

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a general description of the research. It provides the research background, statement of problem, research objectives, research significances, conceptual framework, previous studies and clarification of key terms.

A. Research Background

Language is the primary tool people use to convey ideas, feelings, and intentions, and every choice of words, structure, and delivery is shaped by the social situation behind it (Sari, 2021). In interpersonal relationships specifically, language does more than transmit information: according to Slatcher (2010), the words a person uses in interaction can reveal the closeness, conflict, or satisfaction present in a relationship, which makes analyzing language use an important way of understanding how relationships are built, maintained, and changed over time.

However, language use in a relationship does not always remain stable. When a relationship becomes unstable, marked by inconsistent interaction, repeated conflict, and rapid emotional shifts, speakers may move between direct and indirect expressions, warm and cold tones, or open and closed responses, and they may find it harder to express their feelings effectively, which can lead to misunderstanding or escalating conflict (Christensen, 1988; Counseling Center Group, 2023). These shifts are typically driven by factors such as differing expectations, difficulty handling conflict, and past experiences, and they surface in language through more reactive or attacking wording on one side and indirect or minimal responses on the other (Hossain et al., 2022).

One recurring interaction pattern in unstable relationships is the *demand–withdraw pattern*, introduced by Christensen (1988): one speaker

presses an issue through criticism, complaints, or demands for change, while the other reduces involvement by giving short or indirect responses, changing the subject, or not responding at all. In this study, this pattern is treated not as a psychological concept but as a linguistic one, since the imbalance it describes is visible directly in the forms of the utterances speakers produce (Caughlin & Ramey, 2005). Analyzing this pattern is therefore relevant to linguistic study because it shows how relationship dynamics are reflected through language, and it is used in this study to help explain how such dynamics surface in interaction (Holley et al., 2018).

Beyond delivering meaning directly, speakers also consider how their utterances will be received, which is where politeness strategies come in: according to Brown and Levinson (1987), speakers use these strategies to maintain both their own and the listener's face through appropriate language choices. Brown and Levinson (1987) identify four types, bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record, ranging from the most direct expression of intent to the most implicit, in which meaning is left for the listener to interpret.

In an unstable relationship, politeness strategies become especially important because speakers need to manage how they express disagreement or disappointment without deepening the conflict (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Yule, 1996). This is precisely the dynamic at play in the podcast episode “I Can’t Love You the Way You Want Me To” from *Where Should We Begin?*, where the speakers continually adjust their utterances as the conversation shifts, moving between direct and indirect expressions and different ways of showing closeness or distance while still trying to keep the conversation going despite the instability in their relationship.

Previous research has examined politeness strategies and unstable relationships separately, but rarely together in naturally occurring talk. Sugita (2024) and Daulay et al. (2024), for instance, analyzed politeness strategies in

conflict situations, but in scripted media and general household communication rather than authentic conversation. Meanwhile, studies on unstable relationships, such as Bowen et al. (2017) and the demand–withdraw research by Christensen (1988) and Sagrestano et al. (1999), have concentrated on interaction patterns and relationship characteristics without closely examining the specific politeness strategies speakers use to manage those patterns through language. This gap, between studies that isolate politeness strategies from real relational conflict and studies that describe relational instability without examining its linguistic strategies, is what this study addresses by analyzing politeness strategies in the naturally occurring conversation of a podcast episode depicting an emotionally unstable relationship.

B. Statement of Problem

The research questions serve as the foundation that guides the direction of this study. As discussed in the research background, previous studies on politeness strategies have largely examined scripted or relatively structured contexts, such as fictional dialogue, household talk, or general everyday communication, while studies on unstable relationships have mainly focused on interaction patterns, such as the demand–withdraw pattern, without closely examining the specific linguistic strategies speakers use to manage face and mitigate conflict. This gap becomes evident in the naturally occurring conversation in the episode “I Can’t Love You the Way You Want Me To” of the podcast *Where Should We Begin?*, where the speakers repeatedly shift between direct criticism, appreciation, hedging, and indirect hints while negotiating an ongoing relational conflict. This condition shows that the interaction cannot be fully understood merely by identifying its instability, but requires a closer look at the specific politeness strategies the speakers employ, how these strategies are applied across the conversation, and how they function

in managing an emotionally unstable relationship. Therefore, the researcher formulates the following research questions:

1. What politeness strategies are used by the speakers in the episode “I Can’t Love You the Way You Want Me To” of the podcast Where Should We Begin?
2. How are these politeness strategies applied by the speakers throughout the conversation?
3. How do these politeness strategies manage interaction in an emotionally unstable relationship?

C. Research Objective

Based on the research question formulated above, the purposes of this study are as follows:

1. To analyze the politeness strategies used by the speakers in the episode.
2. To analyze how the speakers apply these politeness strategies during interaction.
3. To analyze how politeness strategies manage interaction in an emotionally unstable relationship.

D. Research Significance

1. Theoretical Significance

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of pragmatic studies by applying Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory (1987) in the context of emotionally unstable relationships. While politeness strategies are often studied in formal or structured situations, this study highlights how they appear in natural conversations that involve tension and changing interaction. By using conversational data,

this study shows that politeness strategies can be understood as patterns of language use, especially in how speakers choose words, adjust their level of directness, and shape their utterances depending on the situation.

Furthermore, this study emphasizes how language is used by speakers to express feelings and manage interaction in emotionally unstable situations. The focus is placed on observable language features, such as word choice, sentence form, and response patterns. Through this approach, the study shows that changes in interaction can be identified through the way speakers use language in conversation.

In addition, this study contributes to pragmatic research by showing how politeness strategies operate in naturally occurring interaction, such as in a podcast. This highlights that everyday language use, especially in conversations with unstable dynamics, can provide meaningful insights for linguistic analysis.

2. Practical Significance

Practically, the findings of this study are expected to provide insights into how language is used to manage interaction in emotionally unstable relationships. By identifying recurring patterns of language use, such as indirectness, mitigation, and politeness strategies, this study can help readers become more aware of how everyday language choices influence the way interaction is carried out.

The results of this study may also serve as a reference for students and researchers who are interested in pragmatics and discourse analysis, especially in the study of natural interaction. In addition, the use of podcast data as the source of analysis shows that digital

conversations can be a valuable source of authentic language data for linguistic research.

Finally, this study may offer practical value for readers in understanding how language is used in everyday interaction, especially in situations that involve tension. The findings may help readers become more aware of how language choices, such as being more direct or indirect, can influence the flow of interaction and help avoid unnecessary conflict.

E. Conceptual Framework

This study employs a conceptual framework to examine the use of politeness strategies in emotionally unstable relationships, as represented in the podcast episode *“I Can’t Love You The Way You Want Me To”* from *Where Should We Begin?*. The framework focuses on how language is used by speakers to express feelings and manage interaction in situations that involve tension and changing dynamics.

This study is based on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory of politeness strategies, which is used as the main tool for analysis. This theory explains how speakers use different strategies, such as bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record, to manage communication and respond to possible face-threatening situations. In this study, these strategies are identified through how speakers choose words, form their utterances, and decide how direct or indirect their speech is.

In emotionally unstable relationships, these strategies show how speakers respond to tension in the relationship. For example, direct language may show conflict or disagreement, while indirect or softened language may show an attempt to reduce tension and maintain the relationship. Through these patterns, language becomes the main way speakers manage their relationship.

Therefore, this framework sees politeness strategies as ways of using language to handle communication in real situations. By focusing on actual conversation, this study explains how politeness strategies are used in situations that involve emotional tension and instability in a relationship.

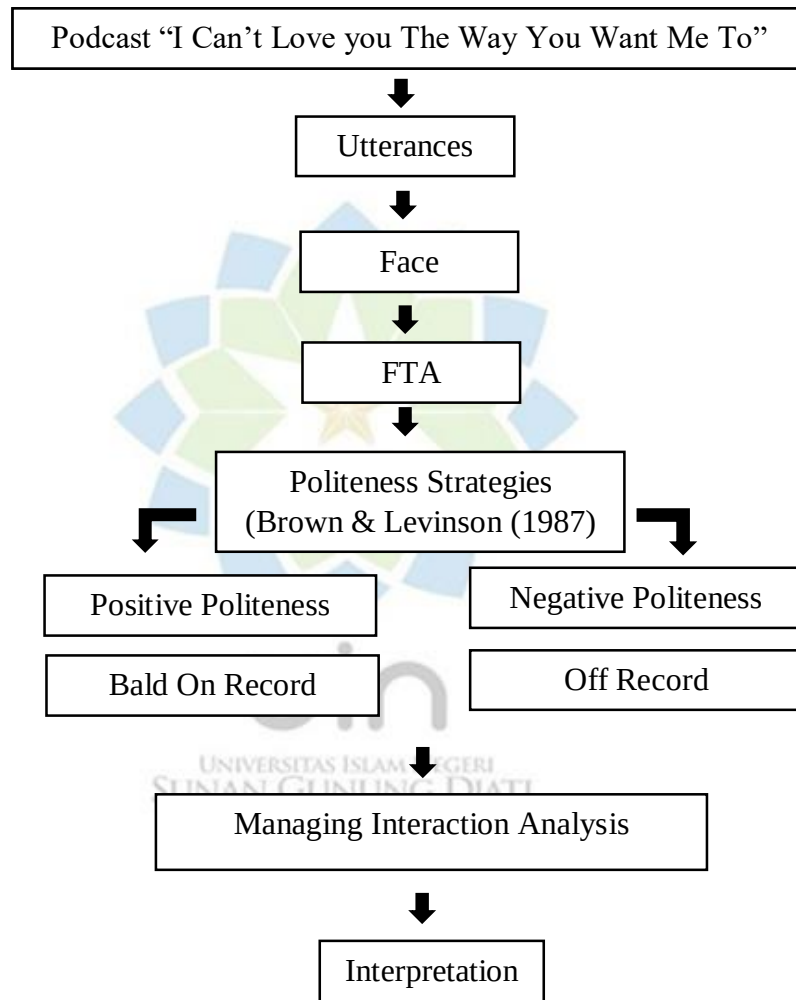


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework