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POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN GORONTALO SPOUSAL COMMUNICATION: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

In Indonesia, marital instability is often linked to persistent disputes and communication breakdowns, yet the role of spouses' everyday language in managing or escalating conflict remains underexplored. This study aims to examine how Gorontalo spouses employ Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies in marital communication, focusing on the identification of strategy choices, their pragmatic realization, and the contextual and relational factors influencing these choices. This study adopts a qualitative descriptive design within a pragmatic framework, with data collected from April to May 2026 through in-depth interviews with 4 married individuals. Data were analysed using the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), supported by Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. The findings reveal that all four politeness strategies are used in spousal interaction, with positive politeness being the most dominant, particularly in cooperative contexts such as parenting and problem-solving, indicating a strong orientation toward solidarity and shared responsibility. Negative politeness appears in situations involving requests or emotional sensitivity, reflecting awareness of autonomy and interpersonal boundaries. Off-record strategies are used in delicate contexts such as criticism or reminders to avoid confrontation and maintain emotional stability, while bald-on-record strategies are applied in urgent situations requiring clarity and immediacy. In conclusion, Gorontalo spouses strategically adjust their politeness choices to the purpose and sensitivity of an interaction, suggesting that effective use of politeness helps sustain mutual respect, reduce potential conflict, and support harmony in marital communication.

Keywords: *politeness strategies; marital communication; pragmatics; Gorontalo spouses.*

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, marital instability has remained a significant social concern in Indonesia. National statistics indicate that hundreds of thousands of divorce cases are recorded annually, with persistent disputes and ongoing

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quarrels cited as the dominant causes of separation (Yonatan, 2026). A substantial proportion of these cases are associated with repeated conflicts and communication breakdown between spouses (Taufani, 2024). These figures suggest that beyond economic or legal dimensions, everyday interpersonal interaction plays a crucial role in shaping marital outcomes.

While divorce is often examined from legal, psychological, or socioeconomic perspectives, less attention has been given to the linguistic processes through which conflict is constructed, negotiated, and potentially mitigated in daily marital interaction. Many domestic disagreements do not arise solely from major issues but from routine exchanges such as requests, reminders, disagreements, and expressions of dissatisfaction (Todd, 2025). The way these utterances are formulated, including their level of directness, mitigation, and sensitivity to the interlocutor's face can significantly influence emotional responses and relational stability.

From a pragmatic perspective, meaning in marital interaction is not confined to literal content but emerges through context, shared history, relational intimacy, and situational dynamics. Everyday spousal communication frequently involves face-threatening acts, such as criticism, disagreement, or imposition. These acts require strategic linguistic management to maintain relational harmony (Karmila et al., 2025). The concept of face introduced by Goffman (1967) provides a foundation for understanding such interaction, while Brown and Levinson's (1983) politeness theory offers a systematic framework for analyzing how speakers manage face threats through bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies.

Despite the social relevance of communication in marital stability, pragmatic research has largely concentrated on institutional or public discourse, while spousal interaction remains relatively underexplored. Moreover, existing studies on marital communication tend to prioritise psychological outcomes rather than systematically examining the linguistic strategies through which face management and relational negotiation occur (Purnamasari et al., 2020). Limited attention has been given to spouses' politeness strategy choices, how these chosen strategies are pragmatically realized through linguistic features, and how contextual and relational factors influence communicative choices in marital settings.

In response to this gap, the present study adopts a pragmatic analytical approach to investigate politeness strategies in Indonesian spousal communication. Focusing on elicited responses to everyday marital situations among Gorontalo spouses, this study aims to identify the politeness strategy choices of participants, analyse how those chosen strategies are pragmatically realized, and examine the contextual and relational factors influencing their communicative choices. By linking linguistic analysis with socially relevant marital interaction, this research seeks to contribute both to pragmatic theory and to a deeper understanding of communication dynamics within Indonesian marriages.

