

THEORIZING APPROPRIATE POLITENESS PATTERN IN THE SELECTED ACADEMIC SETTING

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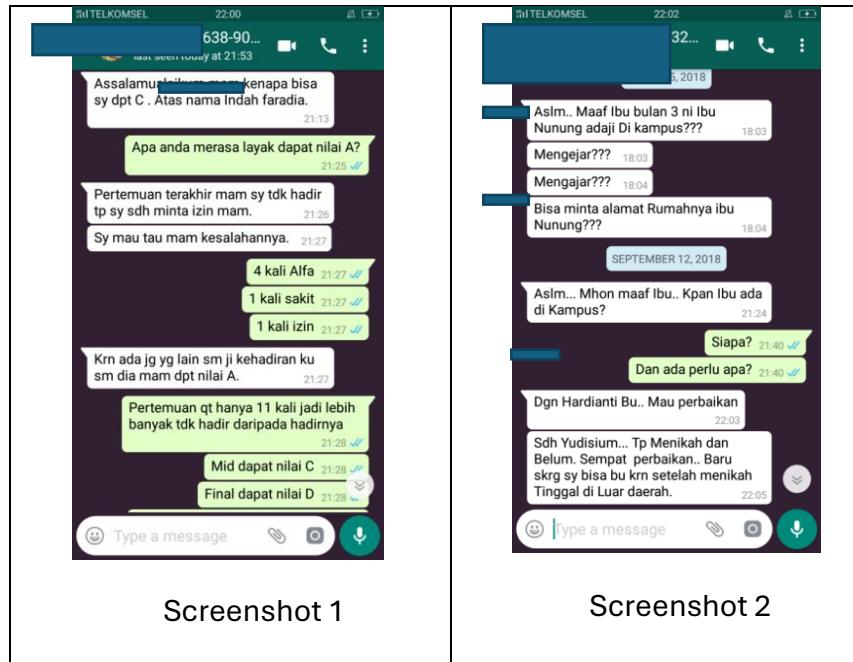
Abstract: Since human communicates with each other through language, communication becomes a crucial part of human life. Therefore, it is essential for people to understand both the grammatical and cultural rules of the language they are using to avoid miscommunication. However, research shows that unsuccessful communication frequently occurs between lecturers and students in academic context. This study was conducted to generate a grounded theory of appropriate politeness pattern to be followed by both lecturers and students in communication. Seven lecturers from different social and educational background, along with their students, were observed and interviewed to obtain the relevant data. Qualitative data analysis was performed using grounded theory methods. The findings formulate an appropriate politeness pattern agreed upon by both lecturers and students in academic communication, referred to as "compromised politeness pattern". This pattern consists of four principles: academism, simplicity, responsiveness, and considerateness. Lecturers and students confirmed that this pattern met their expectations for communication standards in an academic context. Therefore, this pattern was expected to serve as a general guideline for lecturer-student interactions to achieve successful communication and, ultimately, to avoid miscommunication and offense, particularly in academic setting.

Keywords: academic setting, politeness, politeness patterns

1. INTRODUCTION

Politeness theory posits that power, social distance, and the intrinsic severity of a face-threatening act are predictors of how much remedial linguistic work an individual will use. Speakers who are lower in relative power, socially distant, or communicating severe face threats are predicted to use greater degrees of politeness (Morand, 2000). In Indonesia, as in many other cultures, the relationship between students and teachers involves a power differential. Students usually perceive their lecturers as having an authoritative, higher-power role. As a result, students are more likely to employ politeness strategies when communicating with their instructors, both in face to face and in mediated communication.

However, some research has reported that many students display problematic behaviours in the classroom, such as reading, drawing, or doing homework unrelated to the lesson, as found by Sun and Shek (2012). Additionally, the development of communication technology has introduced a phenomenon where students use electronic devices like mobile phone or smartphone to text people inside or outside classroom, play electronic games, surf the web, or listen to music. The following student's messages exemplify politeness issues in mediated communication:



(Source: screenshot of lecturers' WhatsApp message)

The first screenshot shows a student questioning why they received a “C” in a subject. The manner in which the student asked triggered a politeness issue from the lecturer’s perspective. The second screenshot shows the student texting the lecturer, inquiring about lecturer’s position and address. This, too, triggered a politeness issue, as the student excessive punctuations, which made the lecturer offended for feel as if they were being interrogated. Moreover, both messages were considered overly direct, whereas Indonesian culture is known for its indirectness.

These examples demonstrate how lecturer-student interactions and communication become unsuccessful, leading to strained personal and academic relations. Preliminary interviews I conducted with several lecturers reveals that many believed the closer students are to their lecturers, the less polite they become. Consequently, some lecturers choose to maintain distance and emphasize their authority when interacting with students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past two decades, significant attention has been given to the study of linguistic and semantic politeness in practice. Despite numerous studies on politeness, the definition remains unclear and often varies across cultures. For instance, in Chinese culture, the first response to receiving a present is often a ritualized ‘no’, as it considered rude to accept a gift immediately, as if the recipient had taken the gift for granted (Gu, 1990). This concept of politeness may differ in other cultures.

Thus, politeness principle can vary depending on the situation and culture. Reiter (2000) suggests that politeness is not an inherent characteristic of an action but rather arises from an interactional relationship. This relationship is based on a standard that is shared, developed and reproduced by individuals within a social group. Werkhofer (1992) similarly views politeness as the power of a symbolic medium shaped by individual speakers, representing social standards of behaviour.

Both researchers' views of politeness have once again confirmed the need to contextualize investigations.

Politeness is a communicative behaviour commonly found in human languages and cultures, making it a universal phenomenon in human society. Leech (2014) describes politeness as a value transaction between interlocutors that is strongly determined by context and may vary from one culture to another. He distinguished two forms of politeness: **neg-politeness** (applied to reduce the possibility of giving offense) and **pos-politeness** (designed to supply some positive value to the interlocutors).

Leech (2014) states that politeness is actually a value transaction between interlocutors, strongly determined by given situations, and may vary from one culture to another. It takes two forms, which Leech labeled as **neg-politeness** and **pos-politeness**. In making this distinction, he borrowed from Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness, suggesting slightly different terminology due to confusion that arose in the application of their terms.

Lakoff (1973, p. 64) interprets politeness as "forms of behavior developed in societies to reduce friction in personal interaction." Holmes (1995, pp. 4-5) describes politeness as "behavior which is somewhat formal and distancing, with the intention not to intrude or impose." According to Holmes, "being polite means expressing respect toward the person you are speaking to and avoiding offending them." Sifianou (1992, p. 82) sees politeness as a means of "restraining feelings and emotions to avoid conflict." Yule (1996) adds that politeness is a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate human interaction by minimizing potential conflict. In other words, politeness helps avoid conflict that may arise in daily communication.

Kasper (1990) defines politeness as a set of strategies "to defuse danger and minimize antagonism." Hill et al. (1986) consider politeness "one of the constraints on human interaction, whose purpose is to consider others' feelings, establish mutual comfort, and promote rapport." Once again, politeness is defined as behavior that promotes positive interactional qualities such as "mutual comfort" and "rapport," ignoring the possibility that politeness could be used by the speaker to exert power over the addressee.

Fraser and Nolen (1981) provide a more enigmatic definition of politeness, describing it as "a property associated with a voluntary action." According to Lim and Han (2016), politeness is tactical behavior that addresses face wants, designed to promote a supportive atmosphere by showing respect and consideration for others. The fact that politeness represents a social norm that can be observed empirically in language and reliably analysed by means of language has long made it an important object of study in linguistics. The result shows that the questions of politeness have been tackled in every linguistic field of enquiry (Watts et al., 2005).

Politeness, as a social norm observable in language and analyzable through linguistic tools, has long been a significant subject of study in linguistics. Research has shown that politeness can be studied across various linguistic fields of inquiry (Watts et al., 2005).

2.1 Politeness Rules - Robin Lakoff

Lakoff was one of the pioneers in researching politeness. Her theory of politeness is structured upon Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle (CP) and Maxims of Conversation. Grice argues that all conversationalists have a propensity to cooperate with each other to achieve effective communication. Grice's Cooperative Principle

consists of four maxims: quantity, quality, relation, and manner. These maxims indicate that for effective communication, people should be informative, truthful, relevant, and avoid ambiguity (Grice, 1989).

Expanding on Grice's views, Lakoff (1973) proposes three rules of politeness: (1) formality: keep aloof; (2) deference: give options; and (3) camaraderie: show sympathy. Lakoff further argues that "the rules of politeness may differ dialectically in applicability, but their basic forms remain the same universally" (1973). Lakoff claims that Grice's main concern—clarity in conversation—falls under her first rule of politeness (formality). It is generally accepted that since Grice claims universality for his conversational rules, Lakoff is similarly suggesting the universal applicability of her politeness rules.

Although Lakoff does not explicitly define what she considers "politeness," it can be inferred from her politeness model that being polite means "thinking about what is good for others and avoiding actions that may harm them." However, according to Brown (1976), Lakoff's analysis is too rigid regarding what constitutes politeness. Tannen (1985) argues that Lakoff's politeness rules do not adequately explain the complexity of the phenomenon, especially since some terms (e.g., "aloof" and "informal") are not clearly defined. Watts (2003) further points out that Lakoff's theory does not explain how speakers form sentences that are classified as "polite." Some critiques of Lakoff's principles have fed into later research, such as Geoffrey Leech's work.

2.2 Politeness Principles - Geoffrey Leech

Like Lakoff, Leech builds his pragmatic theory on Grice's conversational principles. In his work, politeness is seen as a regulative factor in interaction and a key explanation for why people convey meaning indirectly. Leech emphasizes the importance of the speaker's communicative goal, focusing on "goal-oriented speech situations" where the speaker uses language to produce a particular effect on the hearer (Leech, 1983). He defines politeness as **interpersonal rhetoric** and introduces the Politeness Principle (PP) alongside Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) and the Irony Principle (IP).

Leech's PP is designed to "minimize (all things being equal) the expression of impolite beliefs and maximize (all things being equal) the expression of polite beliefs" (1983). The PP, like Grice's CP, consists of several maxims: tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy. According to Leech, speakers should act in the best interest of others, minimizing the chance of not doing so.

Although Leech offers a more detailed analysis of politeness, his theory is not without criticism. Fraser (1990) argues that Leech's principle is too theoretical, leaving open too many uncertainties about how the maxims should be applied. Mey (1993) suggests that to determine whether an act is polite or impolite, the social hierarchy of the speaker and hearer and the context must be considered. These critiques highlight the need for further consideration of cultural and situational contexts in Leech's theory.

2.3 Politeness Theory – Penelope Brown & Stephen Levinson

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is one of the most widely recognized in the field. Their theory is rooted in the concept of **face**, drawing from Goffman's (1967) seminal study. Face refers to the positive social value a person claims during social

interaction. Brown and Levinson argue that face is the primary motivation behind politeness. In their theory, politeness strategies are used universally to facilitate social interaction, which include **positive politeness**, **negative politeness**, and **off-record** strategies.

Positive politeness refers to showing appreciation for the hearer's needs and desires, emphasizing common ground and cooperation between the speaker and hearer. Negative politeness, on the other hand, seeks to minimize imposition on the hearer, giving them options and respecting their autonomy. The off-record strategy involves making statements indirectly, leaving room for interpretation by the hearer.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research employed **constructivist grounded theory**, based on Charmaz's work, which emphasizes the role of the researcher in the process of theory development. The focus was on understanding how people construct meaning and interpret their experiences, rather than on discovering an objective truth. The process involves a reflexive and iterative approach to data collection, coding, and analysis, aiming to develop categories grounded in the data and the researcher's interpretation. The categories are then compared and synthesized to generate a theory that accounts for multiple perspectives and interpretations of the phenomenon being studied.

