



Politeness Strategies in Sister-to-Sister Interaction in Little Women by Louisa May Alcott

Dea Meinanda¹, Dyah Nugraheny Priastuti^{2*}

¹⁻² English Language Education, IKIP Widya Darma, Indonesia

*Correspondence Author: dyahnugraheny91@gmail.com

Abstract. This study examines the politeness strategies used in interactions among sisters in Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women*. Using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory as an analytical framework, this study identifies and classifies the forms of politeness strategies that emerge in the conversations of the four main characters: Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March. The research data consists of dialogic utterances purposively selected from the novel's text. The results indicate that all four politeness strategies on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record are present in the interactions among the sisters, with positive politeness being the most dominant. The dominance of this strategy reflects the closeness of their relationship, solidarity, and mutual respect among the characters. Additionally, the choice of politeness strategies is also influenced by factors such as social distance, age differences, and situational context. This study contributes to the understanding of language use in a literary context, particularly in depicting the dynamics of family relationships through character interactions.

Keywords: Brown and Levinson; Literary Pragmatics; *Little Women*; Politeness Strategies; Sibling Interactions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication is a fundamental aspect of human interaction that goes beyond mere information exchange it simultaneously maintains social relationships, negotiates identity, and reflects cultural values. In everyday conversation, speakers employ various linguistic strategies to convey messages effectively while preserving harmonious relationships with their interlocutors. Among these strategies, politeness occupies a central role as a social mechanism that minimizes conflict and protects the face of both speaker and hearer. Drawing on Goffman's (1967) foundational notion of face as the public self-image individuals seek to uphold, Brown & Levinson (1987) developed what remains the most influential framework in politeness research, proposing four principal strategies bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record deployed by speakers to manage face-threatening acts (FTAs) in accordance with perceived social distance, power differentials, and the degree of imposition involved. Although later scholars have critically extended this model by emphasizing that politeness is better understood as a dynamic, evaluative social practice embedded within broader discursive contexts rather than a static, speaker-centered phenomenon, Brown and Levinson's framework continues to provide a robust and widely applicable analytical lens for examining communicative behavior across diverse settings.

Within the realm of literary pragmatics, scholars have increasingly recognized the analytical value of applying pragmatic frameworks to fictional dialogue. Clark (1996) and Sotirova (2016) assert that literary dialogue, though imagined, embeds genuine pragmatic structures that mirror authentic communicative norms and societal values. Building on this

premise, politeness theory has proven particularly productive as a tool for literary analysis, most notably through Culpeper's (2001, 2011) development of impoliteness theory, which effectively accounts for confrontational exchanges where face-threatening acts are deployed deliberately for narrative effect. These developments underscore the broader applicability of pragmatic inquiry to literature, as fictional dialogue not only reflects but also constructs social realities, making it a legitimate and revealing object of linguistic study.

Family communication, and sibling interaction in particular, constitutes a distinctive context for examining politeness behavior. Unlike institutional or non-familial relationships, sibling bonds are characterized by intimacy, shared history, and asymmetrical power dynamics, within which politeness functions not merely as a face-management device but as a medium through which relational identities and emotional connections are continuously negotiated (Tannen, 2007; Kulka, 1997). These dynamics are especially salient in sister-to-sister interaction, where politeness strategies may be deployed, modified, or deliberately withheld in ways that simultaneously express affection, assert authority, and manage interpersonal tension. Prior studies on politeness have been conducted across a range of contexts, including institutional service encounters Rachmawati (2015), animated film dialogue Rizki (2020), and online communication among EFL learners (Hartini, 2023). However, these works are predominantly anchored in real-life spoken interaction or contemporary media, and consequently do not account for the distinctive features of literary dialogue namely, the author's intentionality, the period-specific social norms shaping character voice, and the literary construction of interpersonal exchanges all of which demand a specifically literary-pragmatic approach (Simpson, 1993; Paltridge, 2012).

Little Women, written by Louisa May Alcott and published in 1868, offers an exceptionally rich literary corpus for the pragmatic analysis of sibling interaction. The novel vividly portrays the daily conversations, conflicts, reconciliations, and relational negotiations of the four March sisters Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy across the formative stages of their adolescence and early adulthood. Each sister exhibits a markedly distinct communicative style: Meg speaks with maternal authority, Jo with directness and emotional candor, Beth with characteristic gentleness and a consistent orientation toward face-saving language, and Amy with indirectness and frequent appeals to shared social standards. These divergent styles, embedded within the ideological framework of 19th-century American domesticity, constitute a pragmatically complex interactional environment that renders *Little Women* a valuable text for investigating how power, identity, and relational bonds are enacted and negotiated through language. Nonetheless, existing scholarship on the novel has been primarily literary and

cultural in orientation examining Alcott's feminist subversion of 19th-century gender norms, the tension between individual aspiration and domestic expectation, and the construction of female identity through the four sisters Keyser (1993); Elbert (1997); Hollander (2000) while its linguistic dimensions have remained largely unexplored. No study to date has systematically examined the politeness strategies operative in the March sisters' interactions using Brown & Levinson's (1987) framework, leaving a significant gap at the intersection of literary pragmatics, politeness theory, and canonical American literature.

This study seeks to address that gap by integrating literary pragmatics and politeness theory to analyze how Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy deploy, negotiate, and at times resist politeness strategies across varied interactional contexts throughout the novel. In doing so, it aims to illuminate how language enacts power, shapes identity, and constructs relational meaning within *Little Women*, while contributing a linguistically grounded perspective to a body of scholarship that has thus far been dominated by thematic and cultural analysis. It bears emphasizing that the findings are not intended to be generalized to real-world communication; rather, the study's objective is to examine how politeness is constructed within a literary work and what these constructions reveal about the social relationships and cultural values embedded in canonical American domestic literature.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is grounded in the theoretical intersection of pragmatics and politeness, two interrelated fields that together provide a robust analytical framework for examining how language operates as a social and relational instrument in both real and fictional communicative contexts.

Pragmatics, as a sub-discipline of linguistics, is concerned with the study of language in use specifically, how meaning is produced and interpreted in relation to speaker intention, social context, and situational circumstance. Yule (1996) explains that pragmatics extends beyond the literal content of utterances to encompass what speakers mean, taking into account the social, cultural, and environmental factors that shape interpretation. This orientation makes pragmatics particularly well-suited to the analysis of literary dialogue, where meaning is rarely confined to surface-level expression but is instead embedded within relational positioning, contextual inference, and interpersonal negotiation. Within pragmatic inquiry, politeness constitutes one of the most extensively theorized phenomena, as it reflects both individual communicative choices and the broader social norms that regulate interpersonal conduct across cultures and relationships.

The foundational theoretical framework of this study is Brown & Levinson's (1987) model of politeness, which draws on Goffman's (1967) seminal concept of face defined as the positive social value individuals claim for themselves and seek to protect in interaction. Brown & Levinson distinguish between two universal face wants: positive face, the desire to be liked, accepted, and endorsed by others; and negative face, the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition or interference. Any communicative act that threatens either of these face wants constitutes a face-threatening act (FTA). In the context of sister-to-sister interaction, the FTAs most pertinent to this analysis are those arising organically from the dynamics of close family relationships including criticism, complaint, and disagreement, which endanger the hearer's positive face, as well as commands, requests, and unsolicited advice, which impinge upon the hearer's negative face and freedom of action.

To manage such threats, Brown & Levinson propose five politeness super strategies arranged on a continuum from the most to the least direct. Bald on-record involves performing an FTA without mitigation and typically occurs in contexts of urgency, high familiarity, or when communicative efficiency outweighs face concerns. Positive politeness addresses the hearer's positive face by expressing solidarity and common ground through sub-strategies such as the use of in-group identity markers, seeking agreement, and offering sympathy or understanding. Negative politeness attends to the hearer's negative face by acknowledging the imposing nature of the FTA and softening it through hedging, apologizing or showing reluctance, and minimizing imposition. Off-record strategies communicate meaning indirectly, allowing the speaker to avoid direct responsibility for an FTA by giving hints or maintaining deliberate vagueness. Finally, the option to refrain from performing the FTA altogether reflects a speaker's decision to withhold a potentially threatening act entirely in the interest of preserving relational harmony. The selection among these strategies is shaped by three social variables: the degree of social distance between interlocutors, the power differential between them, and the level of imposition that the FTA entails. Locher and Watts (2005) and Spencer-Oatey (2008) further situate these dynamics within the broader negotiation of freedom and constraint in interpersonal relationships, noting that negative face concerns are particularly salient when individuals perceive a threat to their personal autonomy a dynamic that resonates strongly with Jo March's communicative behavior throughout the novel. Taken together, these theoretical components constitute an analytically productive framework for examining how the March sisters navigate face threat, assert relational positions, and construct individual identities through language.

