
Power Dynamics Through Politeness Strategies in *Steven Universe: The Movie* (2019)

Villareal Mamengko¹, Olga A. Rorintulus², Imelda S. Lolowang³

^{1,2}) English Language and Literature Study Program, Universitas Negeri Manado, Indonesia

³) English Education Study Program, Universitas Negeri Manado, Indonesia

^{*)} Corresponding Author: villarealmamengko28@gmail.com

Article History

Submitted : March 18th, 2026

Revised : April 08th, 2026

Accepted : April 16th, 2026

KEYWORDS

Politeness Strategies,
Power Dynamics,
Pragmatics,
Steven Universe: The Movie.

ABSTRACT

Politeness strategies play an important role in shaping communication, especially in media where characters' interactions reflect broader social values. While much research has examined politeness in everyday conversations, limited attention has been given to animated films, particularly non-Disney productions like *Steven Universe: The Movie*. This study investigates how politeness strategies and power dynamics are employed by the two central characters, Steven and Spinel, based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness. Using a qualitative method (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), the researcher analyzed the movie's transcript and identified 76 utterances containing different politeness strategies. The findings indicate that, within Brown and Levinson's framework, Off-record strategies were used most frequently (27 occurrences), reflecting the characters' tendency to express emotional conflict through indirectness and implied meaning. Positive Politeness (19 occurrences) appeared when the characters attempted to build solidarity and maintain relationships, while Negative Politeness and Bald-on-record strategies (15 occurrences each) were employed in situations requiring caution or direct confrontation. These patterns show how Steven's empathy-driven language and Spinel's insecurity-driven responses shape their power negotiation throughout the film. Overall, the study demonstrates that politeness strategies not only reveal character traits but also reinforce the movie's themes of reconciliation, forgiveness, and personal growth.

INTRODUCTION

Animation is a unique art form that allows creators to explore complex themes through movement, visual expression, and storytelling. McIntosh (2013) defines animation as the process of creating moving images from drawings, models, or digital renderings arranged in sequence to simulate motion. Wells (1998) expands this by stating that animation is not simply the recording of real-life motion but the artificial construction of movement, frame by frame. As McLaren (as cited in Wells, 1998) points out, animation is not merely about making drawings move but about drawing movement itself, reinforcing the artistic control behind every frame. Given this ability to convey deep emotional and social themes, animated films serve as powerful tools for exploring interpersonal relationships and power structures, as seen in *Steven Universe: The Movie*.

One of the most notable animated films that effectively utilizes language to depict power struggles and emotional depth is *Steven Universe: The Movie* (2019), directed by Rebecca Sugar. As a continuation of the *Steven Universe* television series, the film focuses on themes of reconciliation, identity, and shifting power dynamics, particularly in the interactions between Steven and Spinel. Unlike many animated films centered on external conflicts, *Steven Universe: The Movie* is deeply character-driven, relying on dialogue and linguistic choices to shape relationships and emotional tension. Understanding how characters use language to establish, challenge, or submit to power requires an analytical approach beyond simple dialogue analysis, one that aligns with pragmatics.

Pragmatics, as a subfield of linguistics, examines how meaning is shaped by context, speaker intent, and the relationship between interlocutors (Yule, 1996). Unlike traditional linguistic analysis focused on grammar or structure, pragmatics investigates how language is used to achieve social goals, manage relationships, and convey implied meanings (Leech, 2014). This approach is particularly relevant in *Steven Universe: The Movie*, where characters' language choices reflect attempts to navigate power and resolve emotional conflicts. One of the most influential frameworks within this field is Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, which examines how speakers manage face-threatening acts (FTAs) to maintain social harmony. According to this theory, every individual has a positive face (the desire to be liked and accepted) and a negative face (the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition). In the film, Steven consistently uses politeness to maintain harmony, while Spinel's speech evolves from direct, face-threatening language toward more nuanced strategies, illustrating how linguistic choices signal emotional change and power rebalancing.

Power dynamics, as they intersect with language use, play a crucial role in shaping the interactions analyzed in this study. Fairclough (1989) argues that power is not only embedded in explicit authority but also subtly maintained and negotiated through language, discourse, and communicative choices. In the framework of Brown and Levinson (1987), three social variables (power (P), social distance (D), and rank of imposition (R)) determine the degree of threat an utterance poses and guide speakers in selecting appropriate politeness strategies. Speakers in positions of authority tend toward direct, unmitigated speech, while those with less power rely on deferential or indirect strategies to navigate social hierarchies. In animated storytelling, these dynamics are often made visible through character relationships and narrative conflict, where shifts in language reflect shifts in power. *Steven Universe: The Movie* is particularly rich in this regard, as the central conflict between Steven and Spinel involves not only physical confrontation but a continuous negotiation of emotional authority, social belonging, and relational power, all expressed through language.

In real-life contexts, however, the use of politeness appears to be in decline, particularly among younger generations. Komara et al. (2024) found that excessive exposure to digital media has contributed to a behavioral shift among students, with many no longer greeting teachers or classmates when preoccupied with online games or social media. Similarly, Rahmi et al. (2024) found that preschool-aged children still apply politeness inconsistently. These findings indicate that politeness, while essential for maintaining social harmony, is not always taught or modeled consistently. Given this shift, exploring how politeness is modeled and negotiated through media, especially through family-oriented animated films, becomes increasingly important.

