

Politeness Strategies In Donald Trump's Government Shutdown Speech: A Pragmatic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to identify and describe how polite language strategies are used in government political speeches related to the issue of government shutdowns. The approach used is descriptive qualitative, using the pragmatic theoretical framework of Brown and Levinson (1987). The research data comes from recordings of official speeches posted on YouTube, where note-taking and listening techniques were used to collect information. The results of the research show that speakers tend to use Positive Politeness strategies to strengthen the sense of togetherness among party members, and use Direct Strategies on the Main Issue to convey urgent policy commands. The significance of these findings lies in the understanding of how language is used tactically to maintain social harmony while maintaining political dominance in difficult times. The core conclusion of this research is that the determination of politeness strategies is greatly influenced by the urgency of the situation and the power relationship between the speaker and the listener. Further studies could examine changes in politeness strategies in intercultural political debates or through various social media platforms to observe broader pragmatic movements.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Politeness in Language, Political Discourse, Brown & Levinson

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi dan mendeskripsikan bagaimana strategi bahasa santun digunakan dalam pidato politik pemerintah yang berkaitan dengan isu penutupan pemerintahan (government shutdown). Pendekatan yang digunakan adalah deskriptif kualitatif, dengan menggunakan kerangka teori pragmatik dari Brown and Levinson (1987). Data penelitian berasal dari rekaman pidato resmi yang diunggah di YouTube, dengan teknik simak dan catat untuk mengumpulkan informasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penutur cenderung menggunakan strategi Kesantunan Positif untuk memperkuat rasa kebersamaan di antara anggota partai, serta menggunakan Strategi Langsung pada Isu Utama untuk menyampaikan perintah kebijakan yang bersifat mendesak. Signifikansi temuan ini terletak pada pemahaman tentang bagaimana bahasa digunakan secara taktis untuk menjaga keharmonisan sosial sekaligus mempertahankan dominasi politik dalam situasi yang sulit. Kesimpulan utama penelitian ini adalah bahwa penentuan strategi kesantunan sangat dipengaruhi oleh tingkat urgensi situasi serta hubungan kekuasaan antara penutur dan pendengar. Penelitian selanjutnya dapat mengkaji perubahan strategi kesantunan dalam debat politik antarbudaya atau melalui berbagai platform media sosial guna mengamati pergerakan pragmatik yang lebih luas.

Kata Kunci: Pragmatik, Kesantunan Berbahasa, Wacana Politik, Brown & Levinson

INTRODUCTION

Political communication serves as a fundamental instrument for governance and the maintenance of institutional legitimacy. In the context of statecraft, language is not merely a vehicle for information exchange but a strategic action meticulously designed to influence public opinion, build coalitions, and navigate conflicting interests. From a pragmatic perspective, every utterance delivered by a national leader carries specific intentions that can affect the self-image of both the speaker and the hearer. This phenomenon is closely linked to the concept of “face” or self-image in social interaction. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), individuals possess a “positive face,” which refers to the desire to be appreciated and approved of by others, and a “negative face,” which entails the desire to be unimpeded in one’s actions. In political discourse, speech acts frequently constitute Face Threatening Acts (FTAs), making the employment of politeness strategies essential to mitigate potential conflict and sustain harmonious relations between political figures.

The urgency of this research stems from the critical situations often faced by governments, such as the phenomenon of a government shutdown. This condition exerts immense pressure on both the executive and legislative branches to reach a swift consensus. In such tense environments, the manner in which a leader communicates particularly to fellow party members and political opponents becomes a decisive factor in national stability. The speech analyzed in this study, derived from a government statement regarding legislative transitions and challenges broadcast via an official YouTube channel, provides a clear illustration of how politeness is utilized as a tactic for negotiation and crisis management. The speaker's ability to balance authority with empathy is tested when addressing sensitive issues like national shutdowns and legislative shifts.

To understand the complexity of these interactions, it is essential to delve deeper into the pragmatic framework of politeness. Politeness is not merely about social etiquette; it is a complex system for softening the face-threatening nature of certain communications. Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that the “weightiness” of an FTA is calculated based on the social distance between the speaker and hearer, the relative power of the speaker over the hearer, and the degree of imposition of the act itself. In a political setting, these variables are constantly in flux.

1). Positive Politeness Strategies: Positive politeness is oriented toward the positive face of the hearer, the desire to be liked and to have one’s goals validated. In the analyzed speech, the speaker employs several sub-strategies of positive politeness. For instance, the use of “in-group identity markers” is prominent when addressing colleagues by their first names, such as “JD”, “John”, “Tom”, and “Tim”. This tactic effectively minimizes the social distance and creates a “united front” during a crisis. Furthermore, the speaker uses “exaggerated interest or approval” when discussing the achievements of individual senators, such as James Lankford’s record in Oklahoma. By satisfying the hearer’s positive face, the speaker ensures a cooperative atmosphere necessary for passing difficult legislation.

2). Bald on Record Strategies: When the need for clarity and urgency outweighs the need for face-saving, speakers utilize the Bald on Record strategy. This is common in high-stakes political environments where time is of the essence. The

speaker's repeated calls to "terminate the filibuster" and his insistence that the government "must get open soon" represent direct commands without redressive action. This strategy asserts the speaker's dominance and the non-negotiable nature of the task at hand.

3). Off Record Strategies (Indirectness and Humor): Off-record strategies allow a speaker to communicate a message while maintaining "deniability." This is often achieved through irony, metaphors, or jokes. In the transcript, the speaker uses humor to diffuse tension, such as when joking with "Mr. Toyota" about his wealth. This allows the speaker to address serious economic issues and investment goals without the stiffness of formal diplomatic language. Additionally, using "hints" or referring to "pollsters" allows the speaker to critique the current situation without taking direct personal responsibility for the negative sentiment.

4). Negative Politeness Strategies: Negative politeness addresses the hearer's need for autonomy and freedom from imposition. This strategy is observed in the utterance, "I'll ask the press to leave," which functions as a formal request. Instead of employing a direct imperative, the speaker mitigates the impositive force by framing the action as a personal initiative. This mitigation minimizes potential face-threatening acts and demonstrates sensitivity to institutional norms governing media presence. Such usage reflects the speaker's strategic effort to maintain legitimacy and mutual respect in a formal political context.

Recent discussions in pragmatics and political discourse highlight the importance of interpreting language use in public communication through its social, situational, and institutional dimensions. In contemporary political contexts, pragmatic meaning does not arise solely from linguistic structures but is also shaped by the circumstances in which political utterances are delivered and interpreted. Consequently, political speeches can be understood as strategic forms of pragmatic action, through which speakers manage face-related concerns, negotiate power relationships, and establish public legitimacy.

With the expansion of digital media, political communication is increasingly mediated by online platforms, including YouTube, where political speech becomes publicly accessible and open to continuous scrutiny. This environment places greater pragmatic pressure on political actors, as they are required to address both their immediate interlocutors and a wider, often unseen, audience. Within such a dual communicative setting, politeness strategies play a vital role in enabling speakers to exercise authority while sustaining cooperation and shaping public perception, particularly in politically sensitive situations.

Although politeness strategies have been widely examined in studies of political discourse, existing research tends to concentrate on electoral debates or formal diplomatic encounters. Comparatively little attention has been given to internal governmental interactions that are made public, especially during moments of political transition or institutional uncertainty. This limitation leaves a gap in understanding how politeness operates in contexts where leaders must simultaneously assert authority and foster consensus.

In response to this gap, the present study explores the strategic use of politeness strategies in governmental utterances produced under conditions of

political urgency. The study aims to identify the types of politeness strategies employed in the selected speech and to explain their pragmatic functions within the broader framework of crisis management. The data consist of twenty carefully selected utterance segments taken from the political speech under analysis.

From a practical standpoint, this research contributes to the field of pragmatics by demonstrating that politeness is not a fixed set of moral principles but a flexible communicative resource that adapts to contextual demands. The findings illustrate how political speakers shift between supportive, indirect, and authoritative modes of expression in response to changing situational pressures. Through this analysis, the study seeks to deepen understanding of pragmatic competence in real-world political communication and to extend the relevance of politeness theory within contemporary political discourse.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive approach to investigate the pragmatic phenomena within political discourse. Qualitative research is particularly suited for this study as it allows for an in-depth interpretation of how language is used in specific social and political contexts. The descriptive nature of the research aims to provide a systematic and accurate account of the facts and characteristics of the politeness strategies employed by the speaker during a period of legislative crisis.

The research design follows a pragmatic analysis framework, focusing specifically on the Politeness Theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). This design enables the researchers to look beyond the literal meaning of words to understand the speaker's strategic intent in managing "face" during a high-stakes government address. The study analyzes how linguistic choices function as tactical tools to mitigate conflict while asserting political authority.

The population of this study encompasses the entirety of the official government address regarding the shutdown and legislative transition. The primary subject of the study is the President of the United States. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select 20 specific segments of utterances from the total transcript. These segments were chosen based on their explicit demonstration of politeness strategies: Bald on Record, Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness, and Off Record. The sample size of 20 units was determined to be sufficient to provide a representative overview of the speaker's pragmatic range during the 20-minute address.

The primary instrument for this qualitative research is the researchers themselves, who act as the primary tools for data identification and categorization. The data collection followed a rigorous "simak-catat" (listening and note-taking) technique. First, the researchers accessed the primary data source from an official YouTube live stream. Second, the researchers conducted multiple viewings of the video to capture the nuances of the speaker's tone and context. Third, the verbal utterances were cross-referenced with the provided written transcript from the file to ensure textual accuracy. Every selected utterance was recorded along with its specific timestamp to maintain the chronological context of the speech.

The analysis of the data follows the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, involving three distinct phases:

1). Data Reduction: The researchers filtered the transcript to remove non-essential verbal fillers and focused on utterances that carried significant pragmatic weight. 2). Data Display: The identified data were organized into a structured table, categorizing each utterance by its timestamp, specific content, and the type of politeness strategy employed. 3). Conclusion Drawing and Verification: The researchers interpreted the functions of each strategy. For instance, the use of first-name addresses for colleagues was interpreted as a Positive Politeness strategy to foster solidarity. This interpretation was then verified against the broader context of the government shutdown mentioned in the speech.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

General Results of Politeness Strategies

This study aims to identify the use of politeness strategies in government speeches related to the legislative transition crisis and government shutdown. Based on an in-depth analysis of 20 data units selected purposively from transcripts of speeches lasting approximately 20 minutes, it was found that speakers used a variety of politeness strategies to balance leadership authority and the need for group solidarity.

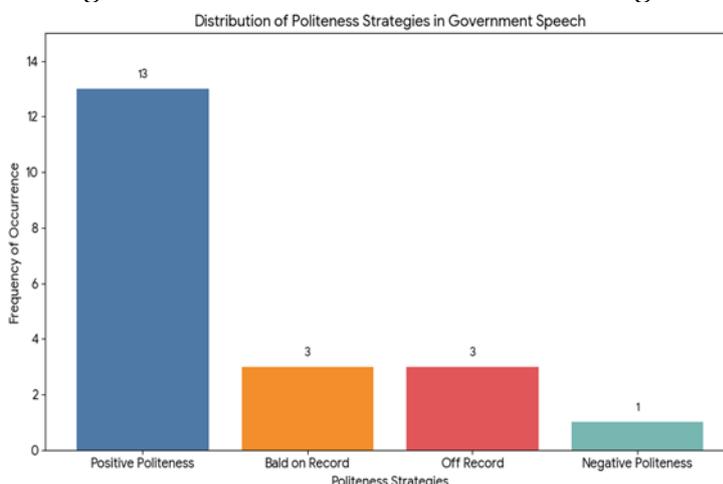
The results of the study show that speakers predominantly used Positive Politeness to engage their internal audience. However, there was a significant shift towards the Bald on Record strategy when the topic of discussion related to the urgency of national policy. The frequency distribution of these strategies is presented statistically in the table below:

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Politeness Strategies

No.	Politeness Strategy	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
1	Positive Politeness	13	65%
2	Bald on Record	3	15%
3	Off Record	3	15%
4	Negative Politeness	1	15%

Based on Table 1, it was found that Positive Politeness dominated the discourse with a percentage of 65%. This indicates that the speakers highly prioritized the “positive face” of their interlocutors, namely their desire to be appreciated, liked, and considered part of a successful group. The Bald on Record strategy (15%) is used for message efficiency in crises, while Off Record (15%) is used to convey criticism or humor indirectly.