Accordingly, the present study narrows its focus to the identification of politeness strategies employed by Gorontalo spouses in everyday marital interaction. Specifically, it investigates the strategies selected by spouses when

responding to common marital situations, providing a foundation for a pragmatic analysis of politeness in Indonesian marital communication. By identifying these strategy choices, the study aims to offer a systematic account of how politeness is employed in everyday spousal interaction and to contribute to a deeper understanding of face management and interpersonal communication within the context of Indonesian marriage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pragmatics is the branch of linguistics that studies how meaning is communicated and interpreted in context, rather than being determined solely by the literal meanings of words and sentences (Yule, 1996). It examines how speakers make communicative choices and how hearers infer intended meanings by considering contextual factors such as interpersonal relationships, shared knowledge, and situational circumstances. Because language use is context-dependent, speakers continually adapt their utterances to achieve communicative goals while maintaining appropriate social relationships. This perspective is particularly relevant to marital communication, where everyday interaction involves requests, disagreements, reminders, criticism, and other situations requiring speakers to balance the expression of personal intentions with relational harmony (Karmila et.al, 2025). Since these communicative choices are closely related to the management of interpersonal relationships, understanding politeness in interaction begins with the concept of face.

The concept of face, introduced by Goffman (1967), refers to the public self-image that individuals seek to maintain during social interaction. Building on this concept, Brown and Levinson (1983) distinguish positive face, the desire to be appreciated and accepted by others, and negative face, the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. Communicative acts that potentially threaten either aspect are termed face-threatening acts (FTAs), including requests, criticism, disagreement, complaints, reminders, and refusals. Since such acts are unavoidable in everyday interaction, speakers typically employ various communicative strategies to minimize potential threats to face while accomplishing their communicative goals.

In marital relationships, where spouses regularly negotiate household responsibilities, decision-making, and interpersonal conflicts, face management becomes particularly important because communicative choices directly influence relational harmony (Worley et.al, 2018). The need to manage face in these situations forms the basis of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. According to Brown and Levinson (1983), the choice of a politeness strategy is influenced by the seriousness of a face-threatening act and the speaker’s assessment of the interactional situation. Rather than simply conveying information, speakers select particular communicative forms that enable them to achieve their goals while considering the potential impact of their utterances on the interlocutor. The theory identifies four broad politeness strategies: bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record.

Bald-on-record is the most direct politeness strategy. In this strategy, speakers express their intentions clearly and explicitly without employing significant mitigation or redressive action. Direct requests, commands, warnings, and instructions are common examples of bald-on-record communication (Dwijayanti et al., 2021). Although such expressions may appear impolite in certain situations, they can be considered appropriate when efficiency, urgency, or mutual understanding takes priority over face concerns (Afful, 2017).

Positive politeness is oriented toward the interlocutor's positive face, namely the desire to be appreciated, accepted, and valued by others. Speakers employing positive politeness seek to emphasise common ground, solidarity, cooperation, and mutual understanding. Rather than highlighting distance, this strategy attempts to strengthen interpersonal relationships and create a sense of shared identity. Positive politeness may be realized through expressions of agreement, encouragement, appreciation, cooperation, and inclusiveness (Borris & Zecho, 2018). In marital communication, positive politeness can help spouses maintain intimacy and relational closeness by emphasizing shared goals, mutual support, and collaborative problem-solving (Ismath et.al, 2023). Because marriage involves long-term interpersonal commitment, positive politeness often plays an important role in preserving harmonious interaction.

Negative politeness is oriented toward the interlocutor's negative face, namely the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. Speakers employing negative politeness attempt to minimize the burden or pressure placed upon others (Yergazy & Denisenko, 2024). Negative politeness is commonly associated with requests, disagreement, criticism, and other situations that may potentially threaten the interlocutor's freedom of action or emotional comfort. By reducing the force of an utterance, speakers seek to communicate their intentions while minimizing potential interpersonal discomfort (Astuti, 2021). In marital communication, negative politeness may be particularly relevant when discussing sensitive issues such as finances, personal concerns, or conflict-related matters.

Off-record is the most indirect of Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies. Rather than expressing an intention explicitly, speakers communicate in ways that allow the intended meaning to remain implicit. As a result, the interlocutor is required to infer the speaker's intended message from contextual cues and shared knowledge. The use of off-record strategies provides speakers with a degree of communicative flexibility because responsibility for the interpretation of the message is not fully imposed on either participant. Such strategies frequently occur in situations involving criticism, complaints, disappointment, or sensitive concerns where direct expression may threaten interpersonal harmony (Nurul, 2025). In close relationships, off-record communication may serve as a means of addressing delicate issues while reducing the likelihood of confrontation.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design within a pragmatic framework to investigate politeness in Gorontalo spousal communication (Creswell, 2018). The qualitative descriptive approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to describe and interpret participants' politeness strategy choices, the pragmatic realization of these strategies through linguistic features, and the contextual and relational factors influencing their communicative choices in everyday marital interaction. Guided by Brown and Levinson's (1983) politeness theory, the study focused on four politeness strategies, namely bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record, and addressed three aspects of analysis consisting of strategy choices, pragmatic realization, and contextual and relational influences.

The participants of this study consisted of four individuals representing two married couples. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, in which individuals are deliberately recruited based on characteristics relevant to the research objectives and their potential to provide information-rich data (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2015). The selection criteria included being legally married, identifying as members of the Gorontalo ethnic community, having completed at least senior high school education, and having experience in everyday communication with their spouses. Participants were also required to be willing to participate in the study and able to provide detailed accounts of their marital communication experiences. These criteria were established to ensure that the participants had direct and relevant experience of the communicative phenomenon under investigation.

Data collection was conducted over a two-month period, from April to May 2026. Prior to the main data collection, the researcher conducted preliminary observations through informal discussions with several married couples. This preliminary stage was intended to identify recurrent patterns and communicative situations in everyday spousal interaction and to provide an initial understanding of how potentially face-threatening situations were managed within marital communication. The observations subsequently informed the formulation and refinement of the interview guide.

The primary data were obtained through face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the four selected participants. Semi-structured interviewing was employed to provide a consistent framework for exploring the research questions while allowing participants sufficient flexibility to elaborate on their experiences and for the researcher to pursue issues emerging during the interviews (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The interview questions focused on communicative situations involving face-threatening acts (FTAs) and the realization of politeness strategies as conceptualized by Brown and Levinson (1987). In particular, the interviews explored how participants realized politeness strategies in their interactions with their spouses and how contextual and relational factors shaped their communicative choices.

The use of purposive sampling was considered appropriate because the study sought depth of understanding rather than statistical generalisation. In qualitative research, purposive sampling enables researchers to identify participants who possess direct experience and relevant knowledge of the phenomenon being examined, thereby facilitating the collection of rich and contextually grounded accounts (Palinkas et al., 2015). Accordingly, the four participants were selected not for their numerical representativeness but for the relevance and richness of the experiences they could contribute to an understanding of politeness practices in Gorontalo marital communication.

The data were analysed using a qualitative descriptive approach following the interactive model (Miles et al. 2014) which involves data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Since this study focused exclusively on four participants involved in in-depth interviews, the analysis centreed on the interview transcripts and the participants' accounts of politeness strategies in everyday marital communication.

During the data-condensation stage, the interview recordings were transcribed, and the transcripts were reviewed repeatedly to identify information relevant to the research objectives. Meaningful statements were selected, organized, and coded according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework: bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. The analysis also examined the pragmatic realization of these strategies through linguistic features such as directness, mitigation, hedging, indirectness, expressions of solidarity, and respect.

In the data-display stage, the coded data were arranged thematically to facilitate interpretation and comparison across the four participants. Particular attention was given to the contextual and relational factors that influenced their communicative choices, including emotional conditions, the degree of spousal intimacy, the nature of the face-threatening act, and the situational demands of the interaction. Finally, conclusions were drawn by interpreting recurring patterns and comparing participants' accounts. The findings were continuously verified by returning to the interview transcripts to ensure that the interpretations remained grounded in the participants' actual statements and communicative experiences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study to provide an in-depth understanding of how Gorontalo spouses employ Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies in everyday marital communication. The analysis is based exclusively on qualitative data obtained through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with four participants from two married couples. The participants' accounts were interpreted within the framework of politeness theory and pragmatics, particularly the concepts of face, face-threatening acts, and context-dependent meaning (Goffman, 1967; Yule, 1996; Worley et al., 2018; Karmila et al., 2025).

