

An Analysis of Politeness Strategies in the Main Character Movie: Killer of the Flower Moon

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how language is used to navigate power dynamics and relationships in *Killers of the Flower Moon*, employing Brown and Levinson's politeness theory and Morand's framework on power. The analysis focuses on how characters use positive politeness to build trust, negative politeness to soften demands, bald-on-record statements to assert authority, and off-record strategies to convey concerns indirectly. Findings reveal that Hale and Ernest manipulate language to present themselves as protectors while concealing selfish motives, using religious references and promises to gain Mollie's trust and ensure her dependence. Mollie, in contrast, employs cautious, indirect speech to voice her suspicions without openly challenging the dominant power structures, reflecting her vulnerable position within a system of exploitation. The study highlights how language serves as a tool for both control and resistance, exposing the moral conflicts of the characters while underscoring the systemic injustices faced by the Osage people. These findings demonstrate the role of language in revealing hidden intentions and maintaining societal hierarchies, adding depth to the narrative's exploration of betrayal, trust, and resilience.

Keywords: *Politeness; Pragmatic; Killers of the Flower Moon*

INTRODUCTION

Killers of the Flower Moon, directed by Martin Scorsese, is a cinematic adaptation of David Grann's non-fiction book detailing the Osage murders in 1920s Oklahoma. The film not only depicts historical injustices but also examines the interpersonal relationships between the Osage people and the white settlers who sought to exploit them. The movie is rooted in Scorsese's distinct approach to storytelling, which often intertwines moral complexity with an exploration of systemic power structures. According to Rosen & Scorsese (1975), Scorsese's work consistently delves into themes of human frailty, ambition, and moral conflict, which are also central to *Killers of the Flower Moon*. This narrative approach is evident in how Scorsese balances the personal and the political, crafting a story where intimate relationships mirror broader societal injustices.

Reiter (2009) emphasizes that politeness extends beyond individual interactions, reflecting broader cultural and societal norms. This idea enriches the understanding of

Killers of the Flower Moon, were politeness strategies mirror systemic power imbalances. Politeness, as seen in the characters' interactions, becomes a tool to navigate, reinforce, and sometimes resist these imbalances. Brown (2015) adds to this by highlighting the connection between politeness and power structures, showing how language choices can assert dominance or foster relationships. In the film, such dynamics are portrayed through Ernest's use of positive politeness to gain Mollie's trust while masking his exploitative motives. This duality of politeness strategies underscores the complex interplay between language, power, and societal expectations.

Tejeda (2024) further highlights how the film uniquely blends historical accuracy with cinematic drama, painting a vivid portrayal of the Osage community's struggles against exploitation and betrayal. Tejeda underscores the film's ability to humanize its characters while exposing the dehumanizing structures of systemic greed and racism. These contextual elements not only amplify the historical significance of the story but also make the film a fertile ground for linguistic and sociocultural analysis, particularly in understanding how language reflects and perpetuates power dynamics within the narrative.

Tatsuki (1998) explains that movies are a useful way to study how people use politeness in conversations. Films show real-life speaking patterns and give clear examples of how characters use politeness strategies, such as positive and negative politeness, bald-on-record statements, and off-record hints. These strategies help characters handle social situations, express emotions, or reach their goals. Movies also add extra clues like body language, tone of voice, and cultural context, which make it easier to understand how language affects relationships. Tatsuki's ideas help us study Killers of the Flower Moon, where politeness strategies show how characters use language to control, manipulate, or resist others. The film highlights how language reflects personal intentions and the power struggles in society, making it a good example for studying politeness and power.

The language used in the film reflects deeper power structures, fitting with broader sociolinguistic ideas. Reiter (2009) explains how politeness reflects societal expectations and norms, a concept that aligns with the interactions in the film. Morand (2000) explains that language works as a way to show power, especially in hierarchical relationships, where leaders often use specific strategies to show authority, and subordinates use polite words to show respect. This pattern appears in the film's portrayal of the Osage community and white settlers, where politeness is both a way to manipulate and to resist. Similarly, Person et al. (1995) point out that politeness can promote harmony, but it can also block direct and clear communication in critical moments. This idea is seen in the film when characters use indirect language and formal politeness to hide deeper exploitation and moral struggles.

