

Politeness Strategies Portrayed in *Peaky Blinders* Series

Muhammad Al Syidad Alamsyah Putra

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University,
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA
E-mail: a11200040@john.petra.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study aims to find the correlation between politeness strategies and status scale when Thomas Shelby communicates to Billy Kimber, a high-status person, and to Chester Campbell, an equal-status person, in a negotiation situation by using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategy theory and Holmes' (2013) social dimensions theory. The source of data is the *Peaky Blinders* series, season 1 episode 2, and the data are Thomas Shelby's utterances that contain politeness strategies to Billy Kimber and to Chester Campbell. The findings show that Thomas Shelby often uses negative politeness to Billy Kimber and does not use it at all to Chester Campbell. In addition, Thomas Shelby often uses one of the bald on record types to Chester Campbell compared to Billy Kimber. This study concludes that Thomas Shelby does not carelessly use politeness strategies when negotiating. Instead, Thomas Shelby considers his interlocutor's social status to choose the proper politeness strategies when negotiating. As for the future studies, the writer suggests other researchers to examine scenes other than negotiations or to identify other subjects in this series.

Keywords: *Peaky Blinders*, politeness strategies, social dimensions, status scale

INTRODUCTION

Politeness is one of the ways that a person can use to generate positive relationships with others. Politeness, according to Zamzani (2011), is an action that is done in a good and or ethical way to others. Holmes (2013) explains that the speaker can be more polite if the speaker's interlocutor has a higher status indicator, such as when a student wants to show respect to the principal. Holmes (2013) continues that the speaker can speak casually and less formally if the speaker and his/her interlocutor's status are equal. In addition, one of the interaction types is negotiation. Schatzki and Coffey (1981) states that communication is the heart of negotiation.

Peaky Blinders, the source of data, is a series about a mafia leader named Thomas Shelby. The main character is Thomas Shelby, who owns an illegal pub, casino, and bar business. In the series, Thomas Shelby wants to add other businesses to supplement his income. The writer chooses *Peaky Blinders* series due to the writer's interest in how the main character, Thomas Shelby, utilizes politeness to achieve success by negotiating with his interlocutors who have more power than he does. The writer conducts this study to examine Thomas Shelby's use of politeness strategies to Billy Kimber as a higher status person and to Chester Campbell as an equal status person.

The writer also wants to observe the differences and similarities between Thomas Shelby's utilization of politeness strategies to Billy Kimber as a higher status person and to Chester Campbell as an equal status person. The research questions are: (1) What politeness strategies are used by Thomas Shelby when negotiating with Billy Kimber as a higher-status person in the *Peaky Blinders* series? (2) What politeness strategies are used by Thomas Shelby when negotiating with Chester Campbell as an equal-status person in the *Peaky Blinders* series? (3) What are the differences and similarities in Thomas Shelby's politeness strategies to Billy

Table 2 Politeness Strategies Used by Thomas Shelby to Chester Campbell

| Thomas Shelby's Utterances to | Bald on Record | | Positive Politeness | | | | Off Record | |
|-------------------------------|----------------|---|---------------------|----|----|------|------------|----|
| | | | CMG | | CC | FH W | ICI | |
| | NM | M | At | Dg | Of | Gf | Gh | Ur |
| Chester Campbell | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

Thomas Shelby's Politeness Strategies to Billy Kimber

Based on the data analyzed by the writer, Thomas Shelby uses all types of politeness strategies: bald on record (non-minimization of face threat and minimize face threat), positive politeness (notice, attend to H; presuppose/raise/assert common ground; include both S and H in the activity; and give gifts to H), negative politeness (give deference), and off record (use rhetorical questions and be ambiguous). The examples are as follows:

- (1) Billy Kimber: "I am Billy Kimber, I run the races! You fixed one of them so I'm going to have you shot against a post."

Thomas Shelby: "Mr. Kimber. Look at it." (1.5)

The writer places this utterance with the non-minimization of face threat sub-strategy from bald on record strategy, as it shows similar characteristics. Brown and Levinson (1987) explain that this sub-strategy is designed for the speaker's direct utterances without consideration for the hearer's 'face.' In the utterance, instead of using a more elaborate utterance such as "I want you to look at that bullet," Thomas Shelby uses a more concise and direct utterance "Look at it."

- (2) Thomas Shelby: "That is my name on it. It's from the Lee family. You were also at war with the Lees, Mr. Kimber, am I right?" (1.6)

The writer assigns this utterance to presuppose/raise/assert common ground sub-strategy from positive politeness because Thomas Shelby makes assumptions about Billy Kimber that are similar to the characteristics of this sub-strategy. Brown and Levinson (1987) explain that this sub-strategy focuses on the speaker's assumptions towards other participants, such as "I had a hard time learning to drive, didn't I." In this utterance, Thomas Shelby also uses a similar utterance as Brown and Levinson's (1987) example, namely "am I right?" to express Thomas Shelby's assumption that Billy Kimber agrees with his statement and they both have problems with the Lee family. In addition, Thomas Shelby also inserts "Mr. Kimber" in his utterance to show respect, considering Thomas Shelby has a lower status than Billy Kimber.

- (3) Thomas Shelby: "I admire you, Mr. Kimber. You started with nothing, and built a legitimate business. It would be an honor to work with you, Mr. Kimber." (1.9)

Billy Kimber : “Nobody works with me. People work for me.”

The writer classifies this utterance under give deference sub-strategy from negative politeness because in his utterance, Thomas Shelby shows status difference with Billy Kimber. Brown and Levinson (1987) explain that the speaker can perform this sub-strategy by elevating the status of the hearer, such as “we look forward very much to dining with you.” Thomas Shelby uses the words “Mr. Kimber” and the utterance “It would be an honor to work with you, Mr. Kimber,” to show that Billy Kimber has a higher status than himself. This explanation is also supported by the way Thomas Shelby addresses people with equal status to him, such as “Freddie,” “Polly,” and “Inspector.”

(4) Billy Kimber’s advisor and accountant: “There were suspicious betting patterns at Kempton Park. A horse called Monahan Boy. He won by length twice and then finished last, with 3,000 pounds bet on him.”

Thomas Shelby: “Which one am I talking to? Which one of you is the boss?” (1.3)

Billy Kimber’s advisor and accountant: “I am Mr. Kimber’s adviser and accountant.”

Billy Kimber: “And I’m the fucking boss. Okay, right, end of parley. You fixed a race without my permission. You fucking Gypsy scum!”

The writer classifies Thomas Shelby’s utterance under be-ambiguous sub-strategy from off-record strategy because Billy Kimber can interpret this utterance into two things: insult or pure question. In line with Brown and Levinson’s (1987) explanation, Thomas Shelby also gives the exact characteristics of the utterance to Billy Kimber. Billy Kimber can interpret Thomas Shelby’s utterance as a form of insult because at the opening of the negotiation, Billy Kimber’s representative speaks on behalf of Billy Kimber, not Billy Kimber himself. On the other hand, Thomas Shelby speaks on behalf of his gang. Billy Kimber can feel insulted because of Thomas Shelby’s utterance, “Which one am I talking to? Which one of you is the boss,” can be interpreted as a form of insulting Billy Kimber’s position as the real boss. Even worse, he is insulted by Thomas Shelby’s side, which he considers to be the “little didicoy razor gang.” However, Billy Kimber could also interpret the utterance as a pure question because he had only heard the *Peaky Blinders* gang in passing. Therefore, Billy Kimber can assume that this ‘little didicoy razor’ gang does not know about a gang with a great leader like Billy Kimber.

Thomas Shelby’s Politeness Strategies to Chester Campbell

The types of politeness strategies used by Thomas Shelby: bald on record (non-minimization of the face threat and minimize face threat), positive politeness (notice, attend to H; avoid disagreement; offer, promise; give gifts to H), and off record (give hints and use rhetorical questions). The examples are as follows:

(1) Thomas Shelby: “You and your Specials will leave my businesses alone from now on. No more raids into our territory, no more smashing up pubs, no more lifting my runners. You turn a blind eye to all of my gambling operations.” (2.7)

Chester Campbell: “Forgive me. I don’t seem to have a pen to write down this rather long list of demands.”

Putra: Politeness Strategies Portrayed in *Peaky Blinders* Series

The writer categorizes this utterance within the non-minimization of face threat sub-strategy from bald on record strategy because Thomas Shelby uses a commanding utterance following the characteristics of this sub-strategy. Brown and Levinson (1987) explain that in employing this sub-strategy, the speaker does not think about the hearer's response and feelings towards the speaker's utterance. In addition, the speaker's utterance can damage the hearer's 'face.' Thomas Shelby uses the utterances "you and your specials will leave my businesses alone from now on" and "you turn a blind eye to all of my gambling operations" to order Chester Campbell. In addition, Thomas Shelby uses these utterances without thinking about Chester Campbell's 'face.' Instead of accepting Thomas Shelby's order, Chester Campbell's 'face' is damaged, and he rejects the command indirectly.

(2) Chester Campbell: "Freddie Thorne is at the very top of my list."

Thomas Shelby: "Cross him off. He won't be returning to the city." (2.5)

The writer classifies Thomas Shelby's utterance under minimize of face threat sub-strategy from bald on record strategy because Thomas Shelby still considers Chester Campbell's 'face,' which is his concern. In employing this sub-strategy, the speaker must consider the hearer's 'face' to avoid damaging it. Chester Campbell gives his full attention to Freddie Thorne because he is a communist leader. While Thomas Shelby asks him to erase Freddie Thorne, Chester Campbell worries that Freddie Thorne might start a rebellion in Birmingham. In addition, one of the reasons Chester Campbell's boss sends him to Birmingham is to arrest the communists. Chester Campbell could be considered incompetent to perform this mission if he excludes Freddie Thorne from his list. Therefore, instead of using the utterance "Cross him off," which makes Chester Campbell worry, Thomas Shelby adds, "He won't be returning to the city" because he considers Chester Campbell's concern.

(3) Thomas Shelby: "Inspector, I responded to your invitation, because I want us to understand each other. I am a businessman. I want to make my business successful."

Chester Campbell: "And I want my city run peacefully."

Thomas Shelby: "If the city is peaceful, business can thrive."

Chester Campbell: "So we are on the same side?"

Thomas Shelby: "I think perhaps we could be." (2.3)

The writer classifies Thomas Shelby's utterance under avoid disagreement sub-strategy from positive politeness strategy because Thomas Shelby uses an utterance that seems to agree with Chester Campbell's thought. The speaker can use this sub-strategy by avoiding disagreement with what the hearer considers to be 'right.' Although Thomas Shelby's actions seem to indicate that they are not on the same side, Thomas Shelby still uses the utterance "I think perhaps we could be" to show that he is trying to pretend to agree with Chester Campbell. For him, all his partnerships with other people are only for business.

(4) Chester Campbell: "Very well. But I would prefer if we don't shake hands on it."

Thomas Shelby: "Now why would I shake the hand of a man, who didn't even fight for his country?" (2.12)

The writer classifies Thomas Shelby's utterance under use rhetorical questions

sub-strategy from off-record strategy because Thomas Shelby asks a question that does not need to be answered by Chester Campbell. Brown and Levinson (1987) show that this sub-strategy focuses on the speaker asking the hearer questions that do not need to be answered. Thomas Shelby uses the question utterance “Now why would I shake the hand of a man, who didn’t even fight for his country?” to Chester Campbell, which does not need to be answered because the person referred to in Thomas Shelby’s question is Chester Campbell because he did not participate in World War I but has a high position in the government.

