

Politeness in Political Interviews: A Pragmatic Analysis of Indonesian Presidential Candidates' Answers to Critical Questions

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ABSTRACT

A political interview with a presidential candidate(s) is one of the most anticipated interviews not just by their supporters, but by the entire public. Although this interview has been going on for a while and the presidential election is over, it is still important to analyze the interview from both political and other perspectives. Through a pragmatic approach, this study aims to describe the types of politeness of one of the presidential candidates in answering critical questions from journalists. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method in which the data is collected through non-participant observation techniques and analyzed based on the classification of language politeness proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987). This study found four politeness strategies, namely direct strategy (bald on-record), positive politeness strategy, negative politeness strategy, indirect strategy (off-record). Among these, the most dominant was the off-record strategy (37,8%), which indicates the politician's preference for indirectness and narrative to address sensitive topics. The second most frequent was positive politeness (31.0%), typically employed to create in-group solidarity and a sense of shared purpose. Negative politeness (24.3%) was used when delivering disagreement or rejection while maintaining respect for the interlocutor's autonomy. The least used strategy was bald on-record (6.7%), applied selectively for assertive or factual statements. These findings suggest that politeness strategies in political interviews are not merely linguistic choices, but are tied to image management, institutional power relations, and strategic facework. Besides aiming to enrich the understanding of how the concepts of politeness and face strategies are used in the political context, this study also explains how politicians use language to shape their self-image before the public and the media.

KEYWORDS: Pragmatic, Political Interview, Politeness Strategy

INTRODUCTION

Language has always played a crucial role in various discourses. It is a tool for conveying information, shaping public perception, and influencing social dynamics. In the arena of political communication, language politeness strategies are significant, as they can reflect the communicative competence of political figures and in turn effectively navigate critical questions. Language politeness in political interviews not only determines the success of political messaging but can also influence how the public perceives the candidate. In the context of politics in Indonesia, where public discourse is often laden with ideological and emotional nuances, language politeness strategies can be used as a tool to mitigate *face-threatening acts* and maintain civility in political engagement.

For at least the last 4 (four) decades or since the theory of politeness was first proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987), language politeness studies have received significant attention. Language

politeness has been studied in various discourses such as entertainment (Julianti & Rahmani, 2024; Khan et al., 2024; Widyastuti, 2019) , education (Wangia & Otonde, 2020; Wijayanti et al., 2025) , diplomacy (Yapparova et al., 2019) , social media (Chandra, 2021; Tasyarasita et al., 2024) , and politics (Azizah, 2024; Dalimunte & Wen, 2022; Haryanto et al., 2024; Kadwa & Alshenqeeti, 2020; Macaulay, 2017; Rizka et al., 2020; Rosyidah, 2020) . Particularly in politics, various studies have shown how political figures have used politeness strategies to navigate conversational difficulties. For example, research on the 2019 Indonesian presidential debates has demonstrated instances of maxim compliance and violation (Leech, 2014) as well as revealing the relationship between language use and political position (Rizka et al., 2020; Rosyidah, 2020) . The findings in these studies emphasize the importance of language politeness in constructing political narratives that are persuasive and audience-friendly.

Previous research has also explored the use of politeness strategies in different political *settings*, for example in televised debates. Research that examined speech acts that occurred in a presidential candidate debate in the United States both at the Democratic Party convention and the main presidential debate found that the language used complied with the maxims of politeness (Dalimunte & Wen, 2022) . The data in the study indicated that both debates adopted more positive politeness strategies than negative politeness strategies. In the context of political *talk show* studies, in Mata Najwa for example, similar studies have also shown the dominance of positive politeness strategies which indicate a tendency towards familiarity and building good relationships between political figures and audiences (Haryanto et al., 2024) . These findings suggest that politeness strategies are used variably across different political platforms, depending on communicative goals and audience expectations.

Despite previous studies, there is still a gap in understanding how presidential candidates, particularly in Indonesia, use politeness strategies in response to critical questions during political interview sessions. Unlike political debates, where politicians have more control over the discourse, political interviews present unique challenges as they require spontaneous responses to often difficult or provocative questions. The way presidential candidates handle such questions can significantly influence public perceptions, especially in a political climate where rhetorical skills and perceived credibility play a significant role in shaping and determining voter attitudes (Fairclough, 2001) .

Addressing this gap is important. This is because political interviews are one of the main platforms where political candidates must be able to articulate their policies while maintaining a respectful and persuasive demeanor. Researchers have noted that the ability to manage face-threatening actions in these interactions reflects leadership qualities and communicative adaptability for a candidate (Kadwa & Alshenqeeti, 2020; Macaulay, 2017) . A leadership candidate will certainly be thoroughly scrutinized by the public eye, which in turn, if the leadership candidate cannot demonstrate his communication performance, he will easily be eliminated from the political

arena. Examining how presidential candidates navigate these communication challenges can contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of language politeness in political discourse.

In a broader framework, studying politeness strategies in political interviews is in line with the growing scholarly interest in political pragmatics and critical discourse analysis. Political rhetoric continues to evolve along with the rapid development of digital media and increased voter scrutiny. Therefore, understanding the pragmatic aspects of political communication is crucial. Various studies in political discourse in democratic systems in various parts of the world have been conducted and underline the impact of politeness strategies on political persuasion and public trust (Almahasees & Mahmoud, 2022; Bøggild & Jensen, 2024). Therefore, applying the same research theme to the Indonesian context will provide a useful comparative perspective and enrich the existing body of research.

The present study attempts to fill the research gap through a pragmatic analysis of the politeness strategies used by presidential candidates when responding to critical questions in political interviews. The research will focus on the linguistic choices they make so as to present patterns of politeness strategies that reflect the broader socio-political and cultural dynamics in Indonesia. In this way, the present study offers insights into how language politeness is strategically deployed to deal with face-threatening actions and build political legitimacy.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a theoretical basis in pragmatics, especially the language politeness strategies proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987). The focus of the research is directed at the use of politeness strategies in political interviews conducted by Anies Baswedan when answering critical questions from Najwa Shihab in the Youtube show Mata Najwa. Data were obtained from political interview shows accessed through the Mata Najwa Youtube channel. Researchers used the free listening technique to directly observe the content of the interview without being involved in the interaction. Interview transcripts were compiled based on *closed-caption* (CC) and used as primary data. The video used as a data source has a duration of 1:36:16. The analysis was conducted through a pragmatic approach that emphasizes identifying the types of politeness strategies based on five main categories: direct strategies, positive politeness strategies, negative politeness strategies, indirect strategies, and non-threatening strategies. Data coding was done with the help of Atlas.ti software to facilitate the classification process and thematic visualization. To maintain the validity of the findings, triangulation of findings was carried out by comparing the results of the analysis with the findings of previous relevant research. In addition, researchers also conducted *member checking* by asking for input from pragmatics experts to review the accuracy of the categorization of politeness strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Politeness Strategy	Number of Data	Percentage (%)
Bald On-records	8	6.72%
Positive Politeness	37	31.09%
Negative Politeness	29	24.36%
Off-record Politeness	45	37.81%

Bald On-record Strategy

The bald on-record strategy is the most direct and non-redressive form of linguistic politeness, as proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). In this strategy, speakers convey their intentions explicitly without any attempt to mitigate threats to the interlocutor's face. This strategy is generally used under certain conditions, such as when communication efficiency takes precedence over pragmatic caution, or when the social relationship between speakers and speech partners is familiar, equal, or symmetrical.

In this study, the bald on-record strategy was found in 8 occurrences out of a total of 119 data (6.72%). This number makes this strategy the least frequently used form of politeness by ABWs during interviews. This low frequency shows that this strategy is used selectively and carefully, considering the context of political interviews is public and discourse sensitive.

Here are three representative excerpts showing the use of the bald-on-record strategy, along with linguistic and pragmatic justifications for each utterance:

(2) *"Terima kasih"*

(2) 'Thank you.'