Prior studies have examined politeness strategies across a range of communicative settings, offering relevant but partial empirical foundations for the present research. Rachmawati (2015) analyzed politeness strategies in service encounter interactions at a tourism information center in Surabaya, finding positive politeness to be the dominant strategy in asymmetrical institutional exchanges. While this study usefully demonstrates the role of power dynamics in shaping strategy selection, its scope is limited to a single real-world institutional context and does not engage with literary or fictional discourse. Rizki (2020) investigated politeness strategies in the dialogue of the animated film *Ratatouille*, demonstrating that both positive and negative politeness appear prominently in scripted fictional narrative. Although this study shares an orientation toward fictional discourse with the present research, film dialogue is primarily constructed for visual and auditory effect and lacks the socio-historical and literary dimensions characteristic of a nineteenth-century novel; moreover, the analysis does not address how familial hierarchy, gender, or relational intimacy influence strategy selection. Hartini (2023) examined politeness strategies in WhatsApp group interactions among EFL learners, finding positive politeness to be dominant in informal digital academic communication. While methodologically rigorous, this study is anchored in a contemporary digital context and does not account for the pragmatic motivations behind strategy choices in emotionally complex or conflict-driven interpersonal exchanges.

Within literary pragmatics specifically, Clark (1996) and Sotirova (2016) have established that literary dialogue, despite its fictional nature, is structured in accordance with authentic pragmatic norms and constitutes a legitimate site for linguistic inquiry. Simpson (1993) and Paltridge (2012) further observe that literary dialogue is distinguished from spontaneous spoken interaction by authorial intentionality, period-specific social conventions, and the deliberate construction of character voice distinctions that necessitate a specifically literary-pragmatic orientation. Culpeper's (2001, 2011) development of impoliteness theory as an extension of Brown & Levinson's framework is also pertinent here, as it accounts for instances where face-threatening acts are deliberately performed for rhetorical or narrative effect a pattern observable in several of the March sisters' more confrontational exchanges. Research on *Little Women* itself, while substantial, has been dominated by feminist and cultural perspectives examining Alcott's negotiation of 19th-century gender ideology and the construction of female identity through the four sisters Keyser (1993); Elbert (1997); Hollander (2000), leaving the novel's linguistic and pragmatic dimensions largely unexamined. Tannen (2007) and Blum-Kulka (1997) have highlighted the distinctive communicative complexity of sibling relationships, in which affective closeness, shared history, and power asymmetry

intersect to shape language use in ways qualitatively different from other relational contexts yet this framework has not been systematically applied to *Little Women*.

Collectively, the existing literature reveals a significant and productive gap: no study has yet undertaken a systematic analysis of politeness strategies in the March sisters' interactions using Brown & Levinson's (1987) framework, and the intersection of literary pragmatics, sibling communication, and canonical American domestic literature remains underexplored. The present study addresses this gap by examining how Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy deploy, negotiate, and at times resist politeness strategies across varied interactional contexts, with particular attention to how these choices are conditioned by age hierarchy, personality, emotional proximity, and the ideological norms of 19th-century American domesticity. It is anticipated that the distribution of strategies will reflect not only the relational dynamics between individual sisters but also broader patterns of identity construction and power negotiation that Alcott encodes through the sisters' distinctive communicative styles.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design, which is suited to the research objective of understanding how meaning is constructed through language within specific social and cultural contexts rather than quantifying linguistic occurrences statistically (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2020). Within this design, discourse analysis operating under a literary pragmatics framework serves as the primary analytical method, as it provides systematic tools for examining how language functions beyond the sentence level in literary dialogue (Paltridge, 2012; Simpson, 1993).

The primary data source is Part One of *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott, specifically the Penguin Classics (1989). Part One is selected because all four March sisters Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy are still living under the same roof across 23 chapters, providing consistent and varied opportunities to observe their communicative patterns. The data consist exclusively of direct dialogic exchanges occurring between two or more sisters; narrative description, interior monologue, and interactions with characters outside the sisterhood are excluded to maintain analytical focus on sibling interaction.

