

## Politeness Strategies in Jhumpa Lahiri: A Study

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Jhumpa Lahiri

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### Abstract

Politeness is a social behavioral phenomenon reflected in all social activities, communication, and language. It is a matter of consideration for others. Usually, it is understood as the pragmatic application of good manners or etiquette. It can be communicated directly or indirectly with a verbal as well as non-verbal manifestation. The study intends to examine the notion of politeness in one of the short stories of Jhumpa Lahiri, 'When Mr Pirzada Came to

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Dine'. Brown and Levinson's groundbreaking pragmatic theory of politeness (1978) provides the analytical tools to guide this analysis. The study finds that in the story the protagonists employ positive politeness strategies for showing their consideration for others and bringing harmony in their interpersonal relationships. Some of the positive politeness strategies are highlighted here, such as: self-denigration, exaggeration and intensification of interest, expression of concern and sympathy for the addressee, assumption of reciprocity. The analysis also intends to account for the politeness strategies that are expressed in the nonverbal expression of the protagonists.

**Key words:** Politeness, positive politeness, face, strategy, interpersonal relationship

## **Introduction**

Politeness is a social behavioral phenomenon. It is essentially a matter of consideration for others. Very often, it is associated with terms like courtesy, modesty, hospitality, and so on. Brown and Levinson (1987) observe politeness as “basic to the production of social order, and a precondition of human cooperation. It is the foundation of social life.” The essence of politeness lies in creating an amicable environment for the participants while avoiding every possible misunderstanding, conflict in interpersonal relationships. Lakoff (1973) too accounts that politeness are “those forms of behavior which have been developed in societies in order to reduce friction in personal interaction.” In an interactive situation, its primary goal is to make the hearer feel relaxed and comfortable, so that a cooperative common ground emerges for the smooth functioning of activities or simply for pleasant social co-existence. Geoffrey Leech (1983) observes politeness as a form of behavior that establishes and maintains comity. According to him, “politeness is the ability of participants in a social interaction to engage in an atmosphere of relative harmony”. Politeness is universal though it varies from culture to culture. It is universal because humans in every culture appear to share a very broad and complex form of politeness convention. It is culture specific because very often it is closely associated with a particular cultural norms and assumptions. The present study is an attempt to examine the use of positive politeness strategies in one of the stories of Jhumpa Lahiri, ‘When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine’. For this purpose, the study takes a look at the research on politeness in general and Brown and Levinson’s theory of politeness in particular.

## Literature Review

The forms, functions, and uses of politeness constitute very important aspects of communication, discourse analysis, pragmatics, and sociolinguistic studies. It has been introduced into linguistics more than thirty years ago. Since then it has emerged as a vital and rapidly growing area. The field of politeness research has increased its scope and diversities under various views and opinions: linguistic politeness studies (Brown & Levinson, 1987[1978]; Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983) or post modern politeness studies (Eelen, 2001; Mills, 2003; Watts, 2003). It has been defined as ‘face saving’ (Brown and Levinson, 1987), ‘appropriate behavior’ (Watts, 2003), ‘interpersonal commitment’ (Leech 1983), ‘relational work’ (Locher and Watts, 2005), ‘rapport management’ (Spencer Oatey, 2000) and so on.

The theoretical beginning of the study of politeness phenomena is initiated with the works of Brown & Levinson 1987[1978]; Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983. The trio assumes that different cultures are homogeneous and have a common understanding of politeness comprising particular linguistic devices and strategies. Among these politeness trio, Brown and Levinson (1978) remains the most thought provoking and influential starting point for studying politeness across cultures and societies. Brown and Levinson’s (1978 [1987]), theory of politeness which is also known as ‘face saving’ theory is based on three basic assumptions of politeness: (1) face, (2) face threatening acts, and (3) politeness strategies. They have drawn their idea of ‘face’ from that of Goffman in the late 50s. According to Goffman (1967), ‘face’ is a sacred thing for every human being, an essential factor all communicators have to pay attention to. Face wants are reciprocal, that is, if one wants his face cared for, he should care for other people’s face (Goffman, 1967). This general notion of ‘face’ became much more specific in Brown and Levinson’s theory of politeness. They define ‘face’ as an individual’s self-esteem, and propose two kinds of face: ‘positive face’ and ‘negative face’. While positive face is related to the desire to be appreciated and approved by others, ‘negative face’ related to the desire to be unimpeded and free from imposition. They claimed that face is something that is emotionally invested and it can be lost, maintained or enhanced. It must be constantly attended to in interaction. Normally everyone’s face depends on everyone else’s face being maintained. They continue while stating, “certain acts, verbal or non-verbal, inherently threaten the face needs of one or both participants and therefore they are face-threatening acts (FTAs).” FTAs vary in terms of the kind of threats

involved in interaction. Some threaten the hearer's negative face or hearer's autonomy by imposing on the hearer. They include requests, orders, offers, and instruction etc. Other FTAs threaten the hearer's positive face - the desire to be respected, by indicating the speaker's lack of concern for hearer's self-image. They include disagreeing, criticism, accusation, insults etc. Some FTAs are also speaker-oriented threatening the speaker's autonomy or independence (thanking, accepting offers) or his self-image (apologies, confessions).

The researchers propose certain strategies to mitigate these face threatening acts and argue that in any interactive situation participants can employ certain strategies so as to mitigate the imposition on others and thereby showing consideration for others. Brown and Levinson propose politeness strategies or redressive actions to satisfy the face wants and to mitigate or minimize face-threatening acts. The five such strategies are:

1. Bald-on
2. Positive politeness
3. Negative politeness
4. Off record
5. Avoiding FTA

Both bald-on record and positive politeness (strategies 1, 2) are the outcome of closeness between interlocutors while negative politeness and off-record strategies (strategies 3, 4) are the outcome of distance. Avoiding FTA (strategy 5) signifies silence. Bald-on action involves the act in the most direct, clear, and unambiguous way. There are circumstances they call for such direct ways. For instance, in a situation requiring immediate, urgent, and efficient action, verbal padding which is an essential ingredient of politeness, would be ridiculous and even seriously consequential.

Positive politeness strategies are attempts by a speaker to treat the hearer as a friend or as someone to be included in discourse. They are designed to enhance the politeness of those speech acts which are in themselves polite; for instance, offers are inherently polite. One major

way of being polite in a positive manner is to claim common ground with the hearer and try to fulfill his wants.

In its simplest form, positive politeness refers to being supportive and appreciative of whatever the hearer. It tries to make the hearer feel protected, cared for; reduces potential threat to hearer's positive face by treating the him/her as an in-group member. Some of the examples of positive politeness are: offering, promising, exaggerating, claiming common ground, showing sympathy, giving gifts to the hearer and so on.

Negative politeness lies in minimizing the impolite speech acts such as orders. Contrary to most of the positive politeness strategies, negative politeness strategies are based on non-interference. The speaker respects the privacy of the hearer and refrains from disturbing his independence. Some examples of negative politeness strategies are: being conventionally indirect, being pessimistic, using question forms or hedges, giving deference, apologizing, impersonalizing the speaker and the hearer and so on.

Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that three variables of interpersonal situations are universally related to politeness: (a) 'power' of the hearer over the speaker, (b) 'social distance' between the speaker and the hearer (c) the degree of imposition. According to them, speakers use more polite language when addressing individuals with high status than individuals with equal or low status, when asking for a big favor than a small favor, and when addressing strangers than familiar people. These social factors are shared by the participants and it is assumed to be mutually recognized by them. Depending on the amount of concern for face and the calculation of three variables, the speaker determines what face strategy s/he will use.

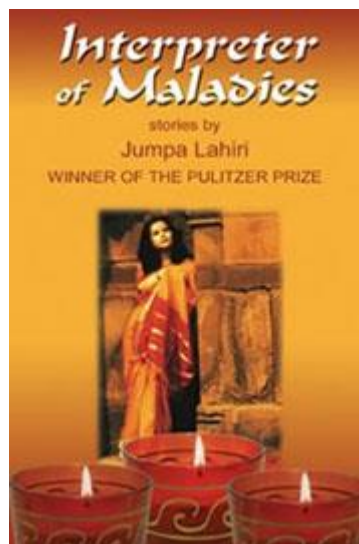
According to Eelen (2001), Brown and Levinson's politeness theory includes the assumption of conflict avoidance, reflecting the nature of daily conversation. In every day conversation, people generally try to avoid embarrassing the other person or making them feel uncomfortable. Speakers attempt to choose the most effective course of action to avoid conflict with the hearers while minimizing the imposition and the cost of losing their face. The theory

posits that maintaining the face of the speaker or the hearer is the primary concern of politeness strategies.

## Data

Based in an intercultural setting, the story “When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine” the second story of Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) provides a suitable ground for the analysis of politeness strategies. It is observed that protagonists in the story show their concern and consideration for each other while employing several positive politeness strategies and bring harmony in interpersonal relationship.

The study also observes that the polite concern of the participants is reflected not only in the linguistic expressions but also it is reflected in their nonlinguistic expressions. The researchers find that in her short stories, Lahiri presents politeness as the ‘basic truth of human life’. In spite of an intercultural existence, Lahiri has been able to connect her characters in an eternal human bond, that is politeness. Her focus is mainly on solidarity in cultural multiplicity which is personified in the number of cross-cultural relationships. In spite of constant struggles in a chaotic multicultural environment, getting along with life with an optimistic attitude is the quintessence of all her short stories. In spite of all the confusion and turmoil, the people of Lahiri live their lives with hope and determination, merging the past with the present.



Though the frustration of diasporic realities is there, yet there is an urge to go back and reconnect to the past which is left for better prospects. There is always a sense of belongingness to the country and culture which is abandoned for better prospects in far off countries. For instance, in the story “When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine” Lahiri projects the growing bond between Mr Pirzada and Lilia’s family in a partition time.

### ***When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine***

The story “When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine” is based during a time of war in 1971 between India and Pakistan. Basically from Calcutta, Lilia’s family moves to the United States for a better, prosperous life in connection with job of Lilia’s father. In US, they meet Mr Pirzada, a professor from Bangladesh, who is on a study grant from the US Government. The story accounts for the friendship between these characters while sidelining their dilemma and insecurities that have been created as a result of their staying away from homeland. When their respective countries are at war with each other, these people, in an alien land strive for solidarity and companionship. The growing bond between the characters is observed by Lilia in the following way:

Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea. (25)

The story reveals that the search for companionship, fellow feeling in a foreign, alien land, has brought Lilia’s parents and Mr Pirzada closer. A vacuum created in their social life as a result of their profession compels the participants to search for a cozy, homelike atmosphere. The participants’ urge for fellow-feeling, solidarity reminds us of Arndt and Janney’s (1985) definition of politeness as “interpersonal supportiveness.”



## Analysis

Brown and Levinson (1987) explain that positive politeness strategy is employed to reduce the positive face threat of the hearer by treating him as a member of in-group. While employing these strategies, participant intends to make the co-participant feel that s/he likes him, approves of him and wants to be friendly with him. The study finds that the characters are aware of their face needs and for showing concern for the same, they take resort to various positive politeness strategies for bringing harmony and solidarity in their interpersonal relationships. Instances of positive politeness strategies such as, self-denigration, exaggeration of interest approval, showing concern and sympathy for the addressee, assumption of reciprocity are visible in the linguistic and nonlinguistic behavior of the participants. The instances of the politeness strategies found in the story are elaborated in the following section.

### *Self-denigration*

It is a prominent politeness strategy where the speaker denigrates his own position and elevates the hearer's position. While employing this strategy, the speaker thinks least about his own interest and gives importance to the image of the hearer. In Indian context, it is a preferred politeness strategy. This also reflects the humbleness and obligation of the speaker towards the hearer. In the story under analysis, this strategy is prominently reflected in the activities of Mr Pirzada. Being a guest to Lilia's family, he remembers to acknowledge the help rendered by the host family and makes effort to humble himself in his interaction with them. Such an instance is reflected while he tells Lilia's father:

“Another refugee, I am afraid, on Indian territory.” (Interpreter of Maladies 28)

The above utterance shows Mr Pirzada's modesty and humbleness as a guest. He denigrates his own position when he considers himself as a 'refugee' and elevates Lilia's father's position when he addresses his house as 'Indian territory.' He acknowledges the hospitality of Lilia's family towards him even if there is a war going on between their respective countries. The utterance shows his reverence towards Lilia's family since he feels that the family has given him support and solace in the time of a war like situation and more importantly when he is away from his family. Lilia's family has provided him an amicable atmosphere where he feels homely and at ease.



Another example of ‘self denigration’ is reflected in Mr Pirzada when he refuses to be thanked by Lilia. In the course of his visit, Mr Pirzada regularly brings some gifts or candy for Lilia. Whenever Lilia thanks him for those gifts, he mildly protests by saying:

what is this thank you? The lady at the bank thanks me, the cashier at the shop thanks me, the librarian thanks me when I return an overdue book, the overseas operator thanks me as she tries to connect me to Dacca and fails. If I am buried in this country I will be thanked, no doubt, at my funeral. (*Interpreter of Maladies* 29)

The above utterance again shows Mr Pirzada’s modesty and humbleness. He refuses to be thanked for his act of gifting and by his act of refusing, he maximizes cost to self and maximizes benefit to Lilia. In Leech’s (1983) observation, politeness is communicated when the speaker maximizes cost to self and maximizes benefit for the hearer. Politeness entails stake to the speaker and benefit for the hearer. In the absence of his own family, staying away from his daughters, Mr Pirzada finds pleasure and comfort in Lilia’s house and brings gift for Lilia as a token of affection; this is the way he would have acted had his daughters stayed with him. He shows his care and affection towards her by showering her with gifts and candies. In return, he does not need a thank as he feels that his act of giving gifts communicate his affection towards Lilia and the act of affection should not be thanked as thanks are given by outsiders. While saying this he considers Lilia as a family member and shows his concern for positive face (need for inclusion) of Lilia. In Indian context, family members do not expect an act of thanking from each other in response of their love and affection. It is considered as a formal and distancing expression. Similarly, Mr Pirzada intends to explain Lilia that expressions like ‘thank you’ are for outsiders not for family members and since he treats her like his daughter, he does not need a ‘thank you’ from her.