Figure 1. Distribution of Politeness Strategies



To provide a comprehensive overview, here is an in-depth analysis of the data units representing these strategies:

No	Timestamp	Utterance Item	Strategy	Pragmatic Function
1	0:42	"Thank you. Thank you very much."	<i>Positive</i>	Audience validation
2	0:46	"I thought we were just going to sit down..."	<i>Positive</i>	Reduce social distancing
3	1:18	"The press has been very nice to us..."	<i>Positive</i>	Praise Strategies
4	1:29	"So I want to thank you for that."	<i>Positive</i>	Maintain good Relations
5	1:32	"I'm sure you'll get back to your normalways."	<i>Off Record</i>	Irony/Humor
6	1:56	"Every one of you I know and... I like."	<i>Positive</i>	Group Solidarity
7	2:36	"JD, thank you very much."	<i>Positive</i>	Internal Familiarity
8	2:55	"John, thank you. Great job."	<i>Positive</i>	Performance Appraisal
9	3:06	"Senator Tom Cotton... Tom, thank you."	<i>Positive</i>	Identity Marker
10	3:17	"Thank you Shelley."	<i>Positive</i>	Personal Confession
11	3:32	"One of my favorite states... James."	<i>Positive</i>	Exaggerated Praise
12	3:37	"Fantastic friend of mine... Tim Scott."	<i>Positive</i>	Close Proximity
13	1:14	"I'll ask the press to leave."	<i>Negative</i>	Formal Request
14	2:14	"I think if you read the pollsters..."	<i>Off Record</i>	Giving Directions/Hints
15	5:29	"We must get the government back open soon."	<i>Bald</i>	Urgent Order
16	6:12	"I said, 'Oh, you're rich.'"	<i>Off Record</i>	Economic Jokes
17	7:20	"I have a bigger heart than anybody."	<i>Positive</i>	Positive Self-image
18	7:24	"Republicans to do what they have to do."	<i>Bald</i>	Party Duties
19	7:26	"Terminate the filibuster. It's the only way."	<i>Bald</i>	EksPLICIT Instructions
20	20:32	"I want to thank you all very much."	<i>Positive</i>	Friendly Closure

Analysis of Positive Politeness (Data 1-12 & 17,20)

The dominance of this strategy is evident from the very first second of the speech. In Data 1 and 4, the speaker repeatedly expresses gratitude to validate the audience’s presence. This action is a fulfillment of positive face, aimed at making the audience feel accepted. A deeper analysis of Data 7 to 12 shows the use of the sub-strategy “In-group Identity Markers.” By using familiar greetings such as ‘JD’ (JD Vance) and “John” (John Thune), the speaker is negotiating power. Instead of acting as a rigid superior, he positions himself as a peer. This is crucial in politics to ensure the loyalty of members during a government shutdown crisis. The use of the

adjectives “fantastic” and “favorite” (Data 11 & 12) is also a form of exaggerating interest strategy to emotionally bind political commitment.

Analysis of Positive Politeness (Data 15,18,19)

A shift in strategy occurs when the speaker discusses concrete policy measures. In Data 15, the statement “We must get the government back open soon” is delivered bluntly without any hedges. In Brown and Levinson’s theory, the Bald on Record strategy is used in emergency situations where message efficiency is more important than politeness. This is reinforced in Data 19, “Terminate the filibuster,” which is an explicit command. Here, the speaker uses his full authority to give a direct mandate to resolve the legislative deadlock.

Analysis of Positive Politeness (Data 5,14,16)

The speaker uses this strategy to convey sensitive criticism or jokes. In Data 5, he sarcastically tells the press that they will return to “normal ways” (critical attitude). This is irony that serves as subtle criticism. In Data 16, the joke “Oh, you’re rich” when interacting with Mr. Toyota serves as an ice-breaker in a heavy economic discussion, while also showing the speaker’s human side.

The primary aim of this study is to examine how politeness strategies are employed in high-level political discourse during a period of governmental crisis. The findings indicate that politeness functions not merely as a form of social courtesy, but as a strategic pragmatic resource used to achieve political objectives. The analysis demonstrates that Positive Politeness, which constitutes 65% of the data, plays a central role in reinforcing party solidarity and interpersonal affiliation. In contrast, Bald on Record strategies, accounting for 15% of the data, are utilized to convey urgent and non-negotiable policy demands, particularly in moments requiring immediate action.

