

Command Strategies in Animated Discourse: A Pragmatic Analysis of *Hey Arnold!* Episode “Full Moon”

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Abstract. Animated cartoons transcend mere entertainment, offering a rich linguistic landscape that mirrors real-world interactions. This study investigates the pragmatics of directive speech acts, focusing on command strategies in *Hey Arnold!*, a series celebrated for its realistic portrayal of childhood social dynamics. The episode "Full Moon" serves as a case study, capturing relatable scenarios of peer influence, authority, and moral dilemmas frequently encountered in communities. Using frameworks from Leech (1983), Brown and Levinson (1987), and Blum-Kulka (1987), commands are categorised into direct, indirect, politeness-enhanced, and justification-driven forms. Results reveal that institutional figures employ bald-on-record commands to assert dominance, while peer interactions favour indirect and mitigated directives. Justification-based strategies emerge as tools for subtle persuasion, reinforcing Blum-Kulka's claim that rationalisation fosters compliance. This research underscores that animated cartoons are not simplistic; they act as linguistic laboratories reflecting real-world discourse. By decoding how commands function in fictional dialogue, we gain deeper insights into the nuanced mechanics of directive speech act strategies in everyday communication. *Hey Arnold!* exemplifies how language shapes social hierarchies and power dynamics, offering valuable perspectives on the interplay between speech acts and social behaviour.

Keywords: *Animated Discourse; Cartoon; Command Strategies; Directive Speech Acts; Nickelodeon*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a means of communication but a powerful instrument that shapes human interactions and social dynamics. Every utterance carries not just lexical meaning but also an intended function, influencing the behaviour of interlocutors. One of the most fundamental pragmatic functions of language is directive speech acts, which serve to prompt a listener into performing a particular action. This phenomenon is deeply embedded in everyday discourse, from simple requests in domestic settings to authoritative commands in institutional contexts. Understanding directive speech acts is crucial for decoding the intricate layers of linguistic pragmatics and enhancing cross-cultural communication.

Searle (1979) classifies directive speech acts as attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something. These acts range from explicit commands to indirect suggestions, each varying in politeness and force. Yule (1996) further refines this definition, stating that directives are those kinds of speech acts that speakers use to get someone else to do something. Similarly, Leech (1983) underscores the functional aspect of directives, noting that they are primarily employed to influence the behaviour of the addressee. The study of directive speech acts, therefore, is essential for comprehending how language operates as a tool for social control and cooperation.

Searle's (1979) classification of directive speech acts encompasses various subcategories, including commands, requests, suggestions, invitations, and prohibitions. However, these can be broadly divided into two main types based on their level of directness: (1) Direct Directives: These are explicit speech acts in which the speaker clearly states the intended action. Directives of this nature often employ imperative structures. For example: "Close the door!" Such utterances, as Brown and Levinson (1987) explain, pose a high face-threatening act (FTA) since they impose on the hearer's autonomy. (2) Indirect Directives: These speech acts convey the intended request or command in a less explicit manner, often using interrogatives or declaratives. An example would be: "Could you please close the door?" or "It's getting cold in here." Leech (1983) categorises these as indirect speech acts, designed to mitigate imposition and enhance politeness.

Among the various types of directive speech acts, one of the most prevalent is command, a linguistic act that explicitly or implicitly directs an interlocutor to perform a specific action. Commands constitute a subset of directive speech acts that impose a degree of obligation on the listener. According to Searle (1979), commands are distinct because they "express the speaker's desire for the hearer to perform a particular action". Leech (1983) expands on this definition by describing commands as speech acts that demand compliance, usually in imperative form. Meanwhile, Yule (1996) emphasises the authoritative nature of commands, highlighting that they carry greater illocutionary force compared to other directives.

There are several strategies for issuing commands, each varying in politeness and level of imposition: (1) Direct Commands (Bald on Record): These are unmitigated, straightforward imperatives such as "Turn off the lights!" They are commonly used in hierarchical settings but may be perceived as impolite in casual discourse (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 67). (2) Indirect Commands (Off-Record): These commands are softened through questions or hints, such as "Could you turn off the lights?" or "It's quite bright in here." Leech (1983: 115) notes that such strategies employ politeness principles to reduce face-threatening elements. (3) Politeness-Enhanced Commands: These incorporate politeness markers such as "please" or modals to make the directive more acceptable, e.g., "Please turn off the lights." (Brown & Levinson, 1987). (4) Justification-Based Commands: These provide a rationale for the directive, making the request seem more reasonable. For example, "Turn off the lights to save electricity." Blum-Kulka (1987) argues that justification improves compliance by aligning the directive with shared social norms.

One of the most intriguing avenues for exploring directive speech acts, particularly commands, is through the lens of animated television series. *Hey Arnold!*, a critically acclaimed American animated television show created by Craig Bartlett, offers a rich linguistic environment for such an analysis. Airing from 1996 to 2004, *Hey Arnold!* revolves around the daily lives of Arnold and his friends in a bustling urban setting, often addressing complex social themes through engaging narratives and well-crafted dialogue.

A particularly compelling episode for this study is Full Moon, in which a group of schoolboys, including Arnold, engages in a mischievous prank that leads to a series of escalating events. Throughout the episode, various directive speech acts, particularly commands, are employed by characters in different hierarchical and social contexts. These range from direct imperatives to more nuanced, indirect strategies, making the episode a valuable case study for examining the pragmatics of command strategies within fictional discourse.

Directive speech acts, particularly commands, have been extensively studied in various linguistic and cultural contexts. Saeful (2021) investigated politeness strategies in Bugis directive speech acts in Ujung Loe, Bulukumba, highlighting explicit and implicit command strategies and the linguistic markers of politeness used by speakers. Similarly, Saleh et al. (2024) explored directive commands within Bugis family discourse, demonstrating that both direct and indirect commands are influenced by factors such as age, status, and situational context.

Focusing on non-Indonesian languages, Qonita (2019) examined Korean directive speech acts in the drama *The Beauty Inside*, revealing that imperative sentences were predominant and that honorific markers played a crucial role in mitigating the directness of commands. Aznawi & Aras (2015) also contributed to the study of Bugis politeness strategies, focusing on command variations among speakers in Wajo, uncovering specific linguistic adjustments based on social hierarchy and discourse setting.

Beyond spoken discourse, Syukri et al. (2020) analysed directive speech acts in the Qur'an, particularly those from the Mecca period, finding that commands played a dominant role in shaping religious and social norms. In fictional narratives, Mansur (2015) investigated command mitigation strategies in *Harry Potter*, illustrating how directives were softened through indirect speech, politeness markers, and justification strategies. Marisa, Hilal, and Agustina (2017) examined parental commands in the Lampung language, identifying direct and indirect speech acts alongside politeness maxims.

Building upon the background and research gap identified in prior literature, this study examines the role of directive speech acts in the *Hey Arnold!* episode Full Moon through four key inquiries. It first investigates how commands are strategically employed by characters, addressing both their explicit and indirect manifestations. The analysis then categorises the linguistic forms these directives take, distinguishing between bald-on-record imperatives and mitigated requests. A further focus explores the incorporation of politeness strategies within command interactions, assessing how characters navigate social expectations through justification or hedging. Finally, the research evaluates how these command patterns reflect hierarchical relationships and power negotiations, revealing how fictional dialogue mirrors real-world dynamics of authority and compliance. Collectively, these questions aim to decode the nuanced interplay between language, social structure, and narrative in animated media.

Accordingly, this study is designed to achieve the following objectives: First, it aims to examine the strategies employed in directive speech acts, specifically commands, within the Full Moon episode of *Hey Arnold!*. Second, it seeks to analyze the various forms of commands present in the episode, differentiating between direct and indirect command structures. Additionally, the study intends to identify the politeness strategies embedded in directive speech acts of command within the animated series. Finally, it will investigate how the use of commands in the series mirrors social hierarchy and power relations in character interactions.

This study is significant for multiple reasons. First, it contributes to the growing field of pragmatics by examining how directive speech acts, particularly commands, function within animated television discourse. Analysing *Hey Arnold!* not only provides insights into linguistic strategies but also reflects broader societal norms and interpersonal power dynamics portrayed in media. Secondly, by employing a case study approach, this research sheds light on how commands are constructed, mitigated, or intensified depending on contextual variables such as authority, social distance, and politeness considerations.

Moreover, this study holds pedagogical implications, particularly for linguists, educators, and students interested in pragmatic analysis of media discourse. By understanding how directive speech acts operate within fictional settings, we can better appreciate their application in real-world interactions, contributing to more effective and nuanced communication strategies across different contexts.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach to examine directive speech acts, particularly command strategies, within the animated television series *Hey Arnold!* (episode: Full Moon). A qualitative approach is chosen to facilitate an in-depth exploration of how commands are structured, delivered, and interpreted in animated discourse, aligning with Searle's (1979) framework of directive speech acts. As Herdiansyah (2010) asserts, qualitative research prioritizes contextual understanding, emphasizing the interplay between linguistic behaviour and social dynamics. The descriptive nature of this study (Sudaryanto, 2015) ensures that the analysis remains grounded in naturally occurring directive utterances, capturing authentic communicative practices within fictional dialogue.

The primary data comprises character dialogues from *Hey Arnold!* (episode: Full Moon), selected for its rich depiction of command strategies across diverse social contexts. This episode presents various instances of direct and indirect commands, making it an ideal subject for pragmatic analysis. The dialogue in this episode involves six primary characters: Arnold Shortman, a fourth-grade student who serves as the moral compass of his peer group; Harold Berman, an informal leader who often uses intimidation to assert dominance; Sid and Stinky, who act as followers without significant influence; Gerald Johanssen, Arnold's best friend, who maintains a neutral stance; and Principal Wartz, the school authority figure who holds the highest formal power. The power hierarchy in the episode is structured as follows: Principal Wartz (highest authority) → Harold (informal leader) → Arnold & Gerald (moral influence) → Sid & Stinky (passive followers). This dynamic demonstrates both horizontal peer power struggles and vertical institutional authority, shaping how directive speech acts, particularly commands, are enacted and received.

The data collection process follows the *simak catat* (observation and note-taking) technique (Mahsun, 2014), wherein the episode is systematically reviewed, and directive utterances are transcribed alongside contextual notes. The analytical process comprises three key stages. First, utterances are identified as commands through Searle's (1979) framework of directive speech acts. Next, these commands are categorized by type, direct (imperative structures) or indirect (declarative/interrogative forms), and strategy, such as bald on record, off-record, politeness-enhanced, or justification-based approaches. Finally, a functional analysis explores how these commands both mirror hierarchical power dynamics and social relationships between characters while also shaping narrative development through shifts in interpersonal tensions or alliances. This tripartite method reveals how linguistic choices in

commands serve as narrative tools to convey authority, negotiate social roles, and drive plot progression.

This study adopts Searle's (1979) directive speech act framework, focusing specifically on commands. The analysis further incorporates politeness theory, evaluating how characters employ politeness strategies to mitigate or reinforce command force.

To ensure validity and reliability, the study employs the distributional method (Sudaryanto, 2021), which uses linguistic elements, such as imperative forms, modal verbs, and politeness markers, as analytical units. The key analytical steps include contextual examination, where situational factors influencing command formulation are identified; comparative analysis, which evaluates command strategies across different character interactions; and interpretation, where findings are discussed within the broader framework of directive speech acts in fictional discourse. This methodological design ensures a comprehensive examination of how command strategies function in animated media, contributing to pragmatic discourse on directive speech acts in fictional narratives.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings reveals how characters employ different command types, direct and indirect, and how politeness strategies mediate these directives within hierarchical and peer interactions. The findings highlight the interplay between linguistic structures and social dynamics, demonstrating how power relations, authority, and peer pressure influence command delivery and reception. The details of the findings can be found in the table below:

Tabel 1. Command Strategies Findings

Category	Type	Data Findings	Percentage
Command Strategies	Direct Commands	27	47.4%
	Indirect Commands	13	22.8%
	Politeness-Enhanced	4	7.0%
	Justification-Based	2	3.5%
Subtotal		46	100%
Command Forms	Imperative	28	49.1%
	Interrogative	13	22.8%
	Declarative	3	5.3%
Subtotal		44	100%
Politeness Strategies	Bald on Record	27	47.4%
	Positive Politeness	4	7.0%
	Negative Politeness	0	0%
	Off-Record	11	19.3%
Subtotal		42	100%

From the table above, we can observe that direct commands (47.4%) dominate, especially by authority figures like Principal Wartz using imperatives (49.1%), while peers prefer indirect commands (22.8%) and polite strategies (7.0%). Interrogatives (22.8%) soften peer directives, while bald-on-record commands (27%) highlight power dynamics.

Discussion

The discussion will now present several data examples with detailed analysis below:

Direct Commands

These are unmitigated, straightforward imperatives. They are commonly used in hierarchical settings but may be perceived as impolite in casual discourse (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The following exemplifies a direct command grounded in institutional hierarchy.

- Context : A group of boys, Harold, Stinky, and Sid, just executed a prank by mooning Principle Wartz. This act is part of a larger scheme that Harold proposed, which Arnold initially refuses to participate in, viewing it as a bad idea. However, the three boys go through with the prank, leading to Principal Wartz's shocked reaction upon witnessing it.
- Arnold : *Are you really going to go through with this??*
- Harold : *Shhh. Two.... Three.....!* (Harold, Stinky, and Sid went full moon on Principal Wartz)
- Principal Wartz : *What the, what is this??* (he puts on his glasses and spots Harold, Stinky, and Sid mooning themselves at him) *Oh my!* (Harold, Stinky, and Sid dash out of the hallway, laughing as they flee) *Come.. baack.. here you little hooligans!!*

(*Hey Arnold!* episode "Full Moon", 10 March 1999, Season 4)



Figure 1. Harold, the Leader of the Gang, Performing Direct Command to His Friends

In this sample, principal Wartz issues direct, unmitigated commands to the children, demanding they stop so he can reprimand or punish them. Phrases like "*Come back here, you*

little hooligans!" exemplify a bald-on-record strategy, a direct, face-threatening command with no softening politeness markers. This approach is permissible because Wartz, as an authority figure, holds the highest social power within the school hierarchy. His directives are the most blunt and imposing, constituting a clear face-threatening act (FTA) as they directly challenge the students' autonomy. Aside from Principal Wartz, Harold, as the ringleader of the prank, employs unmitigated direct commands to silence his friends ("*shh. Two! Three!*") and orchestrate their actions in carrying out the prank.

Indirect Commands

These commands are softened through questions or hints. Leech (1983) notes that such strategies employ politeness principles to reduce face-threatening elements. Below demonstrates an indirect command employed by one of the prank's perpetrators.

- Context : Harold confronted Arnold to find out if he'd snitched to Principal Wartz about him and his gang's mischief.
- Harold : *Did you rat?*
- Arnold : *No, Harold, I didn't rat!*
- Harold : *Well you better not.*

(*Hey Arnold!* episode "Full Moon", 10 March 1999, Season 4)



Figure 2. Harold, Indirectly Threatening Arnold Not to Rat

Harold opens with "*Did you rat?*" – a question that functions as a veiled (indirect) command. This is an interrogative form command with off-record strategy, implicitly pressuring Arnold *not* to report his actions. Harold does this because, in their earlier exchange, his gang had begun to feel guilty, their mischief had already gotten Arnold punished. Yet Harold himself still doesn't want to be caught. He can't outright order Arnold around, as they

occupy the same social hierarchy (even if Harold is physically stronger). Instead, he opts for a subtle threat, one Arnold immediately understands.

Politeness-Enhanced

These incorporate politeness markers to make the commands more acceptable, e.g. (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This section presents an educator's politeness-strategic command towards a student under their guidance.

Context : By chance, Principal Wartz encountered Harold and questioned him about recognising the sketches of the mooning culprits - unaware he was speaking to one of the perpetrators himself. Harold, of course, denied any involvement.

Principal Wartz : *Young man*

Harold : *Oh uh Principal Wartz??*

Principal Wartz : *Hello.... Do you recognise everyone in this sketch??*

Harold : *No sir.. I don't.. I really don't.. Not at all.*

Principal Wartz : *Alright... Well keep up the good work son!*

Harold : *I sure will Mister Principal Wartz.*

(*Hey Arnold!* episode "Full Moon", 10 March 1999, Season 4)



Figure 3. Principal Wartz Interrogating Arnold

As an educator, Principal Wartz employs subtle interrogative techniques to encourage Harold to identify those involved in the mooning incident. Using a politeness-enhanced strategy, he adopts an interrogative approach that serves as a mitigating tactic - softening what would otherwise be a clear face-threatening act while maintaining his presumption of Harold's innocence. His concluding remark, "Alright. Well, keep up the good work, son," similarly

functions as an indirect command through politeness-enhanced strategy. While ostensibly offering praise, it implicitly reinforces expectations for Harold to maintain proper conduct and avoid further disciplinary issues. Though possessing absolute authority, Principal Wartz consciously avoids direct commands ("Tell me who did it!") in favor of this diplomatic approach - preserving Harold's dignity while still asserting institutional authority.

Justification-Based

Justification-Based strategy provide a rationale for the commands, making the command seem more reasonable. Blum-Kulka (1987) argues that justification improves compliance by aligning the directive with shared social norms. The subsequent dialogue illustrates a justification-framed command from educator to pupil.

- Context : For the final time, Headmaster Wartz made one last attempt to persuade Arnold to reveal the identities of the mooning culprits.
- Principal Wartz : *Young man, I now have your permanent record. Now you still have a chance to save yourself! Just tell me who the real mooners are! Tell me their names and I won't have to enter this terrible black mark on your record..*
- Arnold : *I can't do that!*
- Principal Wartz : *You understand that your permanent record will follow you all the way to junior high??*
- Arnold : *I understand..*
- Principal Wartz : *And you still won't tell??*
- Arnold : *No..*
- Principal Wartz : *Then you leave me no choice!*
- (*Hey Arnold!* episode "Full Moon", 10 March 1999, Season 4)



Figure 4. Principal Wartz politely threatening Arnold with a bad permanent record

In this exchange, Principal Wartz employs justification-based commands in declarative form, presenting logical consequences to persuade Arnold into compliance. Instead of issuing direct imperatives, Wartz frames his directives as factual statements, subtly pressuring Arnold while maintaining an authoritative tone. The declarative utterances "*I now have your permanent record*" and "*Then you leave me no choice*" function as implicit commands. Rather than explicitly instructing Arnold to reveal the pranksters, Wartz creates a cause-and-effect scenario in which Arnold's refusal appears to lead inevitably to negative consequences. This strategy allows Wartz to enforce his authority without issuing bald-on-record commands, making his directive more palatable while still exerting institutional control. By adopting this approach, Wartz blends institutional power with psychological persuasion, ensuring that his command remains firm yet professionally framed. His use of declarative statements not only asserts his authority but also serves as a veiled ultimatum, pressuring Arnold to comply without direct confrontation.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has illuminated the intricate pragmatics of directive speech acts, particularly command strategies, within the fictional discourse of *Hey Arnold!* (episode: Full Moon). By systematically analysing the interplay between direct and indirect commands, politeness strategies, and hierarchical dynamics, the research underscores how language functions as both an instrument of authority and a mechanism for social negotiation. The findings substantiate that the deployment of command strategies is profoundly influenced by power relations, contextual variables, and the interlocutors' social roles, a reflection of broader linguistic and pragmatic phenomena.

The data reveal that direct commands, constituting the majority of directive utterances, are predominantly employed by figures of authority, such as Principal Wartz, who leverages his institutional position to issue imperatives with unmitigated force. Conversely, indirect commands, including interrogative and declarative structures, are favoured in peer interactions, where social distance is minimal, and explicit impositions may threaten relational equilibrium. The strategic modulation of commands through politeness-enhanced and justification-based forms further exemplifies how characters navigate hierarchical constraints while maintaining conversational decorum.

To refine command strategies, speakers should assess context, incorporate politeness markers, provide rationale, and adapt to social hierarchy, ensuring directives are neither overly aggressive nor ambiguously soft. These findings underscore the parallels between fictional and

real-world communication, offering practical insights for educators, leaders, and cross-cultural interactions. Future research could explore these dynamics across diverse linguistic and cultural settings to deepen our understanding of command strategies in broader contexts.

Ultimately, this research reaffirms that language is never neutral, even in animated storytelling, it remains a potent force that shapes interpersonal dynamics and societal norms. Future studies may expand upon these findings by examining directive speech acts across diverse cultural and linguistic contexts, exploring how varying sociocultural paradigms influence the articulation and reception of commands. In doing so, we deepen our comprehension of language as not merely a means of expression, but as a dynamic tool of persuasion, negotiation, and control.

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