This utterance appears as an initial response to the journalist's opening greeting. Saying "thank you" is a form of conventional politeness expression that is direct and does not contain additional redressive content. In terms of strategy, this expression does not contain elements of mitigation or framing, so pragmatically it can be classified as a bald on-record strategy. The use of this form is considered reasonable and appropriate in the context of initial greetings, where social expectations of politeness are more formulaic. It also shows ABW's communicative readiness to enter deeper discursive situations.

(51c) *"...saya mengajukan opsinya ini opsinya saya dapat tugas untuk melakukan sudah kerjakan opsi itu..."*

(51c) "...I proposed this option, the option I got the task to do, have done the option..."

This utterance was delivered when ABW explained the political decision-making process involving his coalition. This unmitigated declarative form shows the intention to emphasize that he has carried out his duties fully and completely. The sentence does not contain negative strategies such as requests for permission, reluctance, or forms of distancing, but is stated with full certainty. From a pragmatic point of view, this shows that the speaker wants to build an image as an individual

who is tough, responsible, and has control over complex political situations. This strategy also serves to reinforce ethos before the public.

(51g) *"...tidak ada hasil. Ya sudah, besok pagi lalu besok paginya..."*

(51g) "...no result. Well, tomorrow morning and then the next morning..."

This quote describes a chronological narrative of the failure of the planned political meeting. ABW uses a direct sentence structure to explain that the negotiation efforts were fruitless. Utterances such as "no result" and "that's it" signify a form of event reporting without interpersonal elaboration. There is no attempt to mitigate or redress the possible face threat posed by the information. Instead, the impression that emerges is one of assertiveness and efficiency in conveying facts. In the context of political interviews, the use of bald on-record here serves to strengthen the perception that he is honest, as it is, and not manipulative.

From the three examples above, it can be seen that the bald on-record strategy is used by ABW in three main contexts: (1) formulaic opening interactions, (2) reporting personal responsibilities, and (3) factual explanations of political dynamics. The choice of this strategy reflects an orientation towards clarity of message and strengthening of self-authority, especially when ABWs want to emphasize positions or explain actions in a straightforward manner without the potential for misinterpretation. Although this strategy appeared least in the data corpus, its presence played an important role in shaping a firm and controlled communicative image before the public.

Positive Politeness

Positive politeness strategy is a form of politeness that aims to strengthen social relations between speakers and interlocutors. This strategy reflects the speaker's efforts to meet the positive face needs of the interlocutor, such as the need for acceptance, appreciation, and solidarity. In Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, this strategy includes the use of inclusive language, expressions of approval, humor, or attempts to create familiarity.

In the political interviews analyzed, positive politeness strategies were used predominantly by ABW. There were 37 occurrences out of a total of 119 data (31.09%). This shows ABW's preference in building an image as a communicator who is friendly, collaborative and close to the public and political partners.

Here are three representative quotes that show the use of positive politeness strategies, along with the pragmatic justification for each:

(4) *"ini Senin...jadi ini hari pertama kita sama-sama di Jakarta dan acaranya kegiatan resmi Pertama."*

(4) "It's Monday...so it's our first day together in Jakarta and the first official event."

This utterance contains an expression of togetherness using the inclusive pronomina "we are together". This form represents ABW's attempt to convey information collectively and emphasizes that her involvement is part of teamwork. Pragmatically, this strategy is used to show an open and

collaborative attitude in front of the audience, creating the impression that there is no distance between him and the other parties involved.

(6) *"ya kita selalu bersiap ya dengan situasi apapun..."*

(6) "Yes, we are always prepared for any situation..."

This sentence contains an element of collective affirmation of readiness in facing political dynamics. By using "we are always prepared", ABW not only conveys his views, but also involves emotional and cognitive participation from other parties. This speech is also a form of support for coalition partners and sympathizers. Strategically, this serves to reduce the possibility of face threats due to surprising political decisions, while strengthening a sense of solidarity.

(16) *"karena ya rute yang kita jalani selama ini itu urutan yang perlu tantangan..."*

(16) "because yes, the route we have been traveling so far is a sequence that needs to be challenged..."