The process of conducting research with grounded theory involved the following steps:

- 1) **Determining objectives:** The focus of this research was to formulate an appropriate politeness pattern agreed upon by both lecturers and students.
- 2) **Selecting participants and collecting data:** Seven lecturers from the English department were selected based on predetermined criteria—three females and four males with different educational and cultural backgrounds. The students selected as participants were those taught by the seven lecturers. Data were collected through observation and interviews. The participants were observed during the teaching and learning process, and interviews were conducted to gather perceptions about politeness in an academic context.
- 3) **Analyzing the data:** The data from observation and interviews were transcribed.
- 4) **Generating categories and codes:** The transcribed data were coded, categorized, and displayed to reflect the experiences of the participants accurately.
- 5) **Refining and developing the theory:** The theory was refined and developed to provide a comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon.
- 6) **Validating the theory:** The theory was validated by testing it against new data and seeking feedback from peers and participants.
- 7) **Writing up and disseminating the findings.**

4. FINDINGS

In the following explanation of findings, lecturers are labelled based on their personal and educational background: FL1 (Female Lecturer, senior, Ph.D.), FL2 (Female Lecturer, junior, Ph.D.), FL3 (Female Lecturer, senior, M.Ed), FL4 (Female Lecturer, junior, M.Ed), ML1 (Male Lecturer, senior, Ph.D), ML2 (Male Lecturer, junior, Ph.D), and ML3 (Male Lecturer, junior, M.Ed)—it has been explained in the previous

chapter that male lecturer, senior, M.Ed. is not available, while students are labeled as S1, S2, ... S42 or Ss when more than one student produce utterances together.

The findings of the research, based on interviews and observations, led to the formulation of politeness patterns that are appropriate for the academic context, particularly at Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar, where the research was conducted. Four politeness patterns were accepted and agreed upon by both lecturers and students, which were termed the **Compromised Politeness Patterns**. These patterns were reconfirmed with the lecturers and students, and it was agreed that they met the communication standards expected in academic settings, both in direct and mediated communication.

Here are some responses from the participants:

ML1 : *"Saya sudah baca dan susah menambah karena sudah lengkap. Hahahaha."* (I have read and it's already complete (laughter)).

ML3 : *"Pas mi kayaknya, kak. Mauka iya mahasiswa jangan cuek dan pura-pura lupa kalau ada tugasnya, karena kadang mereka kompak satu kelas menyangkal bilang ada tugas hahahaha."* (It's enough, I guess. Actually I want the students to be not ignorant with their tasks.)

Note: It has been included in 'response' pattern

ML4 : *"Kalau saya mantapmi kak"* (For me, it's enough)

FL1 : *"Ok mi Bu (thumbs up emoji)"* (It's already good, Ma'am)

S1 : *"Menurut saya mungkin bisa ditambah mam: Students expect the lecturer deal with the excuse such as: students get accident, and other external factor that suddenly happen."* (I think to add some more, Ma'am. Students expect the lecturer deal with the excuse such as the students get accident, or other external factors that may suddenly happen)

Note: It has been included in 'considerateness' pattern

S4 : *"Tabe mam, menurut saya mulai dari academism, simpilicity, response dan considerateness semuanya sudah termasuk pattern of politeness in academic setting yang baik mam untuk di aplikasikan oleh siswa maupun dosen mam agar terjalin komunikasi yang lancar dan baik mam."* (Excuse me, Ma'am. I think, all is already become good politeness pattern to be applied by lecturers and students to produce good communication, Ma'am)

S5 : *"Tabe Mam, menurut saya sudah sesuai pola kesopanan dalam komunikasi terhadap mahasiswa dan dosen Mam."* (Excuse me, Ma'am. I think it already fits politeness pattern in communication between lecturers and students, Ma'am)

S9 : *"Tiga hal yang menjadi kebutuhan utama mahasiswa (respon yang cepat, kejelasan informasi dari dosen, serta simpati atas kebutuhan) sudah terakomodir didalam artikel tersebut."* (three kinds of students' main needs (quick respon, clear information, and sympathy for needs) are already covered in that pattern)

S10 : The patterns have met the communication standards between lecturers and students. Eventhough there are a few lecturers who are still very difficult to respond to their students when things are important.

