

Soft Rejection As A Politeness Strategy: A Sociolinguistic Analysis Of Gen Z's Indirect Refusals In Whatsapp Communication

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Article received: 01 November 2025, Review process: 11 November 2025

Article Accepted: 25 Desember 2025, Article published: 12 Januari 2026

ABSTRACT

In sociolinguistic studies, politeness is understood as a linguistic strategy used to maintain social harmony, minimize conflict, and respect face needs in communicative interaction. This research examines soft rejection as a form of digital politeness strategy employed by Generation Z in WhatsApp communication. Grounded in Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, this study analyzes how Gen Z applies both positive and negative politeness strategies to deliver indirect refusals politely while maintaining solidarity and personal autonomy. Using a descriptive qualitative method, the data were collected from screenshots of WhatsApp conversations containing examples of soft rejection among Gen Z users. The findings reveal that Gen Z frequently uses humor, emojis, and laughter markers such as "hehe" or "wkwk" as expressions of positive politeness, while phrases such as "sorry" or "maybe later" reflect negative politeness. These strategies indicate that digital politeness among Gen Z has evolved into a unique form of linguistic adaptation, where respect and familiarity are maintained through creative language use in digital communication.

Keywords: soft rejection, politeness strategies, Generation Z, WhatsApp, sociolinguistics, digital communication

ABSTRAK

Dalam kajian sosiolinguistik, kesantunan dipahami sebagai strategi kebahasaan yang digunakan untuk menjaga keharmonisan sosial, meminimalkan konflik, dan menghormati kebutuhan muka (face needs) dalam interaksi komunikatif. Penelitian ini mengkaji soft rejection sebagai salah satu bentuk strategi kesantunan digital yang digunakan oleh Generasi Z dalam komunikasi melalui WhatsApp. Berlandaskan Teori Kesantunan Brown dan Levinson (1987), penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana Generasi Z menerapkan strategi kesantunan positif dan negatif untuk menyampaikan penolakan secara tidak langsung dengan sopan, sekaligus tetap menjaga solidaritas dan otonomi pribadi. Dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif, data dikumpulkan dari tangkapan layar percakapan WhatsApp yang memuat contoh soft rejection di kalangan pengguna Generasi Z. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Generasi Z sering menggunakan humor, emoji, serta penanda tawa seperti "hehe" atau "wkwk" sebagai wujud kesantunan positif, sementara ungkapan seperti "maaf" atau "mungkin nanti" mencerminkan kesantunan negatif. Strategi-strategi ini menunjukkan bahwa kesantunan digital di kalangan Generasi Z telah berkembang menjadi bentuk adaptasi kebahasaan yang unik, di mana rasa hormat

dan keakraban tetap terjaga melalui penggunaan bahasa yang kreatif dalam komunikasi digital.

Kata kunci: *soft rejection, strategi kesantunan, Generasi Z, WhatsApp, sosiolinguistik, komunikasi digital*

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of digital technology has brought significant changes to communication patterns and social interactions among the younger generation. Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, represents a group that has grown up with technology from an early age and is highly active in utilizing various digital platforms in their daily lives (Winduwati & Irena, 2024). In Indonesia, one of the most widely used communication media among this generation is WhatsApp, with a penetration rate of 92.1% of the digital population, according to the *We Are Social* report (2023). The dominance of WhatsApp as the primary means of communication makes it a dynamic social space that is also prone to potential misunderstandings, particularly in the context of friendships.

WhatsApp provides a platform for users to interact, hold virtual classes, and share various forms of multimedia messages without the limitations of space and time (Jumiatmoko, 2016). Although communication takes place through social media, ethics and politeness in interaction remain essential to ensure that message exchanges are effective and free from misinterpretation. In indirect communication, not only the conveyed idea but also the choice and structure of language play an important role (Muslich, 2009; Prawono, 2009). As communication has shifted from face-to-face interactions to digital media such as instant messages, direct messages, and comment sections, politeness strategies have also adapted to new forms. The use of humor, emojis, and tone markers such as “hehe,” “wkwk,” or “hahaha” has now become part of digital politeness practices ways in which Gen Z adjusts politeness norms to fit fast-paced, concise, and contextual online communication.

Linguistic politeness plays a crucial role in maintaining communicative harmony, whether in face-to-face interactions or through digital media. Leech (2015) explains that politeness reflects refinement and respect toward interlocutors, while Markhamah (2011) emphasizes that politeness allows messages to be accepted without causing offense. In sociolinguistic studies, politeness is understood as part of the relationship between language and its social context. Based on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory, speakers strive to maintain their *face* or self-image through positive and negative politeness strategies particularly when delivering indirect refusals to remain polite and preserve social balance.

According to Awang Sariyan (2007), sociolinguistics focuses on language use that considers social relationships between speakers and hearers, whether in spoken or written communication. In the context of digital communication, this principle is clearly reflected in the ways Generation Z adapts their language use on platforms such as WhatsApp. One intriguing phenomenon is the tendency of Gen Z to express rejection indirectly through phrases like “*maybe later hehe*” or “*nggak sih, tapi gapapa sih wkwk*.” Such forms of refusal are not merely casual language styles but serve as part of a *digital politeness* strategy used to maintain social relationships without

sounding offensive. This phenomenon of *soft rejection* reflects how Gen Z negotiates meaning and politeness in online interactions a subject that remains relatively underexplored within sociolinguistic and pragmatic frameworks.

Social media users employ both positive and negative politeness strategies to adjust their communication styles directly or indirectly depending on the speaker's intent and the conversational context (Suerni, 2024; Soumena & Suhardi, 2023; Rahman & Hassan, 2019). Based on this perspective, the present study aims to analyze how Generation Z uses soft rejection as a form of digital politeness strategy in WhatsApp interactions. Through a sociolinguistic analysis, this study seeks to contribute to the development of politeness theory in the digital era and to enrich understanding of the interrelationship between language, culture, and technology in modern communication practices.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach aimed at describing the forms and functions of politeness strategies in indirect refusals (soft rejection) in Generation Z's digital communication on WhatsApp. The analysis is grounded in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory to identify the positive politeness and negative politeness strategies used by speakers in digital contexts.

The research data consist of WhatsApp conversation screenshots among Generation Z users containing examples of soft rejection. Data sources were obtained through private conversations (with consent), online forums, and digital observations of everyday interactions on WhatsApp. Data collection was conducted using documentation and non-participatory observation methods with the following criteria: (1) informal conversations among peers, (2) participants belonging to the Generation Z age group, and (3) utterances containing forms of *penolakan halus*.

Data analysis followed the steps proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994): (1) data reduction to select relevant utterances, (2) data presentation by categorizing the politeness strategies identified, and (3) drawing conclusions to determine the social function and meaning of soft rejection in Generation Z's digital communication.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This analysis employs a qualitative descriptive method with a pragmatic approach based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. The focus is on how Generation Z uses politeness strategies, specifically positive politeness and negative politeness, to convey indirect refusals (soft rejection) in WhatsApp conversations. Each data excerpt is analyze according to the situational context, the linguistic forms used, and the social intentions of the speakers.

Data 1



Picture 1 Source: WhatsApp chat

Conversation Script:

A: "jam 15.00 gabisa ya?"

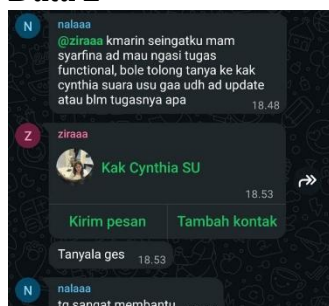
B: "hi hi kak, engga bisa kak huhu"

A: "Yaudah okai no problem hehehe"

Analysis:

The utterance “*hi hi kak, engga bisa kak huhu*” shows an indirect refusal with an emotional and expressive tone. The word “*huhu*” serves as a *negative politeness* strategy to reduce the threat to the interlocutor’s *face* (face-threatening act). A’s response, “*Yaudah okai no problem hehehe*”, demonstrates acceptance with light laughter, which is a form of *positive politeness*. This illustrates that in Gen Z interactions, humor and expressive markers play an important role in maintaining social harmony even in refusal situations.