Data were collected through a systematic, chapter-by-chapter reading of the text to identify all relevant sister-to-sister exchanges. Each identified excerpt was extracted and documented according to page and chapter reference, speakers involved, contextual information, type of face-threatening act (FTA), and the politeness strategy employed. Given the volume of dialogue in the novel, purposive sampling was applied to select approximately

70 conversation excerpts that collectively represent all four observable politeness strategies, all six FTA types (criticism, disagreement, complaint, command, request, and unsolicited advice), and the full range of dyadic relationships among the four sisters, ensuring that no single strategy type or sister pairing dominates the dataset.

Data analysis follows Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory through a five-step procedure. Each excerpt is first examined to identify the FTA present its speech act type, whose face is threatened, and whether positive or negative face is at stake. Each datum is then coded systematically according to speaker, addressee, politeness strategy, and FTA type, as illustrated in the following scheme: Speaker → Addressee Strategy FTA Type (e.g., Jo → Amy Bald on-record Criticism). Following classification, contextual analysis is conducted for each instance, attending to the three social variables central to Brown and Levinson's model social distance between the sisters involved, relative power as determined by age hierarchy and situational authority, and the degree of imposition the FTA entails. Cross-contextual patterns are then identified regarding the distribution of strategies across different sister pairings, situational contexts, and communicative functions, before the patterns are interpreted in relation to character development, 19th-century American domestic norms, and the literary functions of politeness in the novel.

The trustworthiness of the analysis is established through several complementary measures (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2020). Data triangulation is achieved by verifying patterns across multiple dialogic exchanges drawn from varied situational contexts and sister pairings, ensuring that findings reflect consistent communicative tendencies rather than isolated instances. Theory-based validation is maintained by anchoring all classifications firmly in Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, with each categorization explicitly justified. Thick description, as advocated by Geertz (1973) and Lincoln and Guba (1985), is applied through the provision of verbatim excerpts alongside detailed contextual narrative, enabling readers to evaluate the interpretive decisions made. Peer review from colleagues with expertise in pragmatics and literary analysis further minimizes subjective bias. Finally, sustained attention to the socio-historical context of 19th-century American domestic life guards against the anachronistic misreading of communicative norms that differ significantly from contemporary standards (Simpson, 1993; Paltridge, 2012).

4. RESULTS AND DISSUSSION

This chapter presents the findings and discussion of the study on politeness strategies used in sister-to-sister interactions in *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. The analysis is based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which categorizes politeness strategies into four main types: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record (indirect) strategies. The data were taken from dialogues among the four March sisters Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy throughout the novel.

The findings are organized according to the types of politeness strategies identified in the data. Each strategy is illustrated with relevant quotations from the novel, followed by a discussion of how and why the strategy is employed within the context of sister-to-sister interaction.

Types of Politeness Strategies Found in the Novel

The analysis of dialogues among the March sisters reveals that all four types of politeness strategies proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987) are present in the novel. The following table summarize the frequency of each strategy identified in the data.

Table 1. Frequency of Politeness Strategies in Sister-to-Sister Interaction The figures presented above are intended solely to identify general tendencies in the sisters' communicative behavior and are not meant to support statistical generalization.

No.	Politeness Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1.	Bald On-Record	18	25,7%
2.	Positive Politeness	29	41,4%
3.	Negative Politeness	14	20,0%
4.	Off-Record (Indirect)	9	12,9%
	Total	70	100%

Based on the table above, positive politeness is the most frequently used strategy (41,4%), followed by bald on-record (25,7%), negative politeness (20,0%), and off-record strategies (12,9%). These findings reflect the close and familiar relationship among the sisters, where direct yet affectionate communication is common.

Bald On-Record Strategy

Bald on-record strategy is a direct form of communication in which the speaker does not attempt to minimize the face-threatening act (FTA). According to Brown & Levinson (1987), this strategy is often used when the speaker and hearer share a close relationship, in emergencies, or when efficiency is prioritized over politeness. In the interactions among the March sisters, this strategy frequently appears in moments of urgency, frustration, or playful directness.

Direct Commands and Requests

One of the most common manifestations of bald on-record strategy in the novel is the use of direct commands and requests. The sisters, being comfortable with one another, often issue imperatives without softening devices.

Data 1:

“Jo, do behave yourself,” whispered Meg, as she settled her gloves and smoothed her hair. (Chapter 3)

Meg felt she had moral authority as the oldest sibling, so it was natural for her to speak her mind in their interactions. The absence of politeness markers such as ‘please’ or ‘could you’ reflects the direct nature of the bald on-record strategy. This is justified by their close sibling bond, where Meg, as the eldest, asserts her authority naturally. The FTA here threatens Jo’s negatives face (her freedom of action), yet the context makes the directness socially acceptable.

