An Analysis of Politeness Strategies in the Animated Film *Soul* (2020)

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Politeness is not merely etiquette; it shapes how language conveys identity, emotion, and social connection. This study investigates politeness strategies in *Soul* (2020), a Pixar film that blends light-hearted storytelling with philosophical themes. Using Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework comprising Bald on Record, Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness, and Off-Record strategies the study adopts a qualitative descriptive method. Data were collected from the film's official script and cross-checked through multiple viewings for contextual accuracy. A total of 65 utterances were identified: 29 instances of positive politeness, 21 bald on record, 8 negative politeness, and 7 off-record strategies. These findings suggest the film prioritizes affirming, empathetic communication to navigate relationships and emotional transformation. The analysis demonstrates how politeness is used not only to manage social harmony, but also to express vulnerability and personal growth. Ultimately, the study highlights how animated dialogue can serve as a rich site for examining the interplay between language, meaning, and identity in animated storytelling.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language functions not only as a tool for transmitting information but also as a means of shaping social behaviour, constructing identity, and reflecting cultural values within a community. Through strategic linguistic choices, speakers manage relationships, balancing clarity, sensitivity, and respect (Denvir, 2022; Halliday M.A.K., 1978). A central component of this negotiation process is politeness, which facilitates social harmony by reducing potential interpersonal conflicts and maintaining positive relational bonds.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory is one of the most influential frameworks in Pragmatics, defining politeness as a strategic effort to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs) utterances that may threaten an interlocutor's desire to be appreciated (positive face) or remain autonomous (negative face). They categorize politeness strategies into four types: Bald on Record, Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness, and Off-Record. These strategies enable speakers to navigate power relations, social distance, and degrees of imposition. The clarity and systematic nature of Brown and Levinson's typology make it particularly effective for analyzing scripted media such as film, where dialogue is intentionally crafted to convey both explicit meaning and social subtext.

Politeness plays a significant role in shaping emotional climates and collective well-being in interaction (Brown, 2015; da Costa et al., 2020). It also enhances communication quality in both personal and professional contexts (Hu & Zhou, 2024). Beyond social etiquette, politeness reflects cultural norms, situational expectations, and relational positioning, allowing characters to express solidarity, distance, authority, or vulnerability within discourse. Bald on Record strategies prioritizes urgency or clarity, while Positive Politeness promotes affiliation, praise, and shared identity. Negative Politeness emphasizes deference and non-imposition, and Off-Record politeness enables indirect expression to avoid overt responsibility. These pragmatic tools illustrate how communication is simultaneously informational and relational (Merchant et al., 2025). Although alternative politeness models exist including Leech's (2014) Politeness Principle and Watts's (2003) discursive approach. Brown and Levinson's framework remains the most systematically applicable for analysing film discourse. Its

universal focus on face concerns and power dynamics aligns naturally with cinematic dialogue, where language functions as both narrative progression and a vehicle for character psychology and social negotiation.

Research applying Brown and Levinson's model has expanded in recent years. For example, Prasatyo and Gustary (2024) examined politeness strategies in the 2020 Biden–Trump debate, highlighting contrasting rhetorical strategies. Fitri (2022) analyzed politeness in Mulan but focused only on the main character and a small dataset. Septaria and Ambalegin (2023) studied Turning Red but restricted the analysis to positive politeness. Abdul Kabeer and Hashim (2022) and Tagugurad and Rosita (2023) applied all four strategies but in live-action films (The Social Network and The Greatest Showman). Dewi and Ayomi (2023), as well as Krisanti et al. (2023), investigated animated and series-based narratives, yet each limited the scope to a single character. Putri and Fitrawati (2022) similarly examined Yes Day with a narrow taxonomic focus. These studies demonstrate the adaptability of Brown and Levinson's framework; however, they tend to prioritize classification and frequency over deeper interpretations of emotional nuance, interpersonal roles, or narrative function.

A notable gap remains: animated films involving philosophical or emotional depth are underexplored. Existing research on animations (e.g., Mulan; Turning Red; Encanto) often focuses on just one strategy type or one protagonist, resulting in a fragmented understanding of politeness in multi-character cinematic interactions. In addition, several studies analyze fewer than 15–20 utterances, limiting interpretive validity and preventing broader generalization.

Soul (2020), directed by Pete Docter, offers a compelling opportunity to address these gaps. As a critically acclaimed animated film exploring purpose, identity, and the meaning of life, *Soul* blends emotional realism with symbolic storytelling. The film follows Joe Gardner, a passionate musician, whose journey through "The Great Before" with soul number 22 sparks introspective dialogue about ambition, fulfilment, and the beauty of ordinary experience. Interactions involving Joe, 22, Libba, Curley, and the Jerrys present a rich context for investigating how politeness strategies negotiate relationships, conflict, and self-understanding. Unlike many animated films that emphasize action or comedy, *Soul* conveys existential depth more commonly associated with live-action cinema—making it particularly relevant for semantic-pragmatic inquiry.

Given that politeness strategies are inherently tied to meaning negotiation, this study examines how characters in *Soul* utilize language to express empathy, manage face needs, and construct interpersonal meaning throughout the narrative. By applying Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework across a wide range of characters and all four strategy types, this research provides a more holistic analysis compared to previous studies. The approach extends beyond structural classification to explore how politeness functions as a vehicle for narrative engagement and emotional development in contemporary animated storytelling.

Therefore, this research aims to investigate the use of politeness strategies in *Soul* (2020) using a qualitative descriptive approach, focusing on how they operate within the film's broader emotional, social, and narrative architecture. The study contributes to pragmatic film analysis by demonstrating how politeness in animation reflects identity, relational growth, and the construction of meaning.

2. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach, which is well-suited for examining linguistic phenomena in their natural context. As Creswell (2014) explains, qualitative research is "a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem". Moleong (2017) similarly posits that qualitative inquiry seeks to interpret human behavior within real-life settings. A descriptive design enables the researcher to present a detailed account of language use without manipulating variables—ideal for analyzing politeness strategies in film dialogue.

The primary data consist of utterances from the animated film *Soul* (2020), sourced via repeated viewings and the official transcript from Scripts.com. This approach ensures rich contextual accuracy. The data collection was purposive: only dialogues potentially containing politeness strategies—aligned with Brown and Levinson's (1987) taxonomy were included. Recent studies following similar methods include Julianti and Rahmani (2024) who identified politeness strategies in Wonder (2023) using this approach, yielding notable distributions across all four strategy types.

The politeness strategies examined in this study include Bald on Record, Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness, and Off-Record, as outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987). Each of these strategies plays a role in managing face-threatening acts (FTAs) and in maintaining interpersonal harmony within communication. Rather than being analyzed in isolation, each identified utterance was evaluated within its specific narrative and social context—taking into account the speaker–hearer relationship, the situational background of the interaction, and the pragmatic intent behind the language used. This comprehensive approach ensures that the analysis reflects not only the linguistic form of each strategy, but also its functional role in shaping meaning, emotion, and character relationships within the film.

The data analysis followed a thematic-coding process adapted from Creswell (2014), entailing data organization, code development, and interpretive categorization. As Braun and Clarke (2006) endorse, thematic

analysis provides a rigorous yet flexible method for qualitative discourse analysis. Dialogues were classified according to strategy categories, ensuring comprehensive coverage across