S19 : It has met the students' need. Therefore, I really hope that all lecturers and students at Muhammadiyah University of Makassar apply these points, particularly in response point.

S27 : As an active student, I rarely communicate with lecturers, both offline and online. But after reading the patterns, it is something that is very necessary between lecturers and students.

S36 : All points are good; really hope both students and lecturers could apply them.

S37 : Regarding the questionnaire I read, these points were very good. And here students and lecturers only need to apply it. So that communication is good and not ambiguous.

S38 : According to my personal view and experience that has occurred in the field, our wishes have been accommodated and we really hope that lecturers could apply that.

S39 : In my opinion, sometimes we have to be more patient and understanding when contacting our lecturers to get various responses, starting from being quickly responded to slowly, even being ignored because the supervisor has activities or other activities. However, as much as possible, the lecturers and students understand and understand each other's needs.

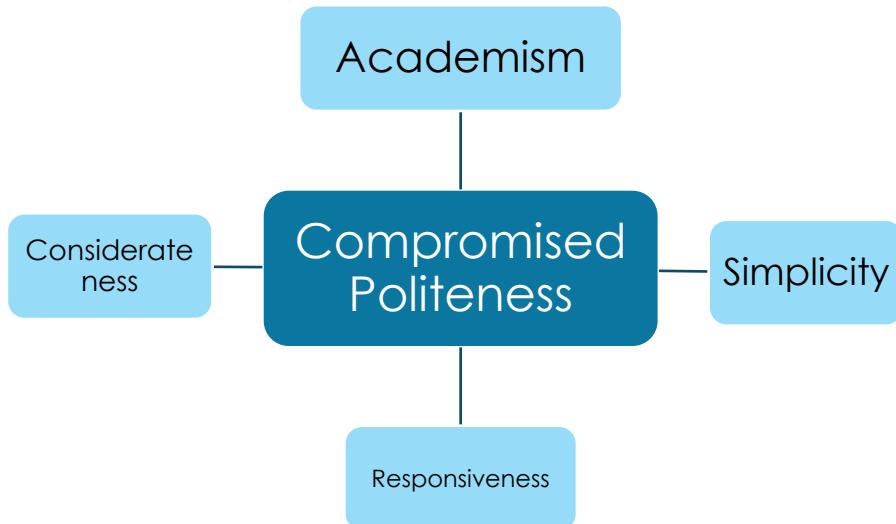
Note: It has actually been included in 'considerateness' pattern

S40 : Based on the four patterns of politeness in communicating between lecturers and students in the academic world, in my opinion it is very appropriate because it has arranged how to communicate in accordance with the context of religion, culture, and university regulations. These four things will become a reference for students and lecturers in their communication or interaction.

S41 : Based on the four patterns of politeness in terms of student and lecturer communication, I think the four patterns above meet the criteria in terms of communicating between lecturers and students, because these four patterns cover a variety of good things, in terms of religion, culture, and communication rules for lecturers and students previously arranged by the university. This can be a reference for students and lecturers in terms of communication.

These responses indicate that both students and lecturers were satisfied with the formulated patterns. Most agreed that the patterns suited their expectations for a polite communication model between lecturers and students. Those who did not provide detailed feedback simply agreed with a brief response, such as "Yes, Ma'am." Therefore, the four patterns of politeness can be clearly presented in the following diagram:

Diagram 1. Politeness pattern



The above diagram describes the politeness pattern that accommodates lecturers and students' expectation in communication. Here are the explanations of each part:

4.1 Academism

The first politeness pattern identified was **academism**, which was perceived as formality in academic communication. Lecturers expect students to behave and communicate formally, particularly within academic settings like the classroom. Similarly, students feel comfortable when they communicate formally with lecturers. This formal communication does not strictly require the use of the national standard language (e.g., Bahasa Indonesia), but students and lecturers may use local dialects as long as they respect local norms and values. When communicating in English, the use of slang should be avoided.