Data 2:

“Don’t try to make me feel better, Jo. Just tell me the truth,” said Amy, with unusual seriousness. (Chapter 9)

Amy’s directive here is unambiguous and direct. She explicitly instructs Jo not to minimize the situation, requesting honestly without hedging. The use of bald on-record is appropriate here as Amy is appealing to a moment of emotional urgency, prioritizing clarity over diplomatic softening.

Urgent or Crisis Situations

Data 3:

“Come quick! Beth has fainted and Mother isn’t home!”. Cried Jo, rushing into the room with a pale face. (Chapter 18)

This utterance exemplifies the use of bald on-record in an emergency situation. Brown & Levinson (1987) note that when urgency outweighs the need for social niceties, speakers

resort to direct, unmitigated speech. Jo's cry is unhedged and immediate, prioritizing action over face-saving. The FTA is present but overlooked due to the pressing circumstance.

Positive Politeness Strategy

Positive politeness refers to strategies that show the speaker's desire to fulfill the hearer's positive face wants their desire to be liked, appreciated, and understood. Brown & Levinson (1987) identify numerous sub-strategies under positive politeness, including expressing approval, claiming common ground, using in-group identity markers, and offering compliments. This is the most dominant strategy found in the interactions among the March sisters, reflecting their warm and supportive relationship.

Expressing Approval and Appreciation

The sisters frequently use positive politeness by affirming and praising one another, thereby satisfying each other's desire to be valued.

Data 4:

"I think your stories are very good, Jo, and you ought to keep writing," said Meg, with a warmth that was unusual for her. (Chapter 14)

Meg's utterance is a clear example of positive politeness through approval. By commending Jo's writing and encouraging her to continue, Meg attends to Jo's positive face her need for recognition and affirmation. The phrase 'very good' is a direct expression of appreciation that strengthens the sisterly bond. This aligns with Brown & Levinson's (1987) sub-strategy of noticing and attending to the hearer's interests and desires.

Data 5:

"Beth, you play beautifully. I don't know why you won't play for other people." Said Jo, sitting down beside her on the piano bench. (Chapter 13)

Jo's compliment on Beth's musical ability serves as a positive politeness strategy. She validates Beth's talent and simultaneously express mild puzzlement at Beth's shyness, but frames it within an appreciative statement. This shows Jo's awareness of Beth's need for encouragement, and her use of 'beautifully' as a superlative signals genuine admiration.

Claiming Common Ground and In-Group Identity

Data 6:

"We all have our troubles, Jo, and we must just help one another through them," said Meg gently. (Chapter 8)

The pronoun 'we' in Meg's utterance is an important marker of positive politeness, as it invokes a sense of collective identity and solidarity among the sisters. By saying 'we all have our troubles,' Meg normalizes Jo's struggles and positions herself as a co-sufferer, thereby

reducing the social distance between them. This reflects Brown & Levinson's (1987) sub-strategy of claiming common ground and emphasizing in-group membership.

Data 7:

"I know just how you feel, Amy. I used to feel that way too," Jo said sympathetically, putting her arm around her younger sister. (Chapter 11)

Jo employs positive politeness here by expressing empathy and claiming shared experience. The phrase 'I know just how you feel' signals understanding and emotional solidarity, which attends to Amy's positive face by making her feel heard and not alone. This sub-strategy is categorized by Brown & Levinson (1987) as seeking agreement and showing understanding.

Offering and Promising

Data 8:

"I'll help you with your dress, Meg. You'll look lovely, I promise," said Jo cheerfully. (Chapter 3)

Jo's offer to help Meg and her reassurance that Meg will 'look lovely' combines an offer with a compliment – both sub-strategies of positive politeness. The spontaneous offer demonstrates that Jo pays attention to Meg's needs and desires (her positive face), while the promise works to reassure Meg about her self-image. Brown & Levinson (1987) classify offering and promising as acts that fulfill hearer's desire for approval and care.

Negative Politeness Strategy

Negative politeness strategies are oriented toward the hearer's negative face – their desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. According to Brown & Levinson (1987), these strategies include being indirect, using hedges, minimizing the imposition, and expressing deference. Although less frequent than positive politeness in the novel, negative politeness appears in interactions where one sister must request something that may inconvenience or impose upon another.