Differences and Similarities between Thomas Shelby’s Politeness Strategies to Billy Kimber and to Chester Campbell

The writer finds three differences and five similarities between the sub-strategies used by Thomas Shelby when negotiating with Billy Kimber and with Chester Campbell. For the differences: First, when negotiating with Billy Kimber, Thomas Shelby adds two different positive politeness sub-strategies (presuppose/raise/assert common ground and include both S and H in the activity) because he disguised his negotiation by solving Billy Kimber’s problems, considering that a high-status person needs more respect and tends to prioritize his desires. However, when negotiating with Chester Campbell, Thomas Shelby adds two different positive politeness sub-strategies (avoid disagreement and offer, promise) to provide supportive utterances and make the negotiation run normally without disguising the original intention.

Second, when negotiating with Billy Kimber, Thomas Shelby uses one negative politeness sub-strategies (give deference) because he needs to be aware of using his utterances to avoid dissatisfaction from Billy Kimber. On the other hand, Thomas Shelby does not use any negative politeness when negotiating with Chester Campbell because he does not need to worry about Chester Campbell’s dissatisfaction. Third, when negotiating with Billy Kimber, Thomas Shelby uses off-record sub-strategies (be ambiguous) so that Billy Kimber gets the freedom to be in charge and choose his own decisions, following the characteristics of a high-status person. Meanwhile, when negotiating with Chester Campbell, Thomas Shelby adds one different off-record sub-strategies (give hints) so that Chester Campbell concludes himself from Thomas Shelby’s clues regarding their mutually beneficial cooperation. Therefore, Thomas Shelby can avoid the impression of forcing and ordering Chester Campbell to cooperate.

For the similarities: First, Thomas Shelby uses non-minimization of face threat sub-strategy to both interlocutors because Thomas Shelby wants to order them with good intentions. Thomas Shelby orders Billy Kimber to look at the bullet he gave because Billy Kimber needs to know that they both have a common enemy and can use this moment to work together. Meanwhile, Thomas Shelby orders Chester Campbell not to interfere with his business so they both get what they want the most. Second, Thomas Shelby uses notice, attend to H sub-strategy to give attention to Billy Kimber and Chester Campbell. Therefore, Thomas Shelby can be considered as a caring person by agreeing with what is considered to be ‘right,’ by knowing the problems faced, and what Billy Kimber and Chester Campbell want. Third, in both negotiations, the writer believes Thomas Shelby uses rhetorical questions sub-strategy to apply pleasantries to Billy Kimber and Chester Campbell even though there is a possibility that they may be offended.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that Thomas Shelby often utilizes more negative politeness (give deference) than other politeness strategies when negotiating with Billy Kimber to show a sense of politeness, not wanting to damage Billy Kimber’s ‘face’ because Thomas Shelby is aware that he is negotiating with a high-status person. In contrast to Chester Campbell, Thomas Shelby often utilizes bald on record (non-minimization of face threat) when negotiating with him to

Putra: Politeness Strategies Portrayed in *Peaky Blinders* Series

show that he is not afraid of Chester Campbell even though he is a police chief when Thomas Shelby realizes that Chester Campbell has the same status. This study shows that Thomas Shelby does not recklessly use politeness strategies toward his interlocutors. He pays attention to whom he is negotiating with and whether the interlocutor has a higher or equal status to himself.

REFERENCES

- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press
- Holmes, J. (2013). *An introduction to sociolinguistics* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Schatzki, M., & Coffey, W. R. (1981). *Negotiation: The art of getting what you want*. Negotiation Dynamics. <https://negotiationdynamics.com/bookart/>
- Zamzani, Z. (2011). Pengembangan alat ukur kesantunan bahasa Indonesia dalam interaksi sosial bermuka. *Litera*. <https://doi.org/10.21831/ltr.v10i1.11>