This distribution suggests that political speakers do not rely on a single communicative approach. Instead, they alternate strategically between maintaining relational harmony and asserting institutional authority, depending on situational demands. In crisis contexts such as a government shutdown, the ability to balance solidarity-building with directive force becomes a defining feature of effective political leadership.

These findings are consistent with Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory, especially the concept of face management in situations involving Face Threatening Acts (FTAs). Within political discourse, FTAs are largely unavoidable, as leaders are often required to issue commands, impose obligations, or articulate firm policy positions. To mitigate the potential impact of these threats, the speaker frequently employs Positive Politeness strategies by offering verbal expressions of appreciation, praise, and personal closeness prior to delivering policy-related directives. Such strategies function as pragmatic “buffers” that soften the impositive force of authoritative statements.

In addition, the speaker’s tendency toward positive self-presentation such as emphasizing emotional concern or moral commitment reflects a calculated effort to maintain a favorable public image while exercising institutional power. This dual

positioning allows the speaker to appear both authoritative and empathetic, thereby reducing resistance to potentially contentious decisions. Similarly, the repeated use of first-name address forms symbolically reduces social distance and reinforces in-group membership among political actors, fostering a sense of collective responsibility during a period of political uncertainty.

The study also reveals the strategic use of Off Record politeness, particularly through humor, when addressing sensitive topics such as economic power and wealth. While such indirect remarks may be interpreted as face-threatening in certain cultural contexts, within Western political pragmatics they often serve as rapport-building devices. In this case, humor operates as a mitigating strategy that enables the speaker to engage with serious economic issues without intensifying communicative tension.

Furthermore, the shift toward Bald on Record strategies in utterances demanding immediate legislative action can be attributed to the high level of urgency associated with the government shutdown. Under such circumstances, communicative efficiency and clarity take precedence over face-saving considerations. The speaker's direct commands reflect both an assumption of legitimate authority and a moral justification grounded in the perceived national consequences of delay.

Notably, this study highlights a recurring rhetorical pattern in which strong directives are embedded within expressions of appreciation and closure. This layered use of politeness allows highly face-threatening instructions to be delivered in a manner that minimizes political friction and increases the likelihood of acceptance. Overall, the findings demonstrate that politeness in political discourse is not a fixed ethical norm, but a flexible and context-sensitive communicative resource that adapts to shifting power relations, urgency, and audience composition. Through this analysis, the study extends the application of politeness theory to contemporary political discourse conducted within digitally mediated environments.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that politeness functions as a strategic and indispensable resource in political communication, particularly during periods of institutional crisis. The analysis of the government speech on legislative transition and shutdown issues demonstrates that the speaker relies predominantly on Positive Politeness strategies (65%) to maintain institutional legitimacy and strengthen solidarity among internal party members. Through the use of in-group identity markers, such as first-name address forms and public expressions of appreciation, the speaker effectively mitigates the Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) that are inherent in high-stakes political negotiations. At the same time, the findings reveal a notable shift toward Bald on Record strategies (15%) when the speaker addresses urgent and non-negotiable policy demands, including the reopening of the government and the termination of the filibuster. This shift indicates that, within the pragmatics of statecraft, communicative efficiency and authoritative clarity may temporarily outweigh face-saving considerations when national stability is perceived to be at risk.

The implications of this study highlight the importance of pragmatic competence for political leaders, particularly in balancing expressions of empathy with the exercise of institutional authority. Politeness, in this context, is not merely an ethical norm but a flexible communicative tool that adapts to urgency, power relations, and audience expectations. Nevertheless, this research is subject to certain limitations. The analysis focuses on a single publicly broadcast political speech delivered via YouTube, which may not fully capture the dynamics of private or closed-door political negotiations. In addition, the study examines a limited number of utterance segments, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Future research is therefore encouraged to conduct comparative analyses across different political ideologies, communication platforms, or cultural contexts. Examining how politeness strategies operate across various digital media, such as Twitter or TikTok, as well as how they are perceived in different sociocultural settings, may offer deeper insights into the evolving nature of political discourse.

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