Although politeness strategies have been studied in animated contexts, most research has focused predominantly on Disney productions. Thoyyibah et al. (2021) examined positive politeness in *Up*, finding that characters predominantly used solidarity-based strategies to reinforce friendship and emotional support. Eka (2024) analyzed politeness strategies in *Encanto*, demonstrating how familial power dynamics shaped characters' linguistic choices across generational relationships. Hakim and Novitasari (2022) investigated *Onward*, identifying how characters navigated requests and obligations through a combination of positive and negative politeness in emotionally charged situations. Widiyari and Muttaqin (2023) explored *The Lion King*, showing how bald-on-record strategies were employed by characters in positions of authority to assert dominance and command compliance. While these studies offer valuable insights into how politeness functions in animated narratives, they share a common limitation: all focus exclusively on Disney productions, leaving non-Disney animated works, particularly those from Cartoon Network, largely unexamined. *Steven Universe: The Movie*, with its layered dialogue, emotional complexity, and explicit engagement with themes of trauma, identity, and power negotiation, offers a distinct opportunity to expand politeness research beyond the Disney framework.

This study therefore aims to identify and analyze the politeness strategies employed by the main characters in *Steven Universe: The Movie* and to examine how these strategies reflect and negotiate power dynamics within the film's narrative. Specifically, it applies Brown and Levinson's (1987) four-strategy framework (positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record) to the dialogue between Steven and Spinel. Theoretically, this research contributes to pragmatic and media studies by demonstrating how politeness strategies function not only as face-management tools but as narrative devices that reveal character psychology and drive conflict and resolution in animated storytelling. Practically, the findings offer insights for educators and media analysts on how language, power, and emotion intersect in animated film, and highlight the value of extending linguistic analysis to non-Disney animated productions that engage with more mature social and emotional themes.

Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that examines how meaning is constructed and interpreted in context, considering speaker intent, social relationships, and situational factors rather than grammatical structure alone. Yule (1996) defines pragmatics as the study of how meaning is communicated by a speaker and interpreted by a listener, emphasizing that meaning cannot be separated from context and that what people mean in specific situations matters more than what words mean in isolation. Supporting this, Ollie et al. (2022) describe pragmatics as a branch of linguistics concerned with the ways people use language to achieve their goals, convey meaning, and interact with one another in social situations, looking beyond the literal interpretation of words and sentences to understand meaning as it operates in context. Leech (2014) extends these definitions by describing pragmatics as a study of language in action, shaped by social conventions and communicative goals, and emphasizes that pragmatics does not function in isolation but intersects with semantics, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis, making it an essential tool for understanding how people negotiate meaning, express politeness, and manage social roles in communication. Crystal (2008) further refines this by positioning pragmatics as a field that studies language from the perspective of its users, considering the choices they make, the constraints they encounter, and the effects their language has on others. He notes that the field encompasses areas such as deixis, conversational implicature, presupposition, speech acts, and discourse structure, and has developed subcategories including pragmalinguistics, which focuses on the structural resources available in a language, and sociopragmatics, which examines how language use is shaped by social conditions. Despite variations in definition, scholars agree that pragmatics is essential for understanding how meaning is constructed beyond the literal interpretation of words, making it particularly useful for analyzing politeness strategies and how speakers manage face-threatening acts, assert authority, and navigate power relations through language, all of which are central to the interactions examined in this study.

Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory provides the primary analytical framework for this study. Drawing on Goffman's (1967) concept of face, the theory distinguishes between positive face, the desire to be liked and accepted, and negative face, the desire for autonomy and non-imposition. In every interaction, speakers must manage face-threatening acts (FTAs): utterances such as requests, criticisms, or commands that risk damaging social relationships. The degree of threat is determined by three social variables: power (P), or the relative authority between interlocutors; social distance (D), or the level of familiarity between them; and rank of imposition (R), or the severity of the act itself. These variables guide speakers in selecting an appropriate politeness strategy.

Brown and Levinson (1987) identify four main strategies. Positive politeness reduces social distance through solidarity, inclusive language, and expressions of approval. Negative politeness mitigates imposition through indirectness, hedging, and deference. Bald-on-record strategies involve direct, unmitigated speech, typically used in urgent situations or where close relationships make redress unnecessary. Off-record strategies rely on implication and indirectness, allowing speakers to convey meaning while avoiding explicit responsibility for an FTA. While scholars such as Watts (2003) and Eelen (2001) have critiqued the theory for assuming universal applicability across cultures, it remains a widely used and productive framework for analyzing politeness in both real and fictional discourse.

Power Dynamics in Language

Power dynamics refer to how authority and influence are distributed, asserted, and negotiated through language and social interaction. Fairclough (1989) argues that power is not only embedded in explicit authority but also subtly maintained and reproduced through linguistic choices, discourse structures, and conversational control, distinguishing between power in discourse, how more powerful participants control and constrain others' contributions within an interaction, and power behind discourse, the broader social and institutional forces that shape what can be said, by whom, and in what context. Within the framework of Brown and Levinson (1987), power is one of three key social variables, alongside social distance (D) and rank of imposition (R), that determine the weight of a face-threatening act and guide speakers in selecting appropriate politeness strategies. Speakers in positions of authority tend toward direct, unmitigated speech, as their social standing reduces the need for redressive action, while those with less power rely on deferential or indirect strategies to navigate social hierarchies. This relationship between power and politeness is not static, however, as van Dijk (1993) notes, power in discourse is dynamic and contestable, meaning speakers do not simply reflect their power positions through language but actively use language to assert, resist, and renegotiate those positions in the

course of interaction. Wodak (2001) similarly emphasizes that discourse is a site of social struggle, where competing interests and power relations are played out through linguistic choices, making politeness strategies tools not merely of face management but of power negotiation.

These dynamics are particularly visible in contexts of conflict and reconciliation, where the balance of authority between interlocutors is unstable and subject to change, a condition that characterizes much of animated storytelling, where shifts in language visibly reflect shifts in power across a narrative arc. In *Steven Universe: The Movie* (2019), the central relationship between Steven and Spinel involves a continuous negotiation of emotional authority, social belonging, and relational power that is expressed almost entirely through dialogue. Steven's consistent use of empathetic, solidarity-oriented language positions him as a figure of cooperative rather than coercive power, while Spinel's oscillation between aggressive directness and self-diminishing indirectness reflects the instability of a character whose sense of social worth has been profoundly damaged by abandonment. Analyzing these interactions through the lens of power dynamics therefore provides not only a linguistic account of the characters' communication but a deeper understanding of how language functions as a site of social and emotional struggle in animated narrative.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to examine how politeness strategies shape power dynamics in *Steven Universe: The Movie* (2019). As Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe, qualitative research focuses on understanding human behavior and meaning-making through detailed contextual analysis rather than numerical measurement. Supporting this, Samola (2022) explains that qualitative research is fundamentally descriptive, emphasizing the richness of language and social behavior over statistical data. Sabudu (2020) further characterizes qualitative studies as prioritizing the collection of data in the form of words rather than numbers, focusing on both the process and outcome of social interactions, and relying heavily on inductive data analysis. Rorintulus et al. (2022) similarly note that qualitative research yields descriptive data presented through words, quotations, and descriptions rather than numerical figures, with the researcher acting as the key instrument for data collection and interpretation. This design is appropriate for the present study, as it allows for a context-driven interpretation of character interactions, speech acts, and linguistic choices rather than quantifying politeness occurrences. The analytical framework combines Yule's (1996) pragmatic approach — which examines how language achieves communicative goals in context — with Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory as the primary coding instrument for identifying positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record strategies.

The primary data source is *Steven Universe: The Movie* (2019), directed by Rebecca Sugar and produced by Cartoon Network Studios. Data were collected through repeated viewings of the film, during which the researcher identified dialogues containing face-threatening acts (FTAs) or redressive behavior, noting timestamps, speaker identity, tone, and relevant non-verbal cues. Selected utterances were cross-referenced with the official script sourced from Fandom (www.fandom.com) and manually transcribed where discrepancies were identified. Secondary sources, including scholarly works on pragmatics and politeness theory, provided the theoretical grounding for the analysis.

Data analysis followed Creswell and Creswell's (2018) five-step qualitative procedure: (1) preparing the data by organizing transcripts and scene notes; (2) reading and reviewing the material to identify interactional patterns; (3) coding utterances using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness categories alongside features such as degree of face threat and relational dynamics; (4) describing and analyzing each coded instance in terms of its pragmatic function and contribution to power negotiation; and (5) interpreting findings in relation to relevant theoretical constructs (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Yule, 1996; Leech, 2014). To ensure credibility, the researcher triangulated sources by comparing manual transcriptions with the script and subtitle files, and preserved an audit trail of timestamps and contextual notes throughout the process.

FINDINGS

The analysis of *SUTM* or *Steven Universe: The Movie* (2019) identified 74 utterances containing politeness strategies across all four categories proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Off-record strategies were the most frequent (27 occurrences), followed by positive politeness (18), bald-on-record (15), and negative politeness (14). This distribution reflects the film's emotionally complex narrative,

where indirectness and ambiguity dominate as characters navigate trauma, conflict, and reconciliation. The following table summarizes the overall frequency of each strategy:

Table 1. Frequency of Politeness Strategy in Steven Universe: The Movie

| Politeness Strategy | Total Occurrences |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| Positive Politeness | 18 |
| Negative Politeness | 14 |
| Bald-on-record | 15 |
| Off-record | 27 |
| TOTAL | 74 |

Positive Politeness Strategies

Positive politeness strategies appeared 18 times throughout the film, primarily in Steven's interactions with Spinel and the Crystal Gems. These strategies function to reduce social distance, affirm the hearer's desire to be appreciated, and build solidarity. The following table presents all identified instances:

Table 2. Positive Politeness Strategies in Steven Universe: The Movie

| Code | Utterance | Speaker | Strategy |
|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| PP01 | (00:56:57 — 00:57:06) "Spinel, ...you're not the only one she hurt." | Steven | Notice/attend to H's wants |
| PP02 | (00:59:11 — 00:59:13) "Oh, Spinel! Did you change your hair?" | Garnet | Notice/attend to H's wants |
| PP03 | (00:59:43 — 00:59:46) "Are you kidding? Anything!" (when Steven asks for a favor) | Spinel | Exaggerate |
| PP04 | (01:18:11 — 01:18:26) <i>laughing</i> "Only 6,000 years! That's nothing! I like this Gem." | Yellow Diamond | Exaggerate |
| PP05 | (00:58:51 — 00:58:52) "Guys! Guess who's back?!" | Steven | Intensify interest to H |
| PP06 | (00:52:47 — 00:52:54) "This was our garden! A special world, built just for Pink and I." | Spinel | In-group identity markers |
| PP07 | (01:17:53 — 01:17:55) "My Diamonnnnnnds..." (salute) | Spinel (to Diamonds) | In-group identity markers |
| PP08 | (01:03:20 — 01:03:21) "Her final piece!" (about Garnet) | Steven | Seek agreement |
| PP09 | (01:00:46 — 01:01:00) "We can just forget this whole thing ever happened." | Steven | Avoid disagreement |
| PP10 | (01:17:43 — 01:17:45) "Spinel, you've met the Diamonds before, right?" | Steven | Presuppose/common ground |
| PP11 | (00:54:25 — 00:54:31) "That's what I'm after—the smile in her eyes, the sound of her laughter." (song lyrics) | Steven | Presuppose S's knowledge of H's wants |
| PP12 | (00:57:23 — 00:57:29) "Come back and save the Earth with me. You can start over there, make new friends." | Steven | Offer, promise |
| PP13 | (01:18:42 — 01:18:50) "Come live with us in the palace, there's a room waiting for you." | The Diamonds | Offer, promise |
| PP14 | (00:59:00 — 00:59:02) "We just have to talk to them." (about the Gems) | Steven | Be optimistic |
| PP15 | (01:21:12 — 01:21:22) "I'll be ready every day, for as long as I can say, I can make a change." | Steven | Be optimistic |
| PP16 | (00:57:32 — 00:57:41) "Someday, somewhere, somehow, you'll love again." | Steven | Include both S and H in the activity |

| | | | |
|------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|-------------------------------|
| PP17 | (01:03:12 — 01:03:19) "I've known hardships and confusion, but love can live through it all." | Garnet | Assume reciprocity |
| PP18 | (00:57:14 — 00:57:16) "You deserve a better friend." | Steven | Gift (sympathy/understanding) |

Negative Politeness Strategies

Negative politeness strategies were identified 14 times, typically surfacing when characters sought to minimize imposition, show deference, or soften potentially face-threatening acts. The following table presents all identified instances:

Table 3. Negative Politeness Strategies in Steven Universe: The Movie

| Code | Utterance | Speaker | Strategy |
|------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| NP01 | (00:59:41 — 00:59:43) "Can I ask you a favor?" (to Spinel) | Steven | Be conventionally indirect |
| NP02 | (01:14:23 — 01:14:29) "Um... Steven? Where are you?" | Connie | Be conventionally indirect |
| NP03 | (01:19:25 — 01:18:30) "Do you think you could handle them? They're not exactly easy to get along with." (about the Diamonds) | Steven | Question, hedge |
| NP04 | (01:15:40 — 01:15:41) "Should we lend him a hand?" (about Steven kissing the soil) | Pearl | Question, hedge |
| NP05 | (00:58:53 — 00:59:00) "Won't they all be... not exactly incredibly thrilled to see me like this?" | Spinel | Question, hedge |
| NP06 | (01:17:17 — 01:17:19) "I don't know about this." (to the Diamonds) | Steven | Be Pessimistic |
| NP07 | (01:15:56 — 01:16:01) "I've got work to do. Friendship isn't going to be easy for me." | Spinel | Minimize the imposition, Rx |
| NP08 | (01:15:31 — 01:16:34) "I-I was just carrying it. I-I didn't have anywhere else to put it." (about the Rejuvenator) | Steven | Give deference |
| NP09 | (01:14:21 — 01:14:22) "I'm sorry..." (after the Injector explodes) | Spinel | Apologize |
| NP10 | (01:15:49 — 01:15:52) "Spinel, wait! I really was going to come back." | Steven | Apologize |
| NP11 | (01:01:01 — 01:01:05) "How you gonna forget with me around? I'm the source of all your problems." | Spinel | State the FTA as a general rule |
| NP12 | (01:14:09 — 01:14:15) "There's no such thing as happily ever after. I'll always have more work to do." | Steven | Nominalize |
| NP13 | (01:17:03 — 01:17:08) "Has your planet always been this... destroyed? Not that we're judging." | White Diamond | Nominalize |
| NP14 | (01:15:08 — 01:15:10) "Don't worry. You'll be good as new in no time." (to Greg) | Steven | Go on record as incurring a debt, or not indebting H |

Bald-on-Record Strategies

Bald-on-record strategies were identified 15 times, appearing predominantly in scenes of crisis, urgency, or emotional confrontation. The following table presents all identified instances:

Table 4. Bald-on-Record Strategies in Steven Universe: The Movie

| Code | Utterance | Speaker | Context |
|------|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------|
| BR01 | (01:03:03 — 01:03:04) "No!" (when Spinel tries to hit him) | Steven | Resisting Spinel's provocation |

| | | | |
|------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------------|
| BR02 | (01:02:57 — 01:03:03) "Stop me! You wanna attack me. Just admit it. Or better yet, just TRY it!" | Spinel | Provoking Steven to fight |
| BR03 | (00:59:28 — 00:59:30) "Don't fight! Everything's chill!" (when Connie arrives) | Steven | De-escalating Connie's arrival |
| BR04 | (01:02:06 — 01:02:07) "RUN FOR IT!" | Peridot | Situational emergency |
| BR05 | (01:05:35 — 01:05:36) "We have to stop Spinel." | Garnet | Reasserting team leadership |
| BR06 | (01:05:41 — 01:05:43) "She'll crush you, dude!" | Amethyst | Warning Steven of power imbalance |
| BR07 | (00:59:26 — 00:59:27) "Where's the fight?!" | Connie | Combat readiness |
| BR08 | (00:57:23 — 00:57:26) "Spinel, come back and save the Earth with me." | Steven | Moral appeal |
| BR09 | (01:09:04 — 01:09:07) "I wanna kill you even MORE." | Spinel | Violent aggression |
| BR10 | (01:16:50 — 01:16:53) "Steven! We've come to Earth to live with youuu!" | White Diamond | Asserting authority |
| BR11 | (01:16:40 — 01:16:42) "Steven! What is that smell?" | Yellow Diamond | High-status bluntness |
| BR12 | (01:15:03 — 01:15:05) "Dad, your arm..." (then heals it immediately) | Steven | Immediate caregiving |
| BR13 | (01:01:08 — 01:01:12) "What's your plan for me, huh? ...You gonna leave me alone?!" | Spinel | Fear-driven confrontation |
| BR14 | (00:59:35 — 00:59:38) "Alright, alright! I'll wash my hands!" | Greg | Submissive compliance |
| BR15 | (01:05:50 — 01:05:51) "Move out!" (to the Gems) | Garnet | Strategic command |

Off-Record Strategies

Off-record strategies were the most frequently occurring category, with 27 instances identified. These strategies rely on indirectness, implication, and ambiguity, allowing speakers to convey meaning while avoiding explicit responsibility for face-threatening acts. The following table presents all identified instances:

Table 5. Off-Record Strategies in Steven Universe: The Movie

| Code | Utterance | Speaker | Strategy |
|------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| OR01 | (00:58:53 — 00:59:00) "Won't they all be... not exactly incredibly thrilled to see me like this?" | Spinel | Give hints |
| OR05 | (01:14:09 — 01:14:15) "There's no such thing as happily ever after. I'll always have more work to do." | Steven | Presuppose |
| OR02 | (00:57:10 — 00:57:16) "It's not like that! You deserve a better friend." | Steven (to Spinel) | Give hints |
| OR03 | (00:59:54 — 00:59:55) "That sounds bad." (looking at the Injector) | Lapis | Give association clues |
| OR04 | (00:59:55 — 00:59:56) "That looks bad." | Bismuth | Give association clues |
| OR06 | (00:56:57 — 00:57:06) "Spinel, ...you're not the only one she hurt." | Steven | Presuppose |

| | | | |
|------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------------------|
| OR07 | (01:18:05 — 01:18:09) “Hah, it was only 6,000 years. I could do that standing on my head!” | Spinel | Understate |
| OR08 | (01:14:12 — 01:14:22) “What am I doing? ... I just wanna be a friend.” | Spinel | Understate |
| OR09 | (01:16:44 — 01:16:45) “Ugh, that’s ‘cause you live here.” | Yellow Diamond | Overstate |
| OR10 | (01:16:50 — 01:16:53) “Steven! We’ve come to Earth to live with youuu!” | White Diamond | Overstate |
| OR11 | (01:04:13 — 01:04:16) “It’s the true kinda love.” | Garnet | Tautology |
| OR12 | (01:04:57 — 01:05:01) “It’s called the truth, it’s called the truth.” | Garnet | Tautology |
| OR13 | (01:00:46 — 01:01:00) “We can just forget this whole thing ever happened.” | Steven | Contradiction |
| OR14 | (00:59:28 — 00:59:30) “Everything’s chill!” (while everyone panics) | Steven | Contradiction |
| OR15 | (01:01:57 — 01:01:59) “Well, think again. You’re not getting rid of me that easy!” | Spinel | Irony |
| OR16 | (01:00:30 — 01:00:31) “Well, what are friends for?” (after helping Steven reluctantly) | Spinel | Irony |
| OR17 | (01:13:52 — 01:13:55) “Now I’m not good at all!” | Spinel | Metaphor |
| OR18 | (01:14:12 — 01:14:13) “What am I doing?” | Spinel | Rhetorical question |
| OR19 | (01:01:10 — 01:01:13) “You gonna leave me somewhere? You gonna leave me alone?!” | Spinel | Rhetorical question |
| OR20 | (01:17:03 — 01:17:07) “Has your planet always been this... destroyed?” | White Diamond | Ambiguity |
| OR21 | (01:19:25 — 01:18:30) “Do you think you could handle them? They’re not exactly easy to get along with.” (about the Diamonds) | Steven | Vagueness |
| OR22 | (01:14:11 — 01:14:15) “I’ll always have more work to do.” | Steven | Vagueness |
| OR23 | (01:01:02 — 01:01:05) “I’m the source of all your problems.” | Spinel | Over-generalize |
| OR24 | (01:01:06 — 01:01:07) “Don’t pretend you want me here.” | Spinel | Over-generalize |
| OR25 | (01:02:26 — 01:02:29) “Steven? Why are you fighting? Aren’t we all friends?” | Garnet | Displace H |
| OR26 | (00:59:26 — 00:59:27) “Where’s the fight?!” | Connie | Displace H |
| OR27 | (00:56:30 — 00:56:35) “Happily watching her dri-i-ift...” (song cut off) | Spinel | Ellipsis/incompleteness |

Based on the data presented across the four tables, the findings reveal that all four politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) are present in the dialogue of *SUTM*. Off-record strategies dominate with 27 occurrences, reflecting the film's reliance on indirectness and emotional concealment as primary modes of communication. Positive politeness follows with 18 occurrences, concentrated largely in Steven's interactions and associated with moments of solidarity-building and emotional reassurance. Bald-on-record strategies appear 15 times, clustering around scenes of crisis, urgency, and emotional peak. Negative politeness is the least frequent at 14 occurrences, emerging in moments of deference, guilt, and sensitivity to face-threatening imposition. The distribution across characters shows that Steven accounts for the largest share of utterances (30 total), with positive politeness as his

dominant strategy, while Spinel produces 21 utterances with a strong reliance on off-record strategies, reflecting her emotional instability and difficulty expressing vulnerability directly.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study reveal that all four politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) are employed in *SUTM*, with off-record strategies dominating the overall distribution. This section discusses the implications of these findings in relation to character analysis, power dynamics, and comparisons with previous studies.

Character Analysis: Steven

Steven's politeness profile, dominated by positive politeness (12 occurrences), followed by negative politeness (7), off-record (7), and bald-on-record (4), reflects his consistent role as a compassionate mediator who exercises authority through empathy and solidarity rather than coercion. His positive politeness strategies frequently attend to Spinel's emotional needs, offer promises of belonging, and build group solidarity. When Steven tells Spinel, "*you're not the only one she hurt*" (PP01), he uses emotional alignment to reduce her sense of powerlessness, positioning himself as an equal in shared suffering rather than a figure of authority. His offer and promise strategy, "*Come back and save the Earth with me. You can start over there, make new friends*" (PP12), further demonstrates this approach, framing Spinel's involvement as an opportunity rather than a command and effectively empowering her through language.

His negative politeness strategies reveal sensitivity to face-threatening interactions, particularly those involving Spinel's emotional fragility. His indirect request "*Can I ask you a favor?*" (NP01) and his hedged concern about the Diamonds "*Do you think you could handle them? They're not exactly easy to get along with*" (NP03) both show him actively managing the risk of further destabilizing her. His apologetic reassurance, "*Spinel, wait! I really was going to come back*" (NP10), similarly functions to prevent further emotional harm rather than simply to acknowledge fault. His pessimistic stance before the Diamonds "*I don't know about this*" (NP06) is equally notable, signaling his recognition of a power hierarchy that even he, as Earth's protector, cannot simply override. Although less frequent, his bald-on-record utterances appear in moments of urgency or moral clarity; his emphatic "*No!*" (BR01) when Spinel attacks him asserts defensive power without any softening device, while his direct "*Don't fight! Everything's chill!*" (BR03) prioritizes social control over politeness. His off-record strategies, meanwhile, allow him to signal disillusionment or redirect conflict without confrontation, as when he uses contradiction to diffuse tension ("*We can just forget this whole thing ever happened,*" OR13) or vagueness to accept burden without naming it directly ("*I'll always have more work to do,*" OR22). Overall, Steven's politeness profile illustrates a leader who consistently prioritizes empathy and reconciliation, demonstrating that power can be exercised cooperatively rather than coercively through strategic language use.

Character Analysis: Spinel

Spinel's politeness profile, dominated by off-record strategies (11 occurrences), followed by negative politeness (4), positive politeness (3), and bald-on-record (3), reflects her emotional instability and the tension between her desire for connection and her fear of rejection. Her heavy reliance on off-record strategies is the most linguistically significant aspect of her character, as irony, understatement, rhetorical questions, and ellipsis collectively function as emotional armor, allowing her to express pain without the vulnerability of direct speech. Her understatement of 6,000 years of abandonment, "*Hah, it was only 6,000 years. I could do that standing on my head!*" (OR07) is perhaps the most striking instance, as she trivializes profound trauma through humor, simultaneously protecting herself from exposure and inviting the listener to read between the lines. Her ironic remark after reluctantly helping Steven, "*Well, what are friends for?*" (OR16) similarly mocks the concept of friendship to mask her deep longing for it, while her rhetorical questions "*What am I doing?*" (OR18) and "*You gonna leave me somewhere? You gonna leave me alone?!*" (OR19) externalize her confusion and fear without expecting answers. The abrupt ellipsis of her song lyric "*Happily watching her dri-i-ift...*" (OR27) is among the most narratively significant moments in the film, as the incomplete utterance linguistically enacts the silencing

she experienced during her abandonment, making the film's use of off-record strategy not merely a conversational tool but a narrative device.

Her rare positive politeness utterances are significant precisely because of their infrequency, her exaggerated willingness to help Steven "*Are you kidding? Anything!*" (PP03), and her invocations of shared identity with Pink Diamond and the Diamonds (PP06, PP07) reveal her deep longing for belonging, emerging precisely at moments when she seeks validation from figures of authority or affection. Her negative politeness strategies, meanwhile, tend to emerge at moments of guilt and self-diminishment rather than strategic deference. Her apology "*I'm sorry...*" (NP09), the minimization of her own needs "*Friendship isn't going to be easy for me*" (NP07), and her self-generalizing statement "*I'm the source of all your problems*" (NP11) all reflect internalized low self-worth rooted in her history of abandonment. Her bald-on-record outbursts, "*Stop me! You wanna attack me. Just admit it. Or better yet, just TRY it!*" (BR02) and "*I wanna kill you even MORE*" (BR09), capture raw, unfiltered anger at moments of emotional peak, representing attempts to reclaim agency through dominance when subtler strategies have failed. Taken together, Spinel's politeness strategies construct a portrait of a character torn between her need for connection and her fear of rejection, where language functions simultaneously as a weapon and a cry for help.

Power Dynamics and Politeness

The distribution of politeness strategies across characters reflects the power dynamics that Brown and Levinson (1987) identify as central to linguistic choice. Steven holds positional authority as the leader of the Crystal Gems, yet his dominant use of positive and negative politeness reveals a deliberate choice to exercise cooperative power, influence built through empathy and solidarity rather than hierarchy. His momentary bald-on-record utterances are situationally motivated and quickly abandoned in favor of mitigated speech, indicating that directness for Steven is an exception rather than a default. The Diamonds, by contrast, employ bald-on-record and off-record strategies that reflect unquestioned institutional authority, their bluntness carries no need for mitigation because their hierarchical position renders face-threat negligible from their perspective, consistent with Brown and Levinson's (1987) observation that those with greater power can forgo redressive action.

Spinel's power position is inherently unstable, and her politeness profile mirrors this instability. She oscillates between aggressive assertion through bald-on-record speech and self-diminishment through negative politeness and off-record indirectness, with the balance shifting depending on whether she feels in control or abandoned. As van Dijk (1993) notes, power in discourse is dynamic and contestable, speakers do not simply reflect their power positions through language but actively use language to assert, resist, and renegotiate those positions. This is precisely what Spinel does throughout the film: her bald-on-record confrontations represent attempts to reclaim agency through dominance, while her off-record irony and negative politeness apologies signal her recognition of her own social fragility. As the narrative progresses, her movement from confrontational bald-on-record speech toward apology and understatement marks a gradual, linguistically traceable shift in the power dynamic between her and Steven, illustrating Wodak's (2001) argument that discourse is a site of social struggle where power relations are continuously played out and renegotiated through linguistic choices.

Taken together, the contrasting politeness profiles of Steven and Spinel demonstrate that power in the film is not a fixed property of individuals but a contextual variable that is continuously renegotiated through interaction. Steven's empathetic use of politeness redefines power as cooperative rather than coercive, while Spinel's shifting strategies embody the dangers of unacknowledged emotional needs. The film ultimately presents a vision where reconciliation is achieved not through dominance but through listening, empathizing, and offering forgiveness, and it is through the analysis of politeness strategies that this moral arc becomes linguistically visible.

Comparison with Previous Studies

The dominance of off-record strategies in *SUTM* distinguishes it from most prior research on politeness in animated media. Pramadiasta and Garnida (2024), analyzing *The School for Good and Evil*, found positive politeness to be dominant, reflecting straightforward alliance-building among characters with higher-status individuals tending to use bald-on-record strategies to assert dominance while lower-status ones employed negative politeness to show deference. This pattern partially aligns

with the present findings, particularly in the Diamonds' blunt, unmitigated speech and Spinel's deference toward them, but diverges in that Spinel's dominant strategy is off-record rather than negative politeness, suggesting that emotional instability, not simply low social status, shapes her linguistic choices. Ananda, Rosnija, and Wardah (2025), studying *Onward*, identified positive and negative politeness as the leading strategies, tied to themes of family bonding and self-discovery, while Fiaz et al. (2024), examining children's animated series, found positive politeness most prevalent, consistent with cooperative and friendly portrayals in children's media. The contrast between these findings and the present study's emphasis on off-record strategies points to a meaningful distinction between *SUTM* and more conventional animated narratives: where the latter tend to foreground solidarity and cooperation through positive politeness, *SUTM* foregrounds emotional concealment and indirectness, reflecting its more mature thematic concerns with trauma, abandonment, and identity. Jegede (2024), in his study of *Anowa*, demonstrated how gendered power structures shape linguistic choices, with male characters favoring direct speech and female characters relying on off-record and negative politeness to navigate restrictive norms, a finding that resonates with the present study's observation that characters in less stable power positions gravitate toward indirectness and ambiguity as primary communicative modes. Overall, the comparison demonstrates that while previous studies frequently identified positive politeness as the dominant strategy in animated and fantasy narratives, *SUTM* distinguishes itself by foregrounding off-record strategies, positioning it as a distinct and underexamined case within the pragmatics of animated film.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed politeness strategies and power dynamics in *SUTM* (2019) using Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory as the primary analytical framework. The findings confirm that all four politeness strategies (positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record) are present in the film's dialogue, with off-record strategies occurring most frequently (27 instances), followed by positive politeness (18), bald-on-record (15), and negative politeness (14). This distribution reflects the film's emotionally complex narrative, where characters more often communicate through indirectness, ambiguity, and implication than through direct or solidarity-based speech.

The character-level analysis reveals that Steven's dominant use of positive politeness positions him as a compassionate mediator who exercises authority through empathy and solidarity rather than coercion. Spinel's heavy reliance on off-record strategies, by contrast, reflects her emotional instability and her difficulty expressing vulnerability directly, her irony, understatement, and rhetorical questions function simultaneously as emotional armor and as indirect appeals for recognition. Power dynamics further shaped these choices: Steven's positional authority as leader allowed him to sustain mitigated, cooperative speech even in confrontational moments, while Spinel's unstable power position produced oscillation between aggressive bald-on-record outbursts and self-diminishing negative politeness. Ultimately, reconciliation in the film is achieved not through dominance but through Steven's persistent use of empathy-driven politeness, demonstrating that language can serve as a tool of transformative rather than coercive power.

These findings contribute to pragmatic and media studies by demonstrating that politeness strategies in animated film function not only as face-management tools but as narrative devices that reflect character psychology, drive conflict, and enable resolution. The study also addresses a gap in the existing literature by extending politeness analysis beyond Disney productions to a Cartoon Network narrative with more mature thematic concerns. Future research may expand this analysis by incorporating additional characters, applying multimodal discourse analysis to account for non-verbal cues such as gesture and intonation, or conducting cross-cultural comparisons of politeness strategies across animated productions from different cultural contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors also wish to thank all individuals who provided encouragement, technical assistance, and helpful discussions during the completion of this article.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

REFERENCES

- Ananda, W. O., & Rosnija, E. (2025). Politeness Strategies and Factors in the Animated Movie Onward. *Jurnal Media Informatika*, 7(1), 540-544.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Crystal, D. (2008). *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics (6th ed.)*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Eelen, G. (2001). *A Critique of Politeness Theories*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing.
- Eka, F. (2024). *An Analysis Of Politeness Strategy Used In Encanto Movie* (Doctoral dissertation, UIN Raden Intan Lampung).
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and Power*. London: Longman.
- Fiaz, S., Kashif, F., & Asgher, T. (2024). A Comparative Ethnographic Analysis Of Politeness Strategies Found In Animated Series Jaan And Sofia The First. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and TESOL (JALT)*, 7(4), 18-35.
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face to Face Behavior*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Hakim, M. L., & Novitasari, N. F. (2022). Politeness Strategies Used By the Main Character in the Film Onward. *Celtic: A Journal of Culture, English Language Teaching, Literature and Linguistics*, 9(2), 191-204.
- Jegede, O. O. (2024). Politeness Strategies and Power Dynamics in Interactions Between Characters in Ama Ata Aidoo's Anowa. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 28(2), 61-70.
- Komara, I. B., Muslimah, R., Septiany, S., Leong, C. R., & Giwangsa, S. F. (2024). Digital Generation: Are Manners Fading? Case Study at SDN 212 Harapan. *Widyagogik: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Pembelajaran Sekolah Dasar*, 12(1), 61-73.
- Leech, G. (2014). *The Pragmatics Of Politeness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McIntosh, C. (2013). *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (4th ed.)*. Cambridge University Press.
- Olii, S. T., Humiang, D. A., & Tuerah, I. J. (2023). An Analysis of Illocutionary Acts in Taylor Swift's Speech at NYU's 2022 Commencement. *Journal of English Culture, Language, Literature and Education*. <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID/264468982>.
- Pramadiasta, A., & Garnida, S C. (2024). An Analysis Politeness Strategies in Characters Utterances in The School for Good and Evil movie. *In Proceeding of Undergraduate Conference on Literature, Linguistic, and Cultural Studies* 3(1), 69-76.
- Rahmi, Y., Adawiyah, N., & Dilaro, N. N. (2024). Case Study: Language Politeness in Preschool Children at Ar-Rahman School. *Journal of Language, Literature, and Educational Research*, 1(1), 7-11.
- Rorintulus, O. A., Lolowang, I., Suoth, A. A., Mokal, P., Wilar, B., & Pratasik, G. (2022). Women's Struggle to Achieve Their Gender Equality in Pride and Prejudice and Jurnal Ph.D Mama: A Comparative Study. *Klasikal: Journal of Education, Language Teaching and Science*, 4(2), 197-208.
- Sabudu, D. (2020). The Reflection of Loyalty in Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man And The Sea. *Jurnal Penelitian Humaniora*, 21(1), 24-32.
- Samola, N., & Lendo, S. (2022). Semantic Analysis on Metonymy Expressions in Manado Malay. *Journal of English Language and Literature Teaching*, 7(1), 290-294.
- Thoyyibah, I. M., Sembiring, L. T. A. B., & Rullyanti, M. (2021). An Analysis of Positive Politeness Strategy Used In " Up " Movie. *Literary Criticism*, 8(1), 27-32.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & society*, 4(2), 249-283.
- Watts, R. J. (2003). *Politeness*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wells, P. (1998). *Understanding Animation*. London: Psychology Press.
- Widiasari, R., & Muttaqin, Z. (2023). *Politeness Strategies Performed By The Characters In The Lion King Movie (Pragmatics Approach)* (Doctoral dissertation, UIN Raden Mas Said).
- Wodak, R. (2001). What CDA Is about—A Summary of Its History, Important Concepts and Its Developments. In W. R., & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (pp. 1-13). London: Sage Publications.
- Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics (Oxford Introduction To Language Study)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.