Hedging and Minimizing Imposition

Data 9:

"I hate to trouble you, Meg, but would you mind lending me your blue ribbon? Just for tonight," Amy asked, looking a little ashamed. (Chapter 5)

Amy's request is a textbook example of negative politeness. She opens with an acknowledgement that she is imposing ('I hate to trouble you'), followed by an indirect question (would you mind'), and then minimizes the imposition with 'just for tonight.' Each of these elements serves to reduce the threat to Meg's negative face. Brown & Levinson (1987)

describe this pattern as a combination of hedging and minimizing the imposition two key sub-strategies of negative politeness.

Expressing Deference

Data 10:

“If it’s not too much to ask, Jo, could you perhaps look over my composition before I submit it? I know you’re busy,” said Amy timidly. (Chapter 10)

Amy’s request to Jo is carefully hedged with conditional clauses (‘if it’s not too much to ask’) and an acknowledgement of Jo’s busy schedule. This deference signals Amy’s awareness of the potential imposition on Jo’s time and freedom. The use of ‘perhaps’ further softens the request. Brown & Levinson (1987) categorize such deferential expressions as strategies that protect the hearer’s negative face while still communicating the speaker’s needs.

Being Conventionally Indirect

Data 11:

“Do you think you could possibly come home a little earlier today, Jo? The house feels very quiet without you,” Beth said softly. (Chapter 12)

Beth’s request for Jo to come home earlier is phrased as a question rather than a command, thereby reducing the directness of the FTA. The use of ‘do you think you could possibly’ is a conventionally indirect formulation that acknowledges Jo’s autonomy. Additionally, Beth provides a reason (‘the house feels very quiet’) that frames the request as an emotional appeal rather than a demand, further softening the imposition.

Off-Record (Indirect) Strategy

Off-record strategies involve communicative acts that are ambiguous enough to allow the speaker to deny that a particular FTA was intended. Brown & Levinson (1987) explain that off-record strategies rely on implicature, metaphor, rhetorical questions, and understatement. Although the least frequent strategy in the data, off-record communication appears in moments where the sisters wish to hint at something sensitive without stating it directly.

Hinting and implicature

Data 12:

“Some people seem to think that silk dresses and gloves are more important than anything else in the world,” Jo remarked, glancing at Amy’s new outfit (Chapter 9)

Jo’s statement is not directly addressed to Amy, yet the reference to ‘some people’ combined with her glance at Amy’s outfit makes the implicature clear. Jo criticizes Amy’s materialism without explicitly naming her, thereby allowing herself an ‘out’ if confronted. This

aligns with Brown & Levinson's (1987) off-record sub-strategy of using vague or ambiguous language to hint at the real message while avoiding direct attribution.

Data 13:

"I wonder if someone remembered to practice her scales today," said Meg, Looking at the ceiling with exaggerated innocence. (Chapter 13)

Meg uses an indirect hint in the form of a wondering statement. By saying 'someone' instead of directly addressing Beth, she softens what is essentially a reminder or mild criticism. The exaggerated innocence noted in the narrative description adds humor while maintaining the off-record nature of the utterance. Brown & Levinson (1987) categorize this as giving hints without explicitly performing the FTA.

Discussion

The findings reveal that positive politeness is the dominant strategy (41.4%), reflecting the emotional closeness and mutually supportive nature of the four March sisters' relationships. Meg, as the eldest, is the most frequent user of this strategy in her quasi-maternal role, though she also employs bald on-record speech when asserting household authority.

The second most frequent strategy is bald on-record (25.7%), reflecting the sisters' high degree of familiarity, which removes the need for elaborate face-saving measures in many interactions. Jo is the primary user of this strategy, consistent with her direct and emotionally candid characterization, though she also resorts to off-record strategies when wishing to express disapproval without triggering open conflict.

Negative politeness (20.0%) appears most frequently in interactions involving requests or situations where one sister imposes on another's autonomy. Amy, as the youngest, relies most heavily on this strategy her use of hedging and indirect questions reflects her heightened awareness of her subordinate position within the sibling hierarchy. Beth similarly gravitates toward this strategy alongside positive politeness, mirroring her gentle, conflict-avoidant disposition.

Off-record strategies (12.9%), though the least frequent, play a significant role in conveying criticism and dissatisfaction without direct confrontation, with Jo as their most frequent user.

Taken together, the distribution of politeness strategies in the novel is not arbitrary but is systematically shaped by four key factors: age and positional authority, power relations interacting with personality, conflict and emotional situation, and conversational context. These findings confirm Brown & Levinson's (1987) assertion that politeness strategy selection

constitutes a rational, context-sensitive response to the social and relational conditions in which communication occurs.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study concludes that all four observable politeness strategies identified by Brown & Levinson (1987) are present in the March sisters' interactions, confirming that Alcott constructed her characters' dialogue with linguistically nuanced and socially realistic interpersonal awareness.

Positive politeness is the dominant strategy (41.4%), reflecting the sisters' fundamentally affectionate and cohesive bonds. Their frequent expressions of approval, use of in-group identity markers, and offers of assistance indicate that solidarity rather than distance naturally orients their communication consistent with Brown and Levinson's assertion that positive politeness thrives in high-solidarity relationships.

Bald on-record (25.7%) reflects not only the sisters' familiarity but also the internal sibling hierarchy. Meg employs it in her quasi-parental role when issuing directives, while Jo's candid temperament leads her to speak directly without mitigation. This strategy thus functions as an expression of positional power as much as intimacy.

Negative politeness (20.0%) emerges primarily in requests and impositions. Amy's use of hedging and indirect constructions reflects her subordinate position, while Beth's preference for mitigation stems from her gentle, conflict-avoidant disposition both cases linking strategy choice to personality and hierarchical positioning.

Off-record strategies (12.9%), though least frequent, are significant for conveying indirect criticism and subtle disapproval. Jo employs them selectively and situationally as a calculated means of voicing dissatisfaction while preserving relational harmony.

Overall, the findings confirm that politeness strategy selection in *Little Women* is systematically shaped by individual personality, the nature of the FTA, and the relational dynamics between sisters. More broadly, politeness in the novel functions as a vehicle through which the sisters enact power, express closeness, and negotiate their identities within the family demonstrating that Brown & Levinson's (1987) framework is a productive tool for literary pragmatic analysis.

REFERENCES

- Alcott, L. M. (1868). *Little women*. Roberts Brothers.
- Alcott, L. M. (1989). *Little women*. Penguin Classics.
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Clarendon Press.
- Blum-Kulka, S. (1997). *Dinner talk: Cultural patterns of sociability and socialization in family discourse*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511813085>
- Culpeper, J. (1996). Towards an anatomy of impoliteness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 25(3), 349–367. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(95\)00014-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(95)00014-3)
- Culpeper, J. (2011). *Impoliteness: Using language to cause offence*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511975752>
- Ely, R., & Gleason, J. B. (1984). I'm sorry I said that: Apologies in young children's discourse. *Journal of Child Language*, 11(3), 599–620. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305000906007446>
- Estes, A. M. (2005). *Little women and the feminist imagination: Criticism, controversy, personal essays*. Garland Publishing.
- Fetzer, A. (2011). Pragmatics as a linguistic concept. In I. W. Norrick (Ed.), *Foundations of pragmatics* (pp. 23–50). De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110214260.23>
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior*. Anchor Books.
- Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Speech acts* (pp. 41–58). Academic Press. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004368811_003
- Hatch, J. A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings*. State University of New York Press.
- Holmes, J. (1995). *Women, men and politeness*. Longman.
- Ide, S. (1989). Formal forms and discernment. In *Multilingual matters* (details of volume/issue not specified).
- Kádár, D. Z. (2013). *Understanding politeness*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139382717>
- Kasper, G. (1990). Linguistic politeness: Current research issues. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 14(2), 193–218. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(90\)90080-W](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(90)90080-W)
- Locher, M. A. (2005). Politeness theory and relational work. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 1(1), 9–33. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jplr.2005.1.1.9>
- Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139173438>
- Sifianou, M. (2013). The impact of globalization on politeness and impoliteness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 45(1), 86–102. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2013.05.016>
- Slugoski, B., & Turnbull, W. (1988). Cruel to be kind and kind to be cruel: Sarcasm, banter and social relations. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 7(2), 101–121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X8800700202>

- Spencer-Oatey, H. (2000). Rapport management: A framework for analysis. In *Culturally speaking: Managing rapport through talk across cultures* (pp. 11–46).
- Spencer-Oatey, H. (2008). (Im)politeness and rapport. In *Culturally speaking: Culture, communication and politeness theory* (pp. 11–47).
- Wolfson, N. (1988). *The bulge: A theory of speech behavior and social distance*. Ablex.
- Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.