Isabella et al. (2022) explored how movies act as effective tools for teaching politeness strategies by presenting relatable, contextualized examples of language use. They highlighted that films like Killers of the Flower Moon provide rich material for studying Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, as the characters' dialogues reflect intricate interpersonal dynamics and broader societal norms. For example, Ernest

employs positive politeness techniques, such as giving compliments, expressing shared values, and demonstrating attentiveness to Mollie, to build trust and create a sense of closeness. However, this outward display of goodwill masks his manipulative intentions, showing how politeness strategies can be a facade for deeper exploitation. Conversely, Mollie's reserved and indirect language use illustrates how politeness is shaped by cultural and situational constraints, serving as both a tool for self-protection and a means to navigate power dynamics in unequal relationships. Through these interactions, the film mirrors societal hierarchies and the complex role of language in maintaining or challenging them.

Archia (2014) similarly emphasized the role of positive politeness in movies, specifically focusing on *Carnage*, to show how these strategies help manage social interactions and conflicts. In *Killers of the Flower Moon*, a comparable pattern emerges, where positive politeness is used to project solidarity and foster trust. Ernest's behavior, such as expressing concern for Mollie's well-being and appearing attentive to her needs, demonstrates how politeness can be weaponized to manipulate emotions and relationships. These strategies reflect deeper societal trends where language serves as a double-edged sword: a tool for exploitation by those in power and a subtle form of resistance for those marginalized. Like Archia's observations in *Carnage*, the interactions in *Killers of the Flower Moon* underscore the dual role of politeness in communication, both as a means of preserving harmony and as a mechanism for asserting or challenging control.

Research on politeness strategies in movies shows how language reflects power and character dynamics. Hutaurok (2018) highlights how characters in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* use language to build relationships and address challenges. Similarly, Probosini (2020) examines *The Devil Wears Prada*, revealing how politeness strategies in workplace interactions disguise power imbalances—a theme echoed in *Killers of the Flower Moon*. Leihitu & Triprihatmini (2021) study *Freedom Writers*, demonstrating how the protagonist's politeness fosters trust and balance between authority and care, while Abdul (2013) analyzes *Twilight* to reveal how politeness reflects emotions and intentions. These studies collectively show how politeness strategies highlight social and power dynamics, providing a framework for analyzing *Killers of the Flower Moon*. This paper applies Brown and Levinson's theory to examine how characters use politeness to achieve their goals, conceal motives, and assert control, revealing deeper links between language, power, and exploitation in the narrative.

This study explores how politeness strategies help characters in *Killers of the Flower Moon* handle social and power dynamics, focusing on manipulation, trust, and betrayal between the Osage community and white settlers. It examines how linguistic politeness works as a tool for both control and resistance while considering how cultural and situational contexts affect its use and meaning. The research analyzes how characters use Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies to build trust, hide intentions, and assert control. Additionally, it aims to show how these strategies highlight deeper themes of power, exploitation, and cultural conflict, offering insight into how language drives the film's story and relationships.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore how politeness strategies help characters in *Killers of the Flower Moon*. The process involves carefully picking scenes that highlight key interactions, identifying how language expresses politeness, and explaining how these strategies reveal power relationships and cultural influences. By focusing on these elements, the study aims to connect linguistic behavior with broader social themes within the film.

The research starts with choosing *Killers of the Flower Moon* because it shows strong narratives about social power and relationships. A detailed study of the film's historical and cultural background is done to give context for the analysis. Important scenes where Osage characters and white settlers interact are picked. These scenes are selected because they reveal key themes like manipulation, trust, and resistance. The selected dialogues are written down word for word. Non-verbal actions like tone, pauses, and gestures are also noted to fully understand the context.

The transcriptions are analyzed using Brown and Levinson's framework to identify examples of positive, negative, bald on record, and off-record politeness. The identified strategies are compared with findings from other research on politeness in movies. This step ensures that the study is consistent and has enough depth.

