclusive interaction (“Please share your thoughts”). These linguistic choices acknowledge the audience’s positive face needs, making followers feel appreciated and valued. Therefore, minimizing the social distance and strengthen solidarity were achieved between the content creator and the audience by the expressions such as gratitude, compliments, encouragement, and invitations for audience participation.

The perspective of multimodal can be seen through the visual image reinforces the verbal message through smiling facial expressions indicating friendliness, bright color composition creating positive emotional associations, and heart emojis symbolizing affection and appreciation. The interaction between text and image produces a coherent message of friendliness and respect. The politeness strategy is therefore realized not only linguistically but also visually.

The data demonstrates how instagram users strategically combine verbal appreciation and visual attractiveness to build engagement and maintain positive interpersonal relationships.

b. Facebook

Data

Post: “Congratulations to all students who successfully completed their final examinations. Your hard work and dedication have paid off. Keep striving for excellent.”

Comments:

- a) “Thank you for your encouragement, Sir.”
- b) “We appreciate your support.”

Visual elements: Group photograph of students receiving certificates.

From the linguistics perspective, the post utilizes positive politeness through:

- a) Compliments (“Your hard work and dedication”)
- b) Expressions of approval (“Congratulations”).
- c) Encouragement (“keep striving for excellent”).

The comments indicate reciprocal politeness as participants respond with gratitude and appreciation. The interaction reflects mutual respect and social harmony.

From the multimodal perspective, the group photograph functions as visual evidence supporting the congratulatory message:

- a) Smiling faces symbolize achievement and satisfaction.
- b) Certificates represent success and recognition.
- c) The collective arrangement of students emphasizes community identity.

Together, the verbal and visual modes create a supportive environment that strengthens positive social relationships. In short, facebook facilitates extended interaction

where politeness is collaboratively constructed through posts, comments, and visual representations of community achievements.

c. Tiktok

Data

Spoken Text: “hello everyone! Thank you for joining today’s live session. I hope these tips will help you improve your English skills. Let me know your questions in the comments.

Visual elements:

- a) Direct eye contact with the camera.
- b) Frequent smiling
- c) Hand gestures emphasizing important points.
- d) Animated text captions appearing on screen.

Linguistically, there are several positive politeness strategies as the evident:

- a) Friendly greeting (“hello everyone!”)
- b) Appreciation (Thank you for joining”)
- c) Concern for audience needs (“I hope these tips will help you”).
- d) Invitation for participation (“Let me know your questions”).

Those strategies create intimacy and encourage audience involvement.

For the multimodal perspective, Tiktok demonstrates the strongest multimodal integration through:

- a) Eye contact creates a sense of direct interpersonal communication.
- b) Smiles indicate friendliness and sincerity.
- c) Hand gestures emphasize key information and maintain viewer attention.
- d) Text overlays reinforce spoken content and improve message accessibility.

The audiovisual elements work simultaneously with language to increase persuasive power and audience engagement.

The findings illustrate that Tiktok users rely on synchronized verbal and non-verbal resources to realize politeness, making communication more interactive, dynamic, and engaging.

Although Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok have different communicative characteristics, all three platforms demonstrate the use of politeness strategies to foster positive interactions. Instagram emphasizes visual aesthetics and concise captions, Facebook prioritizes textual interaction and community discussion, while TikTok combines audiovisual resources to create highly engaging content. Despite these differences, positive politeness emerges as the dominant strategy across the platforms.

The multimodal analysis further reveals that linguistic politeness cannot be understood solely through verbal expressions. Visual and audiovisual resources contribute significantly to meaning-making and audience interpretation. Smiles, gestures, images, emojis, videos, music, and platform-specific features function as complementary elements that strengthen politeness and interpersonal communication.

The results indicate that communication in the digital era is inherently multimodal. Users on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok strategically combine language with visual and audiovisual resources to express politeness, build relationships, and achieve communicative goals. The dominance of positive politeness across the three platforms suggests that social media users prioritize creating a friendly, supportive, and engaging environment. These findings support the view that effective digital communication depends on the interaction between linguistic and multimodal elements, which together shape meaning and social relationships in online contexts.

4.2 Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that positive politeness is the most dominant politeness strategy employed across Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. This result strongly supports the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1987), who argue that positive politeness is used to satisfy the hearer's positive face, namely the desire to be appreciated, accepted, and valued by others. In the analyzed data, content creators consistently attempted to reduce social distance and create a sense of closeness with their audiences through compliments, encouragement, invitations, appreciation, and friendly expressions. Such linguistic choices indicate that social media communication is not merely transactional but relational, aiming to establish and maintain interpersonal connections between creators and followers (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

The Instagram data particularly illustrate how positive politeness is realized through the combination of verbal appreciation and visually appealing content. Captions often contain encouraging statements, gratitude, and invitations for interaction, while photographs and videos present aesthetically pleasing representations of products, experiences, or lifestyles. This finding confirms Brown and Levinson's (1987) claim that positive politeness seeks common ground between speaker and hearer. In the Instagram context, creators establish this common ground by presenting relatable experiences and using inclusive language that invites audience participation. The visual attractiveness of the content further enhances the persuasive and interpersonal function of the message.