### ***Exaggeration and Intensification of Interest***

In interpersonal interaction, the speaker can establish a common ground by exaggerating interest with the hearer. S/he can do so by showing his/her involvement in the hearer’s activity,

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showing appreciation for hearer. In the story, Mr Pirzada, in spite of being an outsider, shows interest and involvement towards the celebration of Halloween in Lilia's family. His genuine interest is observed in his active participation in his act of offering help in the preparation of 'jack-o-lantern'. His intention for cooperation and fellow-feeling is visible when he follows Lilia's and her mother's instruction while cutting the pumpkin for the celebration of Halloween.

### ***Expression of Concern and Sympathy for Hearer***

Expression of concern for the welfare of the addressee is also considered as a positive politeness strategy. The speaker shows his/her concern when s/he displays worries towards the safety and security of the hearer. In the story, Mr Pirzada shows his concern for Lilia when he suggests that he should accompany Lilia in the time of Halloween:

“Is there any danger?”

“Perhaps I should accompany them.”

“But if it rains? If they loss their way?” (38)

The above utterances reveal Mr Pirzada's concern towards the safety of Lilia. He suggests that he would accompany her so that he can give her protection if anything unforeseen happens. Concern is seen with Lilia's family as well towards Mr Pirzada. Lilia's family is also worried about the effect of the war on Mr Pirzada's family. They try their best to give emotional support to Mr Pirzada. The concern is visible in Lilia's father's statement when he tries to reduce Mr Pirzada's frustration:

“They are estimating nine million at the last count...” (28)

Lilia's father rightly recognizes the stress and tension of Mr Pirzada when he considers himself a 'refugee'. He tries to mitigate the frustration of Mr Pirzada while over-generalizing the fact saying it is not only his problem. Like him lot many people are suffering due to the war. Lilia's father intends to show his sympathy for the guest with this statement.

The concern for participants is not only expressed in linguistic behavior. It is also reflected in the nonlinguistic behavior of the participant. The concern is visible with Lilia's

prayer which is an example of nonlinguistic behavior. Lilia prays for the welfare of Mr Pirzada's family. Though she has not met them in person, though they are still strangers to her, still it is Lilia's concern for Mr Pirzada which persuades her to pray for his family:

I prayed that Mr Pirzada's family was safe and sound. I had never prayed for anything before, had never been taught or told to, but I decided, given the circumstances, that it was something I should do. That night when I went to the bathroom I only pretended to brush my teeth, for I feared that I would somehow rinse the prayer out as well. I wet the brush and rearranged the tube of paste to prevent my parents from asking any questions, and fell asleep with sugar on my tongue. (32)

In spite of being a child, Lilia understands the plight of Mr Pirzada, who is away from his daughters, his wife. Lilia understands that although she cannot provide any solution to reduce the tension of the guest, with all her abilities at least she can pray for the welfare of the family. With her innocent mind, she fears that if she brushes her teeth, she would rinse her prayer in that process and she chooses not to brush so that her prayer for Mr Pirzada and his family would be intact. In spite of being a child, Lilia tries to show her consideration for Mr Pirzada with her own innocence.

### ***Assumption of Reciprocity***

The speaker can display his/her polite intent for the hearer by being reciprocal. S/he does so by providing support to the hearer, by approving the hearer's ideas, by helping hearer in achieving his goals and pursuits, avoiding disagreement and so on. In all these activities the motive of the speaker remains same – to make the hearer comfortable and at ease. This kind of attitude is seen in the story while the protagonists get together and actively involve themselves in the preparation of 'Halloween.' The polite intent of the protagonists are reciprocated when they ignore they turn off the TV which aired the news of war and indulge themselves in the festival. It can be symbolically pointed out that then consciously chose to ignore the darkness in their lives and opt for brightness in the form of solidarity, harmony in their interpersonal relationships.

## Conclusion

The above analysis of the story ‘When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine’ unfolds the eternal saga of politeness as a ‘precondition of human cooperation’. Protagonists in the story place more importance on group harmony, solidarity, fellow feeling against the backdrop of war like crisis. There is a visible growing interpersonal bond between Lilia’s parents and Mr Pirzada, while the animosity in the war made no sense to them. As Lilia, the narrator of the story observes: “Most of all I remember the three of them operating during that time as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence, and a single fear” (41). Such “group first” attitudes are considered by Brown and Levinson as positive politeness, that is, sharing common ground and having camaraderie. Consensus within the group overrides any hierarchical differences individuals in the group may have. The analysis shows a great amount of positive politeness strategies lead to reciprocity, familiarity and bring solidarity in the interpersonal relationship of the protagonists.

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