Academism in this context also includes performance, such as coming to class on time, submitting assignments before deadlines, respecting lecturers, and dressing formally according to university regulations for both male and female students.

4.2 Simplicity

The second politeness pattern is **simplicity**, meaning communication should be clear and leave no room for ambiguity. Lecturers expect students to be straightforward in delivering their communicative intentions, especially when communicating through media. For instance, since lecturers may not remember all students, a clear self-introduction is required at the beginning of the communication. Lecturers want students to introduce themselves and state their purpose clearly and concisely.

On the other hand, students expect lecturers to be equally clear in their communication. For instance, when students ask if they can consult, some lecturers only say they are in their office without clarifying if the students can come. Therefore,

clarity and simplicity in expressing communicative purposes are essential for avoiding confusion in academic communication.

4.3 Responsiveness

The third politeness pattern is **responsiveness**, which refers to timely and appropriate responses to the interlocutor's communicative function. Students often report that lecturers fail to respond, especially in mediated communication (e.g., text messages or calls). This lack of responsiveness can lead to misunderstanding and frustration. The data analysis also revealed instances where lecturers did not respond to students' messages, leaving them in uncertainty.

Lecturers also expect students to be responsive. Sometimes, students do not answer when lecturers ask questions, either in class or during consultations. This silence can create a barrier to effective communication. Additionally, lecturers want students to act quickly on given tasks and commands, as some students tend to ignore these directives.

4.4 Considerateness

The final and perhaps most important politeness pattern is **considerateness**. Both lecturers and students expect mutual understanding and empathy. Lecturers want students to be mindful of their time and availability, for example, by making appointments before meetings and not contacting them during inappropriate times (e.g., early morning or late at night).

“Saya ingin mereka bila ingin bertemu face to face, buat janji lewat WA atau SMS, kalau mau berbicara agak panjang, pilih waktu, jangan siang-siang atau terlalu pagi, atau sudah malam, jadi walaupun ada teknologi penghubung tetapi jangan itu menjadi sarana utama karena lain rasanya kalau kita berkomunikasi face to face.” (If students want to meet, they should make appointment through WA or SMS. If they want to talk long time, they should be aware of time, not in middle day, or early morning, or late night. So, even though there is technology, but it should not be the main tool, because it is different from communicating face to face) (ML1).

Similarly, students expect lecturers to sympathize with their circumstances. For instance, they may need a quick response due to external pressures, such as deadlines or emergencies. Students also hope that lecturers will accommodate legitimate excuses, such as accidents, family illness, or other sudden external factors.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of this study, particularly the misunderstandings observed between lecturers and students, emphasize the importance of formulating a clear politeness pattern for the academic setting. Mahmud et al. (2019) noted that communication in educational contexts, such as research seminars, requires politeness strategies. The politeness patterns formulated in this study align with various established theories, such as those proposed by Lakoff (1973), Grice (1978), Brown & Levinson (1987), and Leech (1983), forming the theoretical foundation for analyzing politeness in lecturer-student interactions.

The first pattern, **academism**, aligns with Lakoff's (1973) politeness rules, which include formality, deference, and camaraderie: show sympathy. The first rule is realized once a sense of distance is created between the speaker and hearer by the speaker. It results in ensuring that status distinctions are adhered to, that no informality develops, the relationships remain purely formal. In this pattern, academism or formality in communication includes many things; not only the way students and lecturers communicate, but also the content of the communication itself, such as greeting when the students and lecturers meet, and it should be initiated by students. The next is not interrupting when the speakers speak, particularly when the lecturers speak, avoiding rude words, and not doing other activities when the speakers speak. It is also categorized as communication style as Spencer-Oatey (2008) suggests that a communication style is a manner of language use that exhibits clusters of co-occurring features. All aspects of language use and interactional behaviour can be reflected in the style, including choice of vocabulary and syntax, prosody and paralinguistic behaviour (e.g. intonation, stress, tone of voice, pitch, pacing, pausing and loudness) as well as non-verbal behaviour (e.g. gestures, spatial relations and touch).

