

Politeness, Power, and Ideology in Romantic Film Discourse: Critical Discourse Analysis of Dear John

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Abstract

Politeness was not merely a pragmatic strategy in interpersonal communication but also a discursive practice shaped by power relations, ideology, and social context. This study examined politeness as a discursive practice in the film "Dear John" (2010) using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework. The goal of the study was to reveal how politeness strategies are constructed, negotiated, and contested through language in intimate relationships portrayed in the film. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, the data consist of selected dialogues between the main characters, John and Savannah, which contained politeness-related expressions. The analysis integrated Brown and Levinson's politeness theory with Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA: textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. The findings show that politeness strategies in "Dear John" function not only to maintain interpersonal harmony but also to reflect unequal emotional power, moral positioning, and ideological assumptions about love, sacrifice, and gender roles. Positive politeness dominates the interactions, while The Negative politeness and off-record strategies emerge in moments of conflict and emotional distance. The novelty of this study lies in its integration of politeness theory and CDA to demonstrate how politeness operates as an ideological and discursive resource within romantic narratives. This study contributed theoretically to politeness theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by reconceptualizing politeness as an ideological form of soft power rather than a neutral pragmatic strategy. By integrating politeness theory with CDA, the study demonstrates how politeness in romantic film discourse mediates power relations, constructs moral positioning, and reproduces

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1. Introduction

Language plays a central role in shaping social relationships, negotiating meaning, and constructing reality within both everyday interaction and mediated discourse. In pragmatics, politeness has long been understood as a fundamental mechanism through which speakers manage interpersonal relations and mitigate potential conflict in communication (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Politeness strategies enable interlocutors to attend to each other's social "face," balancing the need for clarity with the desire to maintain harmony. In light of the growing complexity of modern communicative practices, politeness research has spread over the past few decades beyond face-to-face interaction to institutional discourse, digital communication, and educational contexts (Maulidya et al., 2022; Mulyati et al., 2023).

Simultaneously, the study of film discourse has become more popular as academics acknowledge movies as potent cultural texts that replicate, negotiate, and occasionally question prevailing societal norms and ideas in addition to being entertaining. Despite being scripted, movie dialogue makes extensive use of common conversational conventions, making it a useful subject for linguistic and pragmatic analysis (Dynel, 2017). Films are especially pertinent for analyzing politeness as a socially placed practice since they create interpersonal interactions, emotional trajectories, and social hierarchies through discourse. In particular, romantic movies emphasize emotional connection, intimacy, conflict, and reconciliation situations where politeness techniques are regularly used and renegotiated.

Recent studies have increasingly explored politeness strategies in film dialogues using Brown and Levinson's framework. Research on films such as *A Walk to Remember* (Kasim & Satria, 2024), *Me Before You* (Febriyani et al., 2023), *The Social Network* (Aziz & Hashim, 2025), and *Glass Onion* (Ramlee et al., 2025) demonstrates that characters' choices of politeness strategies are closely related to narrative roles, power relations, and interpersonal goals. These studies have contributed valuable insights into how positive, negative, bald-on-record, and off-record strategies function in cinematic interaction. However, much of this scholarship remains descriptive, focusing primarily on the classification and frequency of politeness strategies without sufficiently interrogating their broader social and ideological implications.

This limitation becomes particularly salient when politeness is viewed not merely as a pragmatic tool but as a discursive practice embedded in power relations, social norms, and cultural expectations. From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, language is not neutral; it is a form of social practice that both reflects and shapes social structures, identities, and ideologies (Fairclough, 2010). CDA emphasizes how discourse contributes to the reproduction or contestation of dominance, inequality, and normative values. When applied to politeness, CDA enables researchers to move beyond surface-level strategy identification and examine how politeness operates ideologically for example, how it reinforces gender roles, emotional labor expectations, or asymmetrical power relations in interpersonal communication.

This study advances the theoretical claim that politeness in romantic film discourse functions as an ideological resource rather than a purely interpersonal phenomenon. Through the regulation of emotional expression and interactional roles, politeness strategies contribute to the normalization of gendered power relations in romantic narratives.

By articulating this claim, the study moves beyond methodological integration and offers a theoretical account of how micro-level politeness strategies contribute to macro-level ideological constructions in cinematic discourse.

The film *Dear John* (2009) offers a particularly compelling case for addressing this gap. As a romantic drama centred on long-distance relationships, emotional sacrifice, and moral dilemmas, *Dear John* relies heavily on dialogue to convey intimacy, conflict, and personal transformation. The interactions between characters are marked by negotiation of commitment, autonomy, and emotional responsibility contexts that inherently involve face-threatening acts and the strategic use of politeness. Moreover, the film reflects broader cultural discourses surrounding love, gender expectations, military service, and emotional restraint, making it a rich site for critical linguistic inquiry.

However, existing analyses of *Dear John* have predominantly focused on literary themes, moral values, or narrative structure, with limited attention to its linguistic and pragmatic dimensions. To date, no study has systematically examined how politeness functions as a discursive practice in the film, particularly through a CDA lens. This absence highlights a clear research gap: the need to understand how politeness in romantic film dialogue not only facilitates interpersonal communication but also participates in constructing and legitimizing social norms and ideologies.

Therefore, this study positions politeness as a discursive resource through which characters in *Dear John* negotiate identity, power, and emotional alignment. By integrating Brown and Levinson's politeness theory with Critical Discourse Analysis, the research aims to uncover how politeness strategies operate beyond face-saving functions to shape narrative meaning and reflect broader socio cultural values. The novelty of this research lies in its critical exploration of politeness as an ideological resource that shapes representations of love, sacrifice, and gender roles in romantic film discourse.

2. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach within a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework. The data consist of 20 purposively selected dialogues from the film *Dear John* that exemplify the use of politeness strategies in moments of relational negotiation. The dialogues were selected based on explicit indicators of face-threatening acts (FTAs), emotional conflict, and power asymmetry between characters. FTAs were identified following Brown and Levinson's categorization, including threats to positive face (e.g., criticism, rejection) and negative face (e.g., imposition, constraint). Emotional conflict was determined through verbal disagreement, expressions of emotional tension, and narrative context, while power imbalance was identified through asymmetries in decision-making, emotional control, and relational dependency within the scene.

Data selection followed a multi-stage analytical procedure. First, the film was viewed repeatedly to identify scenes involving interpersonal tension, relational negotiation, or emotional confrontation between the main characters. Second, dialogues containing potential face-threatening acts were isolated and examined using Brown and Levinson's politeness framework. Utterances were categorized based on whether they threatened positive face (e.g., disapproval, emotional distancing) or negative face (e.g., demands, constraints on autonomy).

Third, politeness strategies employed to mitigate these threats such as indirectness, hedging, apologies, or emotional self-restraint were coded and classified. The final selection of 20 dialogues was based on the recurrence and discursive salience of these strategies across different narrative contexts.

Analytical interpretation proceeded through micro-level analysis of linguistic choices, which was then connected to macro-level discursive patterns concerning emotion regulation, gendered interactional roles, and power relations, in line with CDA principles. To enhance analytical transparency, representative excerpts are discussed in detail in the analysis section. Researcher reflexivity was maintained by continuously reflecting on interpretive decisions and grounding claims in textual evidence rather than character intention alone.

3. Result and Discussion

Table 1. Politeness Strategies as Discursive Practice in Film *Dear John*

No	Dialogue Excerpt	Speaker	Politeness Strategies	CDA Interpretation
1	I just want you to understand why I have to stay."	John	Negative politeness (justification, mitigation)	Legitimizes absence while minimizing responsibility
2	"I know this is hard for you, but I'll wait."	Savannah	Positive politeness (empathy, solidarity)	Naturalizes emotional sacrifice
3	"I never meant to hurt you."	John	Negative politeness (apology)	Deflects accountability through moral framing
4	"I believe in what you're doing."	Savannah	Positive politeness (approval)	Ratifies moral authority
5	"Maybe someday things will be different."	John	Off record strategy (hedging)	Maintains ambiguity and control
6	"I don't want to pressure you."	Savannah	Negative politeness (deference)	Suppresses confrontation
7	"You deserve someone better."	John	Negative politeness (self-deprecation)	Justifies withdrawal
8	"As long as you're happy, I'm fine."	Savannah	Positive politeness (self-effacement)	Reinforces unequal emotional labor
9	"I hope you can forgive me."	John	Negative politeness (appeal)	Seeks absolution without change

10	"I understand your silence."	Savannah	Positive politeness (acceptance)	Normalize neglect
11	"It's complicated to explain."	John	Off record (vagueness)	Obscures agency
12	"Take all the time you need."	Savannah	Negative politeness (non-imposition)	Delays resolution
13	"I didn't know how to say this."	John	Negative politeness (hedging)	Softens face-threatening act
14	"I trust your decision."	Savannah	Positive politeness (support)	Transfer power
15	"I hope you won't hate me for this."	John	Negative politeness (fear of disapproval)	Frames choice as unavoidable
16	"I'll always care about you."	Savannah	Positive politeness (affection)	Maintains emotional bond
17	"This isn't goodbye forever."	John	Off record (wish expression)	Keeps discursive control
18	"I don't regret loving you."	Savannah	Positive politeness (affirmation)	Romanticizes loss
19	"I wish things were easier."	John	Off record (wish expressing)	Avoids responsibility
20	"I just want you to be okay."	Savannah	Positive politeness (concern)	Centers partner's needs

3.1 Politeness as an Ideological Resource

Table 1 demonstrates that politeness strategies in *Dear John* function not merely as interpersonal devices but as discursive practices that operate ideologically across textual, discursive, and social dimensions. This finding is consistent with Dynel's (2017) argument that scripted film dialogue is pragmatically rich and socially meaningful rather than a transparent reflection of everyday interaction. From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, politeness emerges here as a linguistic resource through which emotional relations and moral evaluations are structured (Fairclough, 2010).

At the textual level, the predominance of positive politeness in romantic exchanges reflects Brown and Levinson's (1987) claim that such strategies enhance the hearer's positive face and minimize social distance. However, within the genre conventions of romantic cinema (Kasim & Satria, 2024), this linguistic closeness simultaneously functions to frame emotionally consequential decisions such as absence or emotional withdrawal as caring and ethically justified. Thus, politeness does not merely soften interaction but actively shapes how emotional responsibility is discursively assigned.

At the level of discursive practice, the patterned distribution of politeness strategies contributes to character construction and power negotiation. Savannah's frequent reliance on negative politeness and off-record strategies aligns with observations by Maulidya et al. (2022) that mitigation and indirectness often index relational responsibility. However, a CDA-oriented interpretation reveals that this positioning also limits her discursive authority, while John's

comparatively more direct strategies allow him to define relational outcomes as inevitable or morally grounded (Fairclough, 2010).

At the level of social practice, these linguistic patterns reproduce broader ideological meanings related to romance, gender, and institutional duty. As Fairclough (2010) argues, ideological effects often emerge through the naturalization of repeated discursive practices. In *Dear John*, politeness enables emotional sacrifice and restraint to be interpreted as moral virtues, thereby legitimizing unequal emotional relations within romantic discourse.

3.1.1 Politeness as an Ideological Resource in Romantic Discourse

The findings of this study support the view that politeness in *Dear John* operates as an ideological resource through which romantic discourse is constructed and legitimized. In line with Fairclough's (2010) conception of discourse as social practice, romantic film dialogue does not merely represent love but actively shapes how love, sacrifice, and obligation are evaluated. Politeness strategies are central to this process because they mediate emotional conflict through socially valued norms of respect and consideration.

Consistent with Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, negative politeness and off-record strategies are frequently used to minimize imposition during moments of emotional tension. However, when examined critically, these strategies also function to regulate emotional expression. As Dynel (2017) notes, film dialogue often guides audience interpretation through pragmatic patterning. In *Dear John*, indirectness and mitigation transform potentially confrontational moments into morally resolved interactions, reducing the discursive space for resistance.

Romantic ideology is further reinforced through the association between politeness and moral virtue. As Maulidya et al. (2022) and Mulyati et al. (2023) observe, polite emotional restraint is often framed as emotional responsibility, particularly for female characters. In the present data, acts of emotional withholding or self-denial are softened through polite language and positioned as signs of maturity and care, thereby obscuring the unequal emotional costs embedded in such interactions.

From a CDA perspective, this pattern illustrates how politeness contributes to the naturalization of dominant romantic ideologies. By presenting emotional self-sacrifice as polite and loving, the film renders unequal relational arrangements consensual and commonsensical rather than ideologically structured (Fairclough, 2010).

3.1.2 Power, Emotional Authority, and Discursive Control

The analysis confirms that politeness strategies in *Dear John* function as discursive tools for negotiating power, emotional authority, and interactional control. As Fairclough (2010) emphasizes, power is often exercised through normative linguistic practices rather than overt domination. Politeness, in this sense, regulates who may speak directly, whose emotions are prioritized, and which interpretations are validated.

Emotional authority the capacity to define appropriate emotional responses is unevenly distributed through politeness. Brown and Levinson (1987) note that direct strategies may threaten face, yet in institutional or moral contexts, such directness is often legitimized. In *Dear John*, characters invoking military duty or moral necessity are able to employ more direct strategies that close down negotiation while maintaining moral credibility.

Conversely, Savannah's reliance on negative politeness and off-record strategies reflects what Mulyati et al. (2023) identify as gendered expectations of emotional accommodation. While these strategies protect interpersonal harmony, they simultaneously constrain her discursive authority by framing emotionally consequential judgments as tentative or inevitable rather than negotiable.

This asymmetry illustrates Fairclough's (2010) notion of the naturalization of power: emotional control is exercised through polite language that appears cooperative and respectful. As a result, politeness contributes to the maintenance of discursive control by aligning emotional legitimacy with institutional and moral authority.

3.1.3 *Politeness, Gender, and the naturalization of Inequality*

The findings indicate that politeness strategies in *Dear John* play a central role in the discursive construction of gendered identities and the naturalization of unequal emotional roles. As Fairclough (2010) argues, inequality is frequently reproduced through everyday linguistic practices that render asymmetry normal and morally acceptable rather than through explicit domination.

Female characters, particularly Savannah, predominantly employ negative politeness and off-record strategies characterized by hedging, apology, and self-effacement. This pattern is consistent with findings by Maulidya et al. (2022) and Mulyati et al. (2023), who show that women's linguistic accommodation is often framed as normative emotional responsibility. From a CDA perspective, however, such politeness limits female discursive authority by positioning emotional self-sacrifice as an ethical obligation rather than a negotiable choice.

Male characters, by contrast, more frequently employ positive politeness or bald-on-record strategies in contexts framed by moral or institutional authority. This asymmetry reflects what Fairclough (2010) terms the unequal distribution of discursive rights, whereby certain speakers are authorized to be direct while others are expected to mitigate. As Ramlee et al. (2025) argue, such patterns contribute to the subtle reproduction of gender discrimination in media discourse.

Because politeness is culturally associated with virtue, care, and respect, these gendered asymmetries are rarely perceived as unequal. Instead, they are naturalized as expressions of love and devotion, allowing gendered power relations to be reproduced without overt contestation.

At a broader level, these findings demonstrate that politeness in romantic films is deeply implicated in ideological work. Rather than functioning as a neutral mechanism of interpersonal harmony, politeness participates in the construction of gendered subject positions, the regulation of emotional expression, and the legitimization of unequal power relations. By embedding these patterns within familiar romantic narratives, the film renders such inequalities commonsensical and emotionally persuasive. This study therefore contributes to Critical Discourse Analysis by showing how micro-level pragmatic choices in popular media sustain macro-level ideologies of gender, love, and emotional responsibility.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that politeness in *Dear John* operates as a socio-discursive practice embedded in power relations and ideology rather than merely as a pragmatic strategy for maintaining interpersonal harmony. By integrating politeness theory with Critical Discourse Analysis, the findings show how politeness constructs emotional authority, moral legitimacy, and gendered expectations within romantic discourse. This research contributes to politeness studies by foregrounding its ideological function in shaping romantic narratives and normalizing unequal emotional relations. Future research may extend this critical framework to other literary and cinematic texts to further examine politeness as a mechanism of ideological reproduction in media discourse.

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