In this quote, ABW relates the struggle that has been passed as a collective experience. The choice of phrases such as "we go through" and "need challenges" implies that all previous political processes were not the result of individual but collective efforts. The pragmatic justification for this strategy is to strengthen the legitimacy of togetherness and shape the public narrative that the political decisions taken are the result of collective reflection and collective experience.

The findings show that positive politeness strategies are utilized by ABW in various contexts, including: (1) describing political events or activities collectively, (2) showing readiness and a spirit of togetherness, and (3) building a narrative of joint struggle to increase emotional attachment with the public. These three patterns show consistency in the way ABW constructs a rhetorical image that is inclusive, cooperative and oriented towards mutual solidarity.

Negative Politeness Strategy

The negative politeness strategy reflects a form of politeness that is oriented towards fulfilling the negative face needs of the interlocutor, namely the need not to be disturbed, not to be forced, and to be given autonomy in the interaction. In Brown and Levinson's (1987) theoretical framework, this strategy is used when speakers want to maintain social distance, reduce potential threats, or convey intentions indirectly in order to respect the interlocutor's personal space or rights.

In the data analyzed, the negative politeness strategy was found 29 times out of a total of 119 data occurrences (24.3%). This makes it the second most frequently used strategy by ABW, after positive politeness. This shows that ABW not only tries to build closeness, but is also careful to maintain the honor and political sensitivity of the other party, especially when discussing potentially controversial issues.

Here are three representative quotes that show the use of negative politeness strategies, along with their pragmatic justifications:

(19) *"minimal itu menjelaskannya harus apa nih..."*

(19) "At least that explains what it should be..."

This speech shows indecisiveness as a form of caution in explaining complicated political conditions. The use of the modality form "what should I do" and the indirect phrase "at least that explains it" serves to minimize the imagination that the interlocutor is being sued or sued. This strategy reflects ABW's efforts to avoid being portrayed as someone who forces opinions or corners other parties.

(27a) *"apabila Pak Surya Paloh mengajukan nama yang tidak relevan... maka saya petugas partai..."*

(27a) "if Mr. Surya Paloh submits an irrelevant name... then I am a party official..."

In this quote, ABW uses a conditional structure ("if") to convey a hypothetical scenario that indirectly states his objection to a possibility. This strategy serves as a buffer against potential face threats to the figure mentioned (Surya Paloh), and shows that ABW's obedience to the party is based on the suitability of the proposed name, not merely blind obedience. The use of this indirect form shows rhetorical skill in maintaining political relations.

(41a) *"...itu makanya disebut dengan surat. An takdir Allah Maha mengatur..."*

(41a) "I actually don't want to respond in detail to all this..."

It is an indirect form of rejection followed by an explanation. This strategy shows caution in providing clarification on sensitive issues. Word choices such as "actually" and "don't want to respond in detail" reflect a position that avoids confrontation, but still maintains explanatory authority. Pragmatically, ABW presents itself as a figure who considers the sensitivity of the information and respects all parties involved.

Based on the data analyzed, negative politeness strategies are used by ABW in the following contexts: (1) avoiding direct judgment of certain political figures or decisions, (2) expressing disagreement through conditional and hypothetical forms, and (3) rejecting or avoiding certain topics indirectly and politely. These three patterns indicate ABW's pragmatic caution in navigating complex political discourse and the high risk to public image and inter-elite relations.

Off-record Politeness Strategy

The off-record politeness strategy is a form of politeness characterized by implicature, indirectness, or the use of language that allows multi-interpretation. In Brown and Levinson's theory (1987), this strategy is used when speakers want to maintain social and ideological distance, by avoiding direct commitment to a proposition, either for reasons of political prudence or image strategy.

In the political interview corpus analyzed, the off-record strategy was found 45 times out of a total of 119 data (37.8%). This makes it the most dominant strategy used by ABW. The high frequency of use of this strategy reflects ABW's caution in managing public perception and maintaining relationships with various parties without having to explicitly convey their position.

Here are three representative excerpts of off-record politeness strategies, accompanied by in-depth pragmatic justifications:

(21) *"pada waktu itu kami dalam rombongan yang sama karena waktu itu undangan..."*

(21) "At that time we were in the same group because it was an invitation..."

This speech was delivered to answer the accusation about the political meeting that was considered to have been planned beforehand. Instead of directly denying or confirming, ABW chose to explain through a situational narrative that contained implicit information that the togetherness occurred because of an official invitation. This strategy places the speaker in a neutral position and allows the interlocutor to draw their own conclusions without explicit affirmation.

(23) *"...beliau mengatakan Pak Anies ini saya minta 5 menit... beliau bilang ini ada pesan dari saya pesannya supaya berpasangan dengan Muhaimin..."*

(23) "I haven't heard this either on Thursday yesterday he said Mr. Anies I ask for five minutes ..."

In this quote, ABW uses storytelling techniques to convey information indirectly. Instead of explicitly stating that he is being courted or offered political cooperation, he chooses to quote a third-party conversation that is not declarative. This strategy is used to avoid one-sided claims and keep the space for interpretation open to the public.

(25) *"sudah dapat diberitahunya lama kalau saya sudah sudah ada pembicaraan itu..."*

(25) "He could have told me a long time ago that I had that conversation..."

Phrases such as "a long time ago" and the passive form "he was told" show that ABW chose language structures that obscure time and agent. Vagueness in time and agent references is a hallmark of the off-record strategy, which uses to avoid direct responsibility or potential conflict towards the named party. It also serves as a buffer when the information is disputed by the opposing party.

Based on these three quotes and the overall data analyzed, it can be concluded that the off-record politeness strategy is used by ABW in the following contexts: (1) explaining politically sensitive events in a narrative or implicit way, (2) avoiding direct commitment to propositions that risk negative responses, and (3) conveying opinions through quotations or suppositions to maintain flexibility of interpretation. This choice of strategy demonstrates a careful and controlled rhetorical approach, while also signaling that ABW strongly considers the public impact of every statement it makes in an open discursive space.

The results of this study indicate that the politeness strategies used by ABW in political interviews reflect a highly strategic approach to communication. Of the five categories of politeness strategies analyzed, off-record strategies were found to be the most dominant strategy used by ABW (37.8%), followed by positive politeness (31.09%), negative politeness (24.36%), and bald on-record (6.72%). These findings are in line with and expand on the results of previous studies, such as those reported by Haryanto et al. (2024), who noted that in the context of Indonesian political talk shows, positive politeness strategies tend to be dominant among politicians to build rapport and avoid open conflict with the audience. However, this finding also provides a new dimension that in the context

of one-way political interviews that are full of pressure and critical questions, off-record strategies are more often chosen by politicians to maintain room for interpretation and avoid direct commitments that could pose political risks.

Off-record strategies were used by ABW to convey sensitive messages, especially when it came to coalition issues, internal conflicts, and strategic political decisions. For example, in data (21) and (23), ABW chose to narrate the situation using passive structures or references to third parties rather than stating his opinion directly. This strategy is in line with the findings of Rizka et al. (2020) in the 2019 Indonesian presidential debate, which showed that implicit strategies were more frequently used to maintain political harmony and avoid losing public support due to open statements.

Meanwhile, positive politeness strategies were frequently found in the context of inclusive pronouns such as “we” and “us,” as well as in narratives emphasizing togetherness and collective struggle. Examples in data (4), (6), and (16) demonstrate how ABW employs this approach to construct an identity as a leader who is close to the people and collegial with his political colleagues. This strategy supports the findings of Haryanto et al. (2024) and Azizah (2024), which highlight that the use of forms of togetherness in political discourse serves to build social and emotional credibility. This strategy also shows that ABW actively manages the positive face of the addressee, especially the public audience who have expectations of a humanistic and non-elitist communication style.

On the other hand, negative politeness strategies are found in situations where ABW must convey rejection, disagreement, or clarification of accusations. As seen in data (19) and (27a), conditional structures, the use of modality, and indirect statements are tools for maintaining the face of the interlocutor. This strategy is relevant to the research by Kadwa & Alshenqeeti (2020), which emphasizes the importance of negative politeness in maintaining authority while preventing the emergence of new conflicts in political interactions that are fraught with tension. The use of this strategy by ABW demonstrates his skill in maintaining relationships with various parties, both horizontally with coalition partners and vertically with voters.

Meanwhile, the bald on-record strategy is only used in specific contexts, such as in opening responses, reporting tasks, or explaining the chronology of events, as seen in data (2) and (51g). This strategy, though rare, serves to reinforce the impression of firmness, efficiency, and authority. The low frequency of this strategy indicates ABW's caution in avoiding a communication style that is too confrontational or patronizing.

When compared to Dalimunte & Wen's (2022) study on political debates in the United States, this finding shows a different pattern. In US debates, positive politeness strategies are more dominant because the context of the debate allows politicians to be more expressive and expansive. Conversely, in the context of critical interviews like Mata Najwa, the most prominent strategy is off-the-record, as it provides flexibility in answering questions without revealing an overly open position.

Theoretically, this finding supports Brown and Levinson's (1987) claim that the selection of politeness strategies is determined by three main factors: social distance, relative power, and the level of threat to face. In the context of public, open, and high-pressure political interviews, ABW consistently adjusted his strategic choices to maintain a safe, credible public image that was not vulnerable to political exploitation by others. Thus, this study not only reinforces previous findings but also contributes new insights into how linguistic politeness is strategically employed to build political legitimacy and navigate discursive pressures in the public sphere.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to identify and analyze the politeness strategies used by ABW in political interviews on the program *Mata Najwa*. Using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory framework, the results show that ABW uses four types of politeness strategies, namely off-record politeness, positive politeness, negative politeness, and bald on-record. The off-record strategy is the most dominant form (37.8%), followed by positive politeness (31.09%), negative politeness (24.36%), and bald on-record (6.72%).

These findings indicate that politeness strategies are not only used to fulfill social interaction norms but also function as rhetorical and political tools to navigate discursive pressures in public interviews. ABW strategically chose indirect forms of speech to maintain room for interpretation, build an impression of inclusiveness through expressions of togetherness, and avoid open confrontation on sensitive topics. This pattern shows that politeness in Indonesian political discourse is closely related to strategies for image building and maintaining power relations in a subtle manner.

The findings of this study also have important relevance in the field of pragmatic learning, particularly in the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in Indonesia. The analysis of politeness strategies used by ABW can be used as authentic teaching materials to introduce students to variations in speech strategies in real political contexts. Through this case study, learners can understand how the choice of politeness strategies is influenced not only by grammar and lexicon, but also by social context, communication goals, and self-image construction. In addition, discourse-based pragmatic learning can also help improve students' cross-cultural pragmatic awareness, particularly in comparing how politeness strategies are used in Indonesian political communication with practices in other countries. Thus, this study can enrich teaching resources and strategies in courses such as Discourse Analysis, Cross-cultural Pragmatics, and English for Political Purposes.

This study has several limitations. First, the data analyzed only comes from one source of interviews, namely one episode of the program *Mata Najwa* featuring ABW as a guest. Thus, the results of this study cannot be generalized to the overall discursive practices of Indonesian political actors. Second, the focus of the study is limited to politeness strategies in one direction of communication (politicians' responses), without considering the role of the interviewer or broader

interactive dynamics. Third, this study has not explored the multimodal aspects of interviews, such as nonverbal expressions, intonation, and pauses, which can influence the interpretation of politeness strategies in a more profound way.

For future development, it is recommended that similar research be conducted involving more data from various political figures and different formats of interaction, such as candidate debates, campaign speeches, or online public forums. A cross-event or cross-actor comparative approach can enrich our understanding of variations in politeness strategies based on political affiliation, discourse genre, or communicative cultural background. Additionally, further research could integrate multimodal discourse analysis to capture the complexity of meaning created through the interaction between verbal and nonverbal utterances. The integration of qualitative and quantitative analysis within a critical pragmatic approach also holds significant potential for examining how politeness strategies are employed in the reproduction of political discourse power in a more comprehensive manner.

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