The second pattern, **simplicity**, is relevant to the Grice's Cooperative Principle. Grice (1978) proposed a framework to understand some of the implicit rules and strategies that facilitate normal conversation. He proposed that conversation is governed by one overarching rule, that is, the cooperative principle. According to this principle, participants make a "good faith" effort to contribute to and collaborate on the conversation as it proceeds. Grice further suggested that cooperation is augmented by a number of conversational maxims, including the maxim of quantity which requires speakers to say no more or less than is required; the maxim of quality, that demands conversationalists to say something that is true; the maxim of relevance, that asks participants to remain on topic and to avoid extraneous remarks; and the maxim of manner, which expects interlocutors to be brief, be orderly, and avoid obscurity and ambiguity. Even though Herawati (2013) found out that the Gricean maxims of Quantity and Manner are culturally dependent and differently observed in Indonesian culture, possibly because of the different notions of "quantity" and "manner" in Indonesian language culture in comparison with Anglo-American language culture(s) theoretically suggested by Grice, but it should not be thought that Indonesian people deliberately do not follow the maxim of quantity and maxim of manner because different cultures show different discourse patterns, which is a crucial point in intercultural communication. Every discourse community develops its own rules of community behaviour, which become part of their individual and group identity.

The third pattern, **responsiveness**, is closely tied to Grice's maxim of relation, which stresses staying on topic and responding appropriately. Both lecturers and students in this study expressed a need for timely responses, especially in mediated communication. Failure to respond can lead to miscommunication, frustration, and a breakdown in the student-lecturer relationship. This responsiveness is essential in both face-to-face and mediated interactions to ensure clear, respectful, and productive exchanges.

Finally, **considerateness**, the fourth pattern, is aligned with Leech's (1983) politeness principle with several additional maxims specific to politeness, namely tact, generosity, approbation, modest agreement, and sympathy. Leech maintained that the politeness principle is necessary for Grice's cooperative principle to be effective in normal conversation, supplying a negative and a positive formulation:

“minimize (other things being equal) the expression of impolite beliefs” and “maximize (other things being equal) the expression of polite beliefs” (p. 81). Leech views politeness as conflict avoidance and considers two scales to measure the degree of politeness, called “absolute” and “relative” politeness in his first treatment and reformulated as “pragmalinguistic” and “sociopragmatic” in *The Pragmatics of Politeness* (2014). The pragmalinguistic scale captures the degree of politeness of an utterance out of context, while the sociopragmatic takes into account the degree of politeness within a context.

The formulation of these four patterns—academism, simplicity, responsiveness, and considerateness—creates a comprehensive framework for politeness in academic communication. These patterns not only address the practical needs of students and lecturers but also reflect the cultural, social, and hierarchical dynamics within the university setting.

6. CONCLUSION

Based on the politeness phenomena observed in lecturer-student communication, this study formulated four politeness patterns, termed **Compromised Politeness Patterns**, that are deemed appropriate for the academic context. These patterns—**academism, simplicity, responsiveness, and considerateness**—provide a structured framework for communication between lecturers and students.

The findings of this study have two major implications: theoretical and pedagogical. Theoretically, the study contributes to the field of pragmatics by providing a new framework for understanding politeness in an academic setting. The formulation of the Compromised Politeness Patterns is expected to serve as a reference for future studies on politeness, particularly in academic environments involving face-to-face and mediated communication.

Pedagogically, the findings can guide both lecturers and students in their interactions, promoting a respectful and productive communication model. For students, understanding these patterns can help them navigate the power dynamics in their relationships with lecturers, ensuring they communicate appropriately and effectively. For lecturers, the patterns provide a guideline for understanding student expectations and managing communication, both in person and through digital media.

The growing use of mediated communication (e.g., WhatsApp, email) between lecturers and students has broader implications for how politeness norms transfer to digital platforms. As communication technology continues to evolve, further research is needed to examine how politeness strategies adapt to these new contexts and whether they lead to broader cultural or linguistic changes.

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