



A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Power Relations and Politeness Strategies Used by the Main Character in Legally Blonde (2001)

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Abstract

This research analyzes the power relations and politeness strategies used by the main character, Elle Woods, in Legally Blonde (2001) from a sociolinguistic perspective. The objectives of this study are to identify the types of politeness strategies used by Elle Woods and to examine how power relations influence her language choices in interaction. This research employed a descriptive qualitative method. The data were taken from the dialogues spoken by Elle Woods in the movie Legally Blonde (2001) and its script. The data were collected through observation and note-taking techniques, then analyzed using the politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). The findings show that all four politeness strategies were used by the main character, namely bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategy. Among them, positive politeness appeared most frequently because Elle often used friendly, supportive, and cooperative expressions in her interactions. The findings also reveal that power relations significantly influenced the choice of politeness strategies. Positive politeness was mostly used in equal power relations, while negative politeness appeared more frequently in interactions involving higher authority figures. Bald on record strategy was commonly used in situations requiring directness and confidence. The study concludes that politeness strategies reflect social relationships, power dynamics, and communicative goals within interaction. Therefore, the movie provides valuable insight into the relationship between language, politeness, and power in sociolinguistic studies.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, Politeness Strategies, Power Relations, Movie Analysis, *Legally Blonde* (2001)





INTRODUCTION

Language plays an important role in human interaction because it functions not only as a means of communication but also as a tool for expressing identity, social status, and interpersonal relationships. In sociolinguistic studies, language is closely related to social context, including how speakers negotiate power and maintain social harmony through communication. According to Holmes (2013), sociolinguistics examines the relationship between language and society, particularly how social factors influence language use in different situations. Through language, speakers can show authority, solidarity, respect, and politeness depending on whom they are talking to and the context of the interaction. One important aspect of sociolinguistics is politeness strategy. Politeness is used by speakers to maintain good social relationships and avoid conflict during communication. Brown and Levinson (1987) explain that politeness strategies are communicative actions employed to reduce threats to a person's "face" or self-image. They classify politeness strategies into four major types: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategy. These strategies are often influenced by social variables such as distance, familiarity, and power relations between speakers and hearers.

Power relation is another significant concept in sociolinguistics because communication is strongly affected by the relative status of participants in interaction. Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015) state that power refers to the ability of individuals or groups to influence others in social interaction. People who possess higher social status, authority, or institutional position often communicate differently from those with lower status. Consequently, speakers tend to adjust their linguistic choices depending on whether they interact with someone of higher, equal, or lower power. In many cases, politeness strategies become a reflection of these social hierarchies.

The relationship between power and politeness can be observed in various forms of communication, including literary works and films. Movies provide rich sociolinguistic data because they represent natural conversations, social interaction, and cultural values through dialogue. As stated by Dynel (2011), film discourse can serve as valuable material for pragmatic and sociolinguistic analysis because movie conversations often reflect real-life communication patterns. Through movie dialogues, researchers can analyze how characters use language to negotiate power, build relationships, and express politeness in different social situations.

One movie that presents interesting communication patterns is *Legally Blonde* (2001), directed by Robert Luketic. The movie tells the story of Elle Woods, a fashionable and cheerful woman who struggles against stereotypes after entering Harvard Law School. Throughout the movie, Elle interacts with various characters from different social backgrounds and institutional



positions, including professors, classmates, friends, and legal professionals. These interactions demonstrate different forms of power relations and politeness strategies that develop as Elle's character grows intellectually and socially.

Elle Woods as the main character becomes an interesting subject for sociolinguistic analysis because her communication style changes depending on the situation and the people she interacts with. In informal situations with friends or peers, Elle frequently uses friendly and supportive expressions that indicate positive politeness. However, when interacting with authority figures such as lecturers or judges, she tends to use more careful and respectful language. In several situations, Elle also uses direct expressions to show confidence and assertiveness, especially when defending herself or others. These variations indicate that power relations influence her choice of politeness strategies.

Several previous studies have discussed politeness strategies in movies and daily communication. For example, Fitriani and Andriyanti (2020) found that positive politeness is commonly used in movie dialogues to create intimacy and solidarity between characters. Another study conducted by Chaerdiani and Ekawati (2024) revealed that power differences significantly affect speakers' linguistic choices in interaction. However, studies focusing specifically on the relationship between power relations and politeness strategies used by the main character in *Legally Blonde* (2001) are still limited. Therefore, this research attempts to fill the gap by analyzing how Elle Woods uses politeness strategies in relation to different power relations throughout the movie.

Based on the explanation above, this research aims to analyze the types of politeness strategies used by Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* (2001) and to examine how power relations influence her language choices. By applying Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness and sociolinguistic perspectives on power relations, this study is expected to contribute to the understanding of language use in social interaction, particularly in cinematic discourse. Furthermore, the research may provide insight into how communication strategies reflect social hierarchy, identity, and interpersonal relationships in modern society.

RESEARCH METHODS

1. Research Design

This study applied a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the use of politeness strategies and power relations in the movie *Legally Blonde* (2001). Qualitative research is appropriate for studies focusing on language, meaning, and social interaction because it emphasizes interpretation rather than numerical measurement. Creswell and Creswell



(2018) state that qualitative research is used to explore and understand social phenomena through detailed examination of textual or audiovisual data. In this research, the qualitative approach was employed to interpret how the main character, Elle Woods, uses language in different social contexts and how her linguistic choices reflect particular power relations.

The descriptive design was selected because the researcher intended to describe and explain the forms of politeness strategies found in the movie dialogues without manipulating the data. The study focused on analyzing utterances naturally occurring in the conversations among characters. Since the object of the research was a movie, the researcher relied on observation and documentation techniques instead of conducting interviews or surveys. Supporting theories and previous studies related to sociolinguistics, politeness, and power relations were also used to strengthen the analysis and interpretation of the data.

2. Data and Data Source

The data of this research consisted of utterances spoken by the main character, Elle Woods, in *Legally Blonde* (2001). The researcher focused specifically on dialogues containing politeness strategies and expressions that indicated power relations between Elle and other characters. The data included words, clauses, phrases, and sentences produced during interactions throughout the movie.

The primary source of the data was the movie *Legally Blonde* (2001), directed by Robert Luketic, along with its movie script. The script was accessed from the Genius website: <https://genius.com/Movie-scripts-legally-blonde-script-annotated>

In addition, several books, journal articles, and previous studies concerning politeness strategies and sociolinguistics were utilized as secondary sources to support the theoretical framework of the study.

3. Research Instrument

In qualitative research, the researcher acts as the primary instrument because the process of collecting, selecting, interpreting, and analyzing data depends on the researcher's understanding and judgment. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the human instrument is essential in qualitative studies due to the flexibility and responsiveness required during the research process. Therefore, the researcher herself became the main instrument in identifying utterances related to politeness strategies and interpreting the influence of power relations in the interactions.





To assist the analysis process, the researcher also used supporting instruments in the form of data sheets and classification tables. These instruments were designed to organize the collected data systematically based on the categories of politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), namely bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategy. The tables also helped classify the types of power relations found in the interactions, such as higher power, equal power, and lower power relations.

4. Data Collection Technique

The data in this research were collected through documentation and note-taking techniques. The researcher observed the movie carefully while simultaneously examining the script to ensure the accuracy of the dialogues. The procedures of data collection were conducted through several stages as follows:

1. The researcher watched *Legally Blonde* (2001) repeatedly to understand the storyline, characters, and contexts of interaction.
2. The movie script was read carefully to verify the dialogues spoken by the main character and to avoid misinterpretation of utterances.
3. Utterances produced by Elle Woods that contained politeness strategies were identified and marked.
4. The identified utterances were categorized based on the type of politeness strategy and the power relation between Elle and her interlocutors.
5. All relevant data were recorded and organized into data sheets to facilitate further analysis.

Through these procedures, the researcher obtained detailed and systematic data related to the objectives of the study.

5. Data Analysis Technique

After the data had been collected, the researcher analyzed them using descriptive qualitative analysis. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) explain that qualitative data analysis involves the processes of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. In this study, the researcher interpreted the dialogues contextually by relating them to theories of politeness strategies and power relations.





The steps of data analysis were conducted as follows:

1. The researcher selected utterances spoken by Elle Woods that were relevant to the research objectives.
2. The collected data were classified according to the four politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987).
3. The researcher identified the type of power relation involved in each interaction, including higher power, equal power, and lower power relations.
4. Each utterance was interpreted based on its conversational context, including the relationship between characters, setting, and communicative purpose.
5. The findings were then described and explained systematically to answer the research questions.
6. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the overall analysis of the data.

To maintain the credibility of the findings, the researcher rechecked the data and compared the interpretations with relevant theories and previous studies related to sociolinguistic analysis.

RESULTS

After analyzing the dialogues spoken by Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* (2001), the researcher identified various utterances containing politeness strategies and power relations. The analysis was conducted based on the theory of politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), which includes bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategy. In addition, the researcher examined how power relations influenced Elle Woods' language choices during interactions with other characters throughout the movie. The findings reveal that all four types of politeness strategies appear in the movie dialogues. However, the frequency of each strategy differs depending on the context of interaction and the relationship between Elle Woods and her interlocutors. Among the four strategies, positive politeness is the most dominant strategy used by Elle Woods. This strategy frequently appears in conversations with friends, classmates, and colleagues because Elle often attempts to create closeness, solidarity, and emotional support in communication. She commonly uses compliments, encouragement, inclusive expressions, and friendly language to maintain harmonious interaction.

The second most frequently used strategy is bald on record strategy. Elle Woods uses this strategy when she wants to express her thoughts directly and clearly without minimizing the threat to the hearer's face. This strategy is mostly found in situations involving disagreement,





emotional reaction, or moments requiring confidence and assertiveness. For example, Elle tends to communicate directly when defending herself against stereotypes or when dealing with situations that she considers unfair. These utterances reflect her growing confidence and determination throughout the movie.

Negative politeness strategy is also identified in several interactions, particularly when Elle communicates with individuals who possess higher social or institutional power, such as professors, academic authorities, lawyers, and judges. In these situations, Elle uses more formal and respectful expressions to avoid imposing on others. She often employs indirect requests, apologetic expressions, and respectful forms of address to show deference toward the interlocutors. The use of negative politeness indicates Elle's awareness of social hierarchy and institutional authority.

Meanwhile, off-record strategy appears least frequently in the data. Elle Woods rarely uses highly indirect expressions because she generally prefers straightforward communication. The researcher found only a small number of utterances categorized as off-record strategy, mainly in situations where Elle hints at her feelings or intentions indirectly. This finding suggests that Elle's communication style is characterized more by openness and explicitness rather than ambiguity. The analysis of power relations demonstrates that Elle Woods interacts with characters occupying different levels of social power. Three categories of power relations were identified in this study, namely equal power relation, lower power relation, and higher power relation. In equal power relations, such as interactions with friends and classmates, Elle predominantly uses positive politeness strategies. The conversations in these contexts tend to be casual, cooperative, and emotionally supportive because the participants share relatively similar social status.

In lower power relations, where Elle interacts with people who have higher authority or institutional position, negative politeness becomes more dominant. Elle tends to speak more carefully and respectfully in order to maintain politeness and avoid conflict. Nevertheless, the findings also show that Elle occasionally uses bald on record strategy even toward higher-status interlocutors, especially when she experiences discrimination, misunderstanding, or unfair treatment. This reflects her personal confidence and character development during the story.

On the other hand, in higher power relations, where Elle possesses greater control or authority in a particular interaction, she frequently uses bald on record strategy. This can be seen in courtroom situations and academic discussions where Elle needs to communicate efficiently, confidently, and persuasively. The use of direct language in these contexts helps her establish credibility and demonstrate competence. Overall, the findings indicate that the selection of





politeness strategies is strongly influenced by the dynamics of power relations between speakers and hearers.

In addition, the findings suggest that positive politeness and negative politeness strategies contribute significantly to successful communication because they help maintain solidarity, respect, and cooperation among characters. Positive politeness strengthens interpersonal relationships by creating intimacy and friendliness, while negative politeness helps preserve respect and social boundaries in formal interactions. Therefore, the study confirms that politeness strategies play an important role in shaping communication effectiveness and social interaction within the movie.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this research reveal that politeness strategies used by Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* (2001) are strongly influenced by social interaction and power relations. Based on the analysis, all four politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) were identified in the movie dialogues, namely bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategy. Among these strategies, positive politeness appeared most frequently. This indicates that Elle generally prefers maintaining closeness, solidarity, and harmonious relationships with other characters. Through compliments, supportive expressions, and friendly language, Elle attempts to reduce social distance and create comfortable interaction. This finding supports Holmes' (2013) argument that speakers often use positive politeness to strengthen interpersonal relationships and express friendliness.

The dominance of positive politeness is closely related to equal power relations. In interactions with classmates, friends, and colleagues, Elle communicates in a relaxed and cooperative manner because the participants share relatively similar social status. She frequently uses inclusive expressions and emotionally supportive language to maintain solidarity within the conversation. These findings are consistent with Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015), who explain that speakers in equal social relationships tend to use more informal and supportive communication styles. Therefore, equal power relations encourage the use of positive politeness strategies because the interactions emphasize cooperation rather than authority.

Besides positive politeness, bald on record strategy was also frequently found in the data. Elle uses direct and explicit utterances in situations requiring confidence, clarity, or emotional expression. This strategy appears particularly when she defends herself against stereotypes or confronts unfair treatment from others. Brown and Levinson (1987) state that bald on record strategy is commonly used when speakers prioritize efficiency and directness over face-saving





considerations. In this movie, Elle's use of direct communication reflects her personal growth from being underestimated to becoming more assertive and self-confident. The findings also show that Elle sometimes uses bald on record strategy even toward higher-status interlocutors, especially when she feels strongly about a situation.

Meanwhile, negative politeness strategy mainly appears in interactions involving unequal power relations, particularly when Elle communicates with professors, judges, or other authority figures. In these contexts, Elle tends to use more formal and respectful expressions to avoid threatening the hearer's face. She often employs indirect requests, polite forms of address, and apologetic expressions to show respect toward individuals with higher social or institutional power. This finding supports Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory that negative politeness is commonly associated with situations involving social distance and hierarchical relationships. In contrast, off-record strategy was found only rarely because Elle generally prefers direct and open communication rather than indirect or ambiguous expressions.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that power relations significantly influence Elle Woods' choice of politeness strategies throughout the movie. Positive politeness is dominant in equal power relations because it helps maintain solidarity and emotional closeness, while negative politeness is more common in lower power relations to show respect toward authority figures. Bald on record strategy reflects Elle's confidence and assertiveness, especially in situations requiring direct communication. These findings confirm that language functions not only as a communication tool but also as a reflection of social identity, interpersonal relationships, and power negotiation in society. Therefore, *Legally Blonde* (2001) provides valuable insight into the relationship between sociolinguistics, politeness, and power in everyday interaction.

CONCLUSION

This research analyzed the politeness strategies and power relations used by the main character, Elle Woods, in *Legally Blonde* (2001) from a sociolinguistic perspective. Based on the findings, all four politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) were identified in the movie dialogues, namely bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategy. Among these strategies, positive politeness appeared most frequently because Elle often used friendly, supportive, and cooperative expressions in her interactions with other characters. Bald on record strategy was also commonly found, particularly in situations requiring directness and confidence, while negative politeness appeared mainly in conversations involving



authority figures. Off-record strategy occurred least frequently because Elle generally preferred explicit communication.

The findings also show that power relations significantly influenced Elle Woods' choice of politeness strategies. In equal power relations, Elle mostly used positive politeness to create solidarity and maintain harmonious interaction. In lower power relations, she tended to use negative politeness to show respect toward people with higher authority or institutional status. Meanwhile, bald on record strategy frequently appeared in situations where Elle needed to communicate assertively and confidently, especially when defending herself or expressing disagreement. These results indicate that language choice is closely related to social hierarchy, interpersonal relationships, and communicative goals.

In conclusion, this study confirms that politeness strategies function not only as linguistic devices for maintaining communication but also as reflections of social power and identity. Through the character of Elle Woods, *Legally Blonde* (2001) illustrates how speakers adjust their language according to social context and power dynamics. Therefore, the movie provides meaningful insight into sociolinguistic phenomena, particularly regarding the relationship between politeness and power in everyday interaction.

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