Data 2



Conversation Script:

A: “@ziraaa kmarin seingatku Mam Syarfina ad mau ngasi tugas functional, bole tolong tanya ke kak cynthia Suara USU gaa udh ad update atau blm tugasnya apa”

B: “tanyala ges”

A: “Tq sangat membantu”

Picture 2 Source: WhatsApp chat

The utterance “*hehe sorry*” represents a soft rejection. The use of “*sorry*” indicates *negative politeness*, showing an effort to avoid threatening the interlocutor’s *face* by apologizing. Meanwhile, the laughter particle “*hehe*” adds a relaxed nuance, reflecting *positive politeness* to maintain social closeness. A’s playful response, “*Tq sangat membantu*”, indicates social acceptance of the rejection. This phenomenon reflects Gen Z’s communication style, which combines empathy and humor in digital interactions.

Data 3

Conversation Script:

A: “Alya mau ikutan lomba poster gak?”

B: “Waahh sorry Nala, tapi aku gak bisa ikutan ya hehehe”

A: “Okey makasih ya Alya”



Picture 3 Source: WhatsApp chat

Analysis:

The utterance “*Waahh sorry Nala, tapi aku gak bisa ikutan ya hehehe*” demonstrates a combination of *negative* and *positive politeness* strategies. The word “*sorry*” expresses regret, while “*hehehe*” softens the refusal. This is a typical Gen Z *soft rejection*, where refusal is conveyed without offending the interlocutor. A’s friendly response shows that this strategy effectively maintains social relationships. According to Brown and Levinson, this reflects a balanced effort to protect both the positive and negative *face* of the interlocutor.

From the six data sets, the most frequently used politeness strategies by Gen Z in delivering *soft rejection* on WhatsApp are:

- *Negative politeness*: use of apology words (*sorry*), personal reasons (*ngantuk, gak bisa*), and emotional expressions (*huhu*).
- *Positive politeness*: use of laughter (*hehe, wkwk*), emojis, and light, friendly responses.

Both strategies serve to protect the interlocutor's *face* and maintain harmonious social relationships. This phenomenon indicates that politeness in Gen Z digital communication is characterized by being light-hearted, expressive, and oriented toward social solidarity.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that Generation Z employs distinctive digital politeness strategies through *soft rejection* in WhatsApp communication. Indirect refusals, such as the expressions "*maybe later hehe*" or "*nggak sih, tapi gapapa sih wkwk*", illustrate Gen Z's tendency to decline requests without threatening the interlocutor's *face*. Based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, this phenomenon demonstrates the application of two main strategies: *positive politeness*, which serves to build closeness and maintain social relationships, and *negative politeness*, which aims to avoid imposition or threats to individual autonomy. These strategies are applied flexibly according to the interactional context, reflecting Gen Z's ability to adjust their utterances to remain polite in digital spaces. Linguistic politeness functions to maintain social balance between speakers and interlocutors while avoiding potential conflicts through careful and respectful word choices. In digital communication, politeness is no longer confined to formal verbal expressions but also includes digital paralinguistic elements such as emojis, stickers, laughter (*hehe, wkwk*), and tonal markers (*hehehe, huhu*), which substitute for nonverbal cues in face-to-face interactions (Winduwati & Irena, 2024). These elements play a crucial role in creating a friendly and relaxed impression without diminishing the sense of politeness.

Theoretically, this study expands the application of Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory into the realm of digital pragmatics, showing that politeness strategies undergo contextual transformation as communication technologies evolve. Practically, the findings contribute to modern sociolinguistic research by providing insights into how language is used to negotiate identity, maintain social relationships, and express politeness in digital environments with minimal nonverbal cues. Therefore, *soft rejection* can be viewed not merely as a casual communication style of Gen Z but as a linguistic and social adaptation to politeness norms in the digital communication era.

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