The findings also support the multimodal framework proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), who argue that meaning is constructed through the interaction of multiple semiotic resources rather than language alone. In the Instagram data, images do not merely accompany the written text; instead, they actively contribute to meaning-making by communicating friendliness, credibility, and emotional appeal. The combination of verbal and visual elements creates a stronger politeness effect than either mode could achieve independently.

The Facebook findings further reinforce Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness. Unlike Instagram, Facebook provides more opportunities for extended textual interaction. The analyzed posts and comments frequently contain expressions of support, agreement, congratulations, and appreciation. These linguistic features reflect positive politeness strategies such as claiming common ground, showing interest in others, and emphasizing group membership. The prevalence of these strategies suggests that Facebook users prioritize maintaining harmonious social relationships within online communities.

From a socio pragmatic perspective, Facebook interactions reflect the collaborative nature of digital communication. According to Herring (2004), computer-mediated communication allows users to adapt traditional communicative practices to online environments. The Facebook data demonstrate this adaptation through supportive comments, community engagement, and interactive discussions. Furthermore, reaction icons, shared images, videos, and comment threads provide multimodal resources that strengthen interpersonal communication and facilitate the expression of solidarity among users.

Among the three platforms, TikTok presents the most comprehensive example of multimodal politeness. The findings show that creators employ spoken language, text overlays, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, background music, and editing techniques simultaneously to construct meaning. This result strongly supports Kress and Van Leeuwen's

(2006) assertion that communication should be understood as the interaction of multiple modes rather than language alone. In the TikTok data, verbal expressions such as recommendations, encouragement, and promotional statements are reinforced by non-verbal cues including smiling, enthusiastic gestures, and attractive visual presentations.

For example, in the analyzed food review, hotel promotion, book advertisement, and affiliate marketing videos, creators frequently used evaluative expressions such as “recommended,” “worth trying,” and “good value.” According to Brown and Levinson (1987), these expressions represent positive politeness because they emphasize shared interests and create a sense of involvement between speaker and audience. However, the multimodal analysis demonstrates that the persuasive force of these expressions is amplified by accompanying visual and auditory elements. Smiling faces, direct eye contact, energetic body language, and appealing product displays contribute significantly to the audience’s interpretation of the message.

These findings are also consistent with Jewitt’s (2014) view that digital communication is inherently multimodal and that meaning emerges through the interaction of linguistic, visual, auditory, and gestural resources. In the TikTok data, meaning is not located solely in spoken language but is distributed across multiple communicative modes. Consequently, politeness is realized not only through words but also through visual and auditory signs that communicate friendliness, enthusiasm, and engagement.

Another important finding concerns the relationship between politeness and persuasion. Across Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, positive politeness frequently appears in promotional content, product reviews, educational advertisements, and affiliate marketing posts. Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that politeness strategies can be employed to achieve particular communicative goals while maintaining social harmony. The analyzed data support this argument, as creators use positive politeness to establish trust, enhance credibility, and encourage audience participation. By creating a friendly and supportive atmosphere, creators increase the likelihood that audiences will respond positively to their messages.

The findings also align with research on social media discourse, which suggests that digital platforms encourage users to construct a sense of intimacy with large audiences through personalized communication strategies (Page, 2012). Although content creators communicate with numerous viewers simultaneously, they often employ conversational language, direct address forms, and inclusive expressions to create the impression of one-to-one interaction. This strategy is particularly evident in TikTok videos where creators directly address viewers using informal language and personal engagement techniques.

From a multimodal perspective, the study provides empirical support for Jewitt’s (2014) argument that communication in digital environments cannot be fully understood through linguistic analysis alone. Across Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, meaning emerges from the integration of text, images, videos, emojis, gestures, facial expressions, and audio elements. These multimodal resources function together to communicate politeness and shape audience interpretation. Therefore, the findings suggest that linguistic politeness in contemporary social media environments is increasingly realized through complex multimodal interactions.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory remains highly relevant in explaining online communication practices. However, the study also reveals that politeness in social media environments extends beyond linguistic forms and must be examined through a multimodal lens. The integration of politeness theory and

multimodal analysis provides a more comprehensive understanding of how users construct interpersonal relationships, maintain social harmony, and achieve communicative goals in the digital era. Consequently, the study contributes to the growing body of research emphasizing that politeness is a multimodal phenomenon shaped by the communicative affordances of contemporary social media platforms.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that politeness on Instagram, Facebook and Tiktok is expressed through both language and multimodal elements such as images, emojis, videos, and visual design. Positive politeness was the most common strategy, helping users build relationships and encourage engagement.

The platforms differ in how politeness is conveyed. Instagram focuses on visual interaction, Facebook supports community discussion, and Tiktokrelies on audiovisual content. Politeness in digital communication should be understood as a multimodal pragmatic phenomenon shaped by technological affordances and social interaction.

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