The analysis starts by grouping the dialogues based on Brown & Levinson (1987) politeness strategies. Each example is studied to understand its purpose, such as building trust, hiding true goals, or showing authority. The study then connects these examples to larger themes like power and exploitation, using Morand's focus on social hierarchy.

Brown and Levinson's politeness framework, serves as the theoretical basis for this analysis. The chosen dialogues are contextualized within the film's broader narrative to highlight their implications on character development and thematic exploration.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

ERNEST
(laughs)
We're just glad to have you
anytime...let's get you somethin' to
wet your whistle...

Data 1.

This line demonstrates positive politeness, as Ernest employs inclusive language and casual phrasing to create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. By saying, "We're just glad to have you anytime," Ernest uses the inclusive pronoun "we" to position himself as part of a welcoming group, emphasizing solidarity and reducing any sense of hierarchy or distance between himself and Mollie. The use of "anytime" conveys openness and unconditional acceptance, making Mollie feel valued and appreciated. This creates a strong sense of rapport and fosters trust in their relationship.

The phrase "let's get you somethin' to wet your whistle" reflects Ernest's attentiveness to Mollie's needs while maintaining a lighthearted tone. The use of the colloquial phrase "wet your whistle" not only makes the interaction informal and approachable but also highlights Ernest's effort to build a sense of camaraderie. Through these strategies, Ernest carefully constructs a persona of warmth and consideration, aligning with Mollie's expectations of care and attentiveness. However, his use of such language may also be interpreted as strategic, as it allows him to maintain Mollie's trust while masking his deeper, self-serving intentions.

ERNEST
They thick as thieves...

Data 2.

This line reflects off-record politeness, as Ernest uses an idiomatic expression to comment indirectly on the closeness of others. The phrase "thick as thieves" is intentionally vague, avoiding direct mention of any specific individuals or context. This indirectness allows Ernest to maintain ambiguity, making the statement open to interpretation. By refraining from explicitly addressing the subject of the conversation, Ernest avoids committing himself to a definitive stance, which aligns with off-record strategies where speakers leave room for plausible deniability.

The informal tone of "thick as thieves" also helps Ernest maintain a casual, nonchalant demeanor, which can serve to deflect attention away from more serious underlying issues. The phrase's figurative nature implies a strong bond or loyalty between the individuals being referred to, yet Ernest chooses not to elaborate further. This choice minimizes the risk of confrontation or deeper scrutiny into the relationships he may be hinting at.

MOLLIE
(pure Mollie)
I'm sure of it. His Uncle lead him
the wrong way, but not to kill anyone,
and (impossible for her to believe)
not to try to put me in my own
deathbed. I want to talk to my
husband.

Data 3.

This line shows negative politeness and off-record politeness, as Mollie tries to express her doubts carefully while still holding on to her trust in Ernest. Her words show both her hesitation to fully accuse him and her effort to make sense of the situation. Mollie starts with negative politeness when she says, "I'm sure of it. His Uncle lead him the wrong way, but not to kill anyone." She avoids blaming Ernest directly and instead points to his uncle as the one who influenced him. By saying "lead him the wrong way," Mollie softens the idea of Ernest's guilt and presents him as someone who made mistakes

because of his uncle. The phrase "but not to kill anyone" shows her need to believe that Ernest still has moral boundaries.

"I want to talk to my husband" is a bald on record statement. Mollie speaks clearly and directly, showing her intention to confront Ernest. The phrase "my husband" shows her emotional attachment and determination to get answers while still holding on to their relationship.

ERNEST
That's not your concern.
He puts his hand protectively on Mollie.

Data 4.

This line reflects a mix of bald on record and positive politeness strategies, demonstrating Ernest's attempt to assert authority while simultaneously softening his control through a reassuring gesture. The statement, "That's not your concern," is a clear example of bald on record politeness. Ernest speaks directly and unambiguously, leaving no room for interpretation. By excluding Mollie from the matter and emphasizing that it does not involve her, he establishes boundaries and asserts control over the situation. This straightforward approach prioritizes clarity and efficiency but risks creating distance by dismissing Mollie's potential concerns.

In contrast, Ernest's physical action—placing his hand protectively on Mollie—aligns with positive politeness strategies. The gesture serves to communicate care and emotional support, counterbalancing the bluntness of his words. While his verbal statement excludes Mollie from involvement, his non-verbal action conveys a desire to reassure and maintain their emotional connection. This protective touch underscores his role as her caregiver, showing that despite withholding information, he values her trust and wellbeing.

ERNEST
(pugnacious,
steadfast)
You a pure bullshitter with a white
hat...You haven't even talked to Uncle
Bill...I got nothin' to tell because
there ain't nothing to tell...Never
going to be nothing to tell because I
didn't do nothing to tell about...!

Data 5.

This dialogue reflects bald on record politeness paired with an aggressive tone. Ernest's choice of words is intentionally direct, confrontational, and devoid of any mitigating language. His steadfast and defensive tone emphasizes his frustration and refusal to engage further, leaving no room for ambiguity.

Ernest opens with the provocative statement, "You a pure bullshitter with a white hat," which sets the combative tone of the exchange. This remark is a direct insult that dismisses the other person's credibility, creating a strong defensive position for himself.

By using bald on record politeness in such a confrontational way, Ernest signals that he feels cornered and is attempting to assert dominance in the interaction.

The repetition of "I got nothin' to tell because there ain't nothing to tell... Never going to be nothing to tell because I didn't do nothing to tell about...!" reinforces his defensiveness. The repeated negatives emphasize his claim of innocence while simultaneously shutting down further questioning. The structure of his statement, with its circular logic, reflects both his frustration and his attempt to avoid engaging with the content of the accusations. The informal and colloquial tone ("ain't nothing" and "didn't do nothing") further highlights his emotional state and unwillingness to participate in a formal discussion.

MOLLIE

Either were my sister or mother -- or
a whole bunch of other people around
here...this place is pure evil and the
devil's taking his due....

Data 6.

This line shows off-record politeness as Mollie uses indirect and symbolic language to express her pain and anger. Instead of directly accusing anyone, she refers to the harm suffered by her family and community. By saying, "Either were my sister or mother -- or a whole bunch of other people around here," Mollie points to the widespread suffering without naming specific individuals responsible. This general statement allows her to convey her frustration and grief without escalating conflict.

Mollie's words become even more symbolic when she says, "this place is pure evil and the devil's taking his due." This metaphor suggests deep corruption and inevitable suffering, reflecting her sense of despair and hopelessness. The phrase avoids direct blame and instead highlights the moral decay of her surroundings, making her criticism more broad and less confrontational.

ERNEST

(pleasantly)

Every Sunday when you go to that
Church you should thank the good Lord
you find me to keep you safe from all
them scoundrels wanting to steal
everything you got from you. And I
sure must love you something fierce
because with that "headright" they got
I won't get spit when you die...

Data 7.

This line is a combination of positive politeness and bald on record politeness, as Ernest balances flattery and affection with a blunt mention of Mollie's wealth and inheritance. His words reflect both manipulative intent and an attempt to maintain closeness.

Ernest begins with positive politeness by saying, "Every Sunday when you go to that Church you should thank the good Lord you find me to keep you safe." He positions himself as Mollie's protector, implying that she owes her safety to his presence. The reference to religious values ("thank the good Lord") aligns his statement with Mollie's faith, which adds an emotional and moral dimension to his words. This strategy creates a sense of trust and dependency, as Ernest portrays himself as her ally against external threats.

The tone shifts when he states, "And I sure must love you something fierce because with that 'headright' they got I won't get spit when you die." Here, bald on record politeness is evident as Ernest directly mentions Mollie's "headright" wealth and his lack of inheritance. While the phrase "I sure must love you something fierce" maintains the affectionate tone, the bluntness of "I won't get spit when you die" reveals his materialistic motives. This stark contrast between his professed love and his acknowledgment of her wealth undermines the sincerity of his earlier words.

ERNEST (cont'd)
And what have you been doing with the
drinks, pouring them down the
drain...?

Data 8.

This line is a clear example of negative politeness, as Mollie carefully expresses her concern in a manner that avoids direct accusations or overly definitive statements. The tone of her words reflects her unease and fear, but it is delivered in a way that maintains a sense of caution and deference to the uncertainty of the situation.

Mollie begins with the factual statement, "I haven't heard from her in three days," which establishes the basis for her worry. By focusing on an observable fact rather than immediately jumping to conclusions, she avoids creating unnecessary alarm. This factual approach allows her to share her concern without imposing her emotions too strongly on others. It also serves as a subtle invitation for others to validate or acknowledge the significance of the situation.

The second part of her statement, "I got an awful troublesome feeling something bad has happened," deepens the emotional weight of her words while still maintaining a degree of restraint. By framing her fear as a personal feeling—"I got an awful troublesome feeling"—Mollie softens the impact of her concern and acknowledges the possibility that she might be mistaken. The vague phrase "something bad has happened" avoids specificity, allowing her to convey her anxiety without making direct accusations or definitive claims. This approach demonstrates her respect for the uncertainty of the situation and her desire not to overstep or impose unnecessary conclusions on others.

This study finds similarities with past research on politeness strategies in films but also highlights unique aspects of *Killers of the Flower Moon*. For example, Hutauruk's (2018) research on *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* shows how politeness builds relationships and resolves conflicts. Similarly, in this study, Ernest uses positive

politeness to gain Mollie's trust. However, while politeness in Harry Potter fosters genuine connections, Ernest uses it to manipulate and hide his selfish motives, making trust a tool for exploitation. Likewise, Probosini's (2020) study on *The Devil Wears Prada* shows how polite language can mask power imbalances in the workplace. In *Killers of the Flower Moon*, this strategy also hides systemic exploitation, as Hale and Ernest use polite words to appear caring while they pursue their own gain.

Other studies, like Leihitu and Triprihatmini's (2021) analysis of *Freedom Writers*, show how politeness creates trust and balances authority with empathy. Mollie also uses politeness to express her doubts indirectly, but her politeness reflects her position as a victim of exploitation, unlike the empowered characters in *Freedom Writers*. Abdul's (2013) study of *Twilight* explains how politeness shows emotions and intentions, a finding also seen in Mollie's use of negative politeness to protect her relationship with Ernest. However, *Killers of the Flower Moon* adds a deeper context of systemic injustice and cultural conflict, making politeness a way to survive and resist exploitation. These comparisons show how politeness strategies adapt to different settings, revealing the roles of power, trust, and conflict in film narratives.

CONCLUSION

Using Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, the research explores how language serves as a tool to navigate trust, manipulation, and authority within the story's broader themes of systemic exploitation and cultural conflict. Ernest employs positive politeness to build a false sense of security and connection with Mollie, leveraging cultural and religious cues to present himself as her protector while concealing his self-serving motives. His bald on record statements, however, bluntly reveal his underlying greed, underscoring the stark divide between his outward affection and internal intentions. Mollie, in contrast, uses negative and off-record politeness to express her doubts and fears indirectly, reflecting her precarious position as a victim within a system that seeks to exploit her trust and heritage. By analyzing these linguistic strategies, this study reveals the dual nature of politeness as both a means of fostering trust and a tool for manipulation. Ernest's calculated language reflects how systemic greed can masquerade as care, while Mollie's cautious speech highlights the struggles of a character caught between personal resilience and societal oppression. The findings also underscore how language operates within the larger context of systemic injustice faced by the Osage community, reflecting themes of betrayal, moral conflict, and the impact of colonial exploitation.

Through this analysis, the study illustrates how linguistic choices not only develop the narrative but also expose the deeper sociocultural realities embedded in the story. Politeness strategies in the film are not merely conversational tools but also mechanisms for domination, resistance, and survival, reflecting the nuanced interplay of power and human relationships. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of how language in cinema reveals hidden layers of character psychology, societal hierarchies, and cultural tensions, making *Killers of the Flower Moon* a rich text for sociolinguistic

and narrative analysis. This research deepens our appreciation for how language shapes and reflects the intricate dynamics of trust, betrayal, and resilience in storytelling, providing a valuable lens for examining films as cultural texts.

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