The interview findings indicate that the four politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1983), namely bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies, were reflected in the participants' everyday marital communication. However, the participants did not use these strategies in a fixed or uniform manner. Their communicative choices varied according to the topic of conversation, the emotional atmosphere, the purpose of the interaction, and the relationship between the speakers. This finding demonstrates that politeness in marital communication is not determined solely by the linguistic form of an utterance. Rather, it is shaped by the social and emotional context in which the utterance occurs.

Among the four strategies, positive politeness appeared most prominently in the participants' accounts, particularly in situations involving cooperation, parenting, household responsibilities, and problem-solving. The participants frequently described using expressions of understanding, encouragement, agreement, affection, and shared concern when communicating with their spouses. Such expressions functioned not only to convey information but also to strengthen solidarity and maintain relational harmony. In this context, positive politeness reflects the spouses' efforts to recognise one another's feelings, emphasise shared interests, and present themselves as partners working toward common goals. The frequent use of this strategy suggests that everyday marital communication is strongly influenced by the desire to preserve closeness and mutual understanding, consistent with the view that politeness plays an important role in sustaining interpersonal relationships (Worley et al., 2018).

Negative politeness was evident when participants made requests, discussed sensitive matters, or raised issues that could potentially inconvenience or offend their spouses. In these situations, participants reported using more careful and respectful forms of expression, including softened requests, explanations, apologies, and words that acknowledged their spouses' autonomy. These strategies enabled them to communicate their intentions while reducing the potential imposition associated with the utterance. The use of negative politeness demonstrates that marital closeness does not eliminate the need for respect and consideration. Even within an intimate relationship, participants remained attentive to their spouses' personal boundaries, feelings, and freedom to respond.

The participants also described the use of off-record strategies when addressing emotionally delicate matters, such as criticism, reminders, disappointment, or dissatisfaction. Rather than expressing their intentions directly, they sometimes relied on hints, indirect comments, contextual cues, or statements that allowed their spouses to infer the intended meaning. This strategy enabled participants to communicate potentially face-threatening messages while minimizing the risk of direct confrontation. Off-record communication was particularly relevant when the participants wished to address a problem without creating tension or appearing overly critical. The interpretation of such utterances depended heavily on the spouses' familiarity with one another, shared experiences, and ability to understand meanings that were not explicitly stated.

Bald-on-record strategies appeared in situations that required immediate attention, clarity, or direct action. Participants used direct expressions when responding to urgent circumstances, managing practical household matters, or communicating messages in which ambiguity could cause misunderstanding. In these contexts, directness was not necessarily perceived as impolite because it was supported by the participants' shared relationship, the urgency of the situation, and their understanding of the communicative purpose. This finding shows that a direct utterance may function appropriately when the context makes clarity more important than mitigation.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the participants' use of politeness strategies was flexible, relational, and context-sensitive. The four strategies did not operate as isolated categories. Instead, their interpretation depended on the interactional circumstances and the participants' understanding of one another. Factors such as emotional state, level of intimacy, topic sensitivity, communicative intention, and situational urgency influenced how the participants formulated and interpreted their utterances. These findings support Yule's (1996) view that pragmatic meaning is highly dependent on context. They also reinforce the concept of face developed by Goffman (1967), as the participants consistently attempted to protect both their own face and that of their spouses during potentially sensitive interactions.

The interview data further suggest that politeness in Gorontalo marital communication involves more than the use of indirect or softened linguistic forms. It is also expressed through empathy, timing, tone of voice, shared knowledge, emotional awareness, and the ability to adjust one's communication to the circumstances. In this respect, politeness functions as a relational practice through which spouses negotiate respect, affection, cooperation, and conflict in their everyday lives. The participants' experiences indicate that effective marital communication depends not on the constant use of one particular strategy but on the ability to select and adapt a strategy according to the demands of the situation.

Positive Politeness as Solidarity and Cooperative Relationship Building

Positive politeness emerged as a prominent strategy in the participants' accounts, particularly in situations involving cooperation, parenting, household responsibilities, and problem-solving. The participants frequently described using expressions that emphasised discussion, shared responsibility, mutual understanding, and the search for solutions together. For example, they referred to expressions such as "discussing the problem together and finding a solution together," "We both want what is best for our child," "If we work together, things will be easier," and "What matters is that we understand each other." These expressions indicate that the participants approached marital issues as shared responsibilities rather than individual burdens.

From a pragmatic perspective, such expressions reflect Brown and Levinson's concept of positive face, which concerns a person's desire to be

appreciated, accepted, and treated as a valued member of a relationship. By emphasizing common goals and mutual cooperation, the participants showed their efforts to affirm their spouses' importance and maintain emotional closeness. Positive politeness therefore functioned not only as a way of expressing a message but also as a means of strengthening solidarity and reinforcing the sense of partnership within the marriage.

This interpretation is supported by the participants' interview responses. Participant 1 stated, "I prefer expressions that encourage cooperation, such as discussing the problem together and finding a solution together" (P1). This statement suggests that the participant viewed communication as a collaborative process in which both spouses were expected to contribute to the resolution of a problem. Rather than assigning blame or presenting the issue as one person's responsibility, the participant preferred language that positioned the couple as a unified team.

A similar perspective was expressed by Participant 2, who explained, "I prefer expressions that encourage discussion and cooperation. I think it is better to focus on finding solutions rather than blaming each other" (P2). This response demonstrates that positive politeness was closely related to the participants' attempts to prevent conflict and preserve relational harmony. The preference for solution-oriented communication indicates that cooperation was considered more valuable than criticism or the identification of fault. Through this form of communication, the participant reduced the possibility of threatening the spouse's positive face while simultaneously encouraging joint participation in the conversation.

Participant 3 also emphasised the importance of solidarity by stating, "I prefer expressions that focus on cooperation and finding solutions together" (P3). This response reinforces the pattern identified across the interviews. The participant's preference for expressions of cooperation suggests that marital communication was understood as a shared activity based on mutual support and common objectives. The use of the words "together" and "cooperation" highlights the relational meaning of the strategy, as the focus was not merely on solving a practical problem but also on maintaining the unity of the relationship.

The interview data further indicate that positive politeness was especially relevant when participants discussed parenting and family responsibilities. Expressions such as "We both want what is best for our child" established common ground and directed attention toward a shared family goal. In this context, the expression helped reduce disagreement by reminding both spouses that they had a common interest. Similarly, the statement "If we work together, things will be easier" encouraged joint action and presented cooperation as beneficial for both partners. The expression "What matters is that we understand each other" placed mutual understanding at the centre of the interaction and showed that emotional connection was considered an important part of resolving marital issues.

These findings indicate that positive politeness constituted a significant strategy in the communication of the Gorontalo spouses who participated in this study. It was used particularly in situations involving cooperation, family responsibilities, parenting, and conflict resolution. The

strategy was realized through expressions of solidarity, common ground, shared responsibility, encouragement, and mutual understanding. In this way, positive politeness helped participants communicate potentially sensitive matters while protecting the emotional connection between spouses.

The findings are consistent with Ismath et al. (2023), who emphasise that marital communication often relies on solidarity-building strategies to maintain harmony. They also support Brown and Levinson's view that positive politeness involves the expression of approval, interest, cooperation, and shared identity. In the present study, positive politeness was not limited to formal expressions of kindness. Instead, it was embedded in the participants' understanding of marriage as a cooperative relationship. The participants' accounts show that politeness was achieved by creating a sense of togetherness and by presenting problems as matters that could be addressed through joint discussion and shared efforts.

Positive politeness emerged strongly in situations involving cooperation, parenting, and problem-solving. Participants frequently chose expressions such as *"discussing the problem together and finding a solution together"*. As a researcher, I interpret this as evidence that spouses construct marital issues as shared responsibilities rather than individual burdens. This reflects Brown and Levinson's (1983) concept of positive face, where speakers seek approval and closeness in interaction.

This interpretation is further supported by interview data, where one participant stated, "I prefer expressions that encourage cooperation, such as discussing the problem together and finding a solution together" (P1). Another participant added, "I prefer expressions that focus on cooperation and finding solutions together" (P3). These responses reinforce the idea that positive politeness is used to maintain emotional closeness, which aligns with Ismath et al. (2023), who emphasise that marital communication often relies on solidarity-building strategies to sustain harmony.

Negative Politeness as Respect for Autonomy and Emotional Sensitivity

Negative politeness emerged in the participants' accounts mainly in situations involving requests, disagreement, and sensitive interactions. The participants described adjusting their language according to their spouses' emotional and physical conditions, particularly when their spouses appeared tired, stressed, or were experiencing a difficult day. This pattern indicates that the participants were attentive not only to the content of their messages but also to the possible effects of their words on their spouses.

Participant 1 explained, "If my spouse has just come home from work and looks tired, I usually ask more gently" (P1). This statement demonstrates the participant's awareness of the spouse's physical condition and indicates a deliberate effort to reduce the pressure associated with making a request. The use of a gentler form suggests that the participant considered the spouse's need for rest before initiating the interaction. From a pragmatic perspective, this behaviour reflects sensitivity to the interpersonal circumstances surrounding the utterance.

A similar concern was expressed by Participant 2, who stated, "If my spouse is having a difficult day, I usually avoid speaking too directly" (P2). This response shows that the participant viewed directness as potentially uncomfortable or imposing when the spouse was emotionally vulnerable. By avoiding overly direct expressions, the participant attempted to minimize possible tension and protect the spouse's emotional well-being. The participant's choice also demonstrates that politeness in marital communication is influenced by the speaker's interpretation of the hearer's current condition.

These findings can be understood through Brown and Levinson's concept of negative face, which refers to an individual's desire to maintain personal autonomy and freedom from unwanted imposition. In the context of this study, negative politeness was used to acknowledge the spouse's right to decide, delay, refuse, or respond according to their own circumstances. The participants' communication therefore reflected an effort to convey requests and sensitive messages without creating unnecessary pressure.

Negative politeness was also reflected in the participants' preference for mitigating expressions, indirect requests, apology markers, and permission-seeking forms. Expressions such as "Sorry to bother you, but if you do not mind, could you help me for a moment?", "If that's okay, can we do it later instead?", and "If possible, I would like to talk about our finances" demonstrate different ways of reducing the force of an utterance. The expression "Sorry to bother you" acknowledges that the request may interrupt or inconvenience the spouse. The phrase "if you do not mind" gives the spouse space to accept or decline the request. Similarly, "If that's okay" and "If possible" present the speaker's intention in a less forceful manner, while the topic of finances is introduced cautiously because it may involve disagreement or emotional sensitivity.

The interview data support this pattern. Participant 1's explanation shows that requests were softened when the spouse appeared physically tired. Participant 2's response further demonstrates that direct communication was avoided when the spouse was experiencing emotional difficulty. In both cases, the participants adapted their language to the circumstances in order to reduce interpersonal pressure. Their responses indicate that politeness involved an active process of evaluating the spouse's condition and selecting an appropriate way to communicate.

The findings suggest that negative politeness was frequently chosen when participants needed to make requests, discuss disagreements, postpone an activity, or raise sensitive issues. This strategy allowed them to communicate their intentions while maintaining respect for their spouses' autonomy and emotional state. It also shows that marital intimacy does not remove the need for careful communication. Even though the participants shared a close relationship with their spouses, they continued to use mitigating forms when they believed that directness might cause discomfort or impose an unwanted burden.

This finding is consistent with Astuti (2021) and Yergazy and Denisenko (2024), who explain that negative politeness functions to minimize interpersonal pressure and reduce the possibility of discomfort in interaction.

In the present study, negative politeness served as a protective strategy that helped participants manage potentially face-threatening situations while preserving mutual respect. The participants' accounts demonstrate that expressions of politeness were closely connected to emotional awareness, situational sensitivity, and recognition of the spouse's right to respond freely.

Off-Record Strategies as Indirect Management of Emotional Tension

Off-record strategies emerged in the participants' accounts mainly in situations involving criticism, reminders, disappointment, and other emotionally sensitive matters. The participants described using indirect expressions when they wanted to address an issue without creating additional stress or provoking direct confrontation. This pattern suggests that indirectness served as a way of managing emotional tension and preserving harmony within the household.

Participant 2 stated, "I prefer to bring up the issue gently so it does not create additional stress" (P2). This response indicates that the participant considered not only the issue being discussed but also the possible emotional consequences of addressing it directly. The phrase "bring up the issue gently" reflects a deliberate attempt to communicate concern without making the spouse feel attacked or blamed. From the researcher's perspective, this choice demonstrates that off-record communication functioned as a relational strategy through which the participant sought to maintain emotional stability while still drawing attention to a problem.

A similar concern was expressed by Participant 4, who explained, "I do not want to add more pressure when they are already feeling stressed" (P4). This statement reinforces the view that indirectness was used as a protective mechanism. The participant recognised the spouse's emotional condition and avoided introducing a potentially face-threatening message in a direct manner. In this case, the purpose of indirect communication was not to conceal the issue completely, but to present it in a way that allowed the spouse to understand the intended meaning without feeling subjected to additional pressure.

These findings correspond to Brown and Levinson's explanation of off-record strategies. According to their framework, an off-record utterance communicates an intended meaning indirectly, allowing the hearer to infer the message from the words, the situation, or shared contextual knowledge. Because the speaker does not state the intention explicitly, the utterance may reduce the force of the face-threatening act and lessen the speaker's responsibility for imposing a particular interpretation. In marital communication, this strategy can provide both spouses with greater space to interpret, respond, or address the issue according to the emotional circumstances of the interaction.

Indirect meaning was reflected in expressions such as "It looks like the bill still hasn't been paid yet," "I feel like we haven't been talking much lately," and "I thought we were supposed to go out together today." These utterances do not directly state a command, accusation, or complaint. However, their intended meanings can be inferred from the context. The first expression may function as a reminder about an unpaid bill. The second may communicate

concern about reduced communication or emotional distance. The third may express disappointment or remind the spouse of a previous plan. The expressions therefore allow the speaker to raise an issue while avoiding an explicitly confrontational form.

The interview data provide further support for this pattern. Participant 2 preferred to raise issues gently in order to prevent additional stress, while Participant 4 avoided adding pressure when the spouse was already experiencing emotional difficulty. Both responses show that the participants adjusted their communication according to the emotional context of the interaction. Their use of indirect expressions enabled them to address concerns while taking the spouse's feelings into consideration.

The findings indicate that off-record strategies formed an important part of the participants' communicative choices, particularly when they dealt with disappointment, criticism, reminders, and emotionally sensitive concerns. The strategy was not used because the participants were unwilling to communicate their meaning. Rather, it allowed them to communicate difficult messages in a less threatening way. Through observations, hints, implications, and contextual references, the participants could express concern while reducing the possibility of defensiveness or conflict.

This finding is consistent with Nurul (2025), who notes that off-record communication is commonly used to prevent the escalation of conflict in sensitive interactions. In the present study, indirectness functioned as a means of protecting the emotional balance of the relationship. The participants' accounts demonstrate that maintaining harmony did not always require avoiding difficult topics. Instead, it often involved choosing an appropriate way to introduce those topics. Off-record strategies enabled the participants to preserve respect and emotional sensitivity while still communicating matters that required attention.

Bald-on-Record Strategies for Urgency and Clarity in Communication

Bald-on-record strategies emerged in the participants' accounts in situations that required urgency, immediate understanding, clarification, or direct action. Unlike the other strategies, which involved mitigation or indirectness, bald on record communication expressed the speaker's intention clearly and without substantial modification. The participants' responses indicate that directness was not automatically interpreted as impolite. Rather, it was considered appropriate when efficiency and clarity were more important than avoiding imposition.

Participant 1 stated, "I usually speak directly when the matter is urgent or needs an immediate response" (P1). This statement indicates that the participant adjusted the level of directness according to the demands of the situation. When immediate action was necessary, the participant considered a direct expression to be the most effective way to communicate. From the researcher's perspective, this finding demonstrates that directness may serve a practical and relational purpose in marital communication, particularly when ambiguity could delay an important response or create further misunderstanding.

Participant 2 expressed a similar view by explaining, "I become more direct when something needs immediate attention or when there is a misunderstanding that needs clarification" (P2). This response shows that the participant used direct communication not only in urgent situations but also when clarity was needed to resolve confusion. In this context, directness helped make the intended meaning explicit and reduced the possibility of misinterpretation. The participant's account therefore supports the view that bald-on-record communication can be situationally appropriate within a close relationship.

These findings are consistent with Brown and Levinson's description of bald on record strategies as forms of communication that prioritise clarity and efficiency over face protection. In such situations, the speaker communicates the intended message directly, without relying on extensive mitigation, hedging, or indirectness. Afful (2017) similarly argues that direct speech may be acceptable when urgency or clarity becomes the primary communicative goal. This perspective demonstrates that politeness strategies are flexible and cannot be interpreted independently of the context in which they are used.

Direct communication was reflected in expressions such as "Why did you come home late?", "We need extra money," "I disagree with that," and "Please stop doing that." These utterances communicate the speaker's intention explicitly. The first expression directly requests an explanation. The second presents a financial need without mitigation. The third clearly expresses disagreement, while the fourth gives a direct instruction to stop an action. Although these expressions may potentially threaten the hearer's face, their interpretation depends on the situation, the tone of voice, the relationship between the spouses, and the purpose of the interaction.

The interview data further support the use of bald-on-record strategies in particular circumstances. Participant 1 associated directness with urgency and the need for an immediate response. Participant 2 connected it with situations requiring immediate attention or clarification. These accounts indicate that the participants did not use direct communication randomly. Instead, they selected it when a clear and prompt response was necessary. Directness therefore functioned as a practical strategy for managing situations in which delay, ambiguity, or excessive mitigation could interfere with effective communication.

Overall, the findings show that the four participants used bald-on-record strategies primarily when responding to urgent matters, misunderstandings, requests for clarification, and situations requiring immediate action. The strategy allowed them to communicate efficiently and ensure that the intended message was understood. At the same time, the findings demonstrate that directness did not necessarily undermine marital harmony. Within the participants' close relationships, direct expressions could be understood as appropriate when they were motivated by urgency, concern, or the need to resolve a practical issue.

CONCLUSIONS

This study investigates how spouses in Gorontalo apply Brown and Levinson's (1983) politeness strategies in marital communication. The findings reveal that all four politeness strategies, namely positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and bald-on-record, are present in spousal interaction, but their use is strongly shaped by context. Positive politeness is the most frequently used strategy, particularly in cooperative situations such as parenting and problem-solving. This indicates that spouses tend to frame household issues as shared responsibilities and prioritise emotional closeness and solidarity in their communication. Such a pattern reflects an effort to maintain harmony and strengthen relational bonds in everyday marital life.

Negative politeness appears mainly in situations involving requests or when one partner is in a tired or emotionally sensitive condition. In these cases, spouses adjust their speech to avoid imposing on each other and to respect personal space and emotional state. This shows that even within close relationships, awareness of autonomy and sensitivity remains important in interaction. Meanwhile, off-record strategies are used in emotionally delicate situations such as giving criticism or reminders. In these contexts, indirect expressions are preferred to reduce the risk of confrontation and to maintain emotional stability within the household. This suggests that indirectness functions as a protective communicative strategy to preserve harmony.

Bald-on-record strategies, on the other hand, are used in urgent situations that require clarity and immediate response. Although this strategy is highly direct, it is not perceived as impolite when used appropriately in contexts where efficiency is prioritised over face-saving concerns. The data show that direct communication becomes acceptable when mutual understanding and urgency are the main goals. Overall, the findings demonstrate that politeness strategies in marital communication are not fixed but highly flexible and adaptive to situational demands.

In conclusion, spouses in Gorontalo dynamically shift between politeness strategies to balance clarity, emotional sensitivity, and relational harmony in their daily interactions. This study highlights that politeness in marriage is not simply about avoiding impoliteness, but about negotiating meaning based on context, emotional state, and interpersonal goals. As a reflection, this suggests that effective marital communication relies not only on linguistic choices but also on empathy and situational awareness, which help sustain cooperation and emotional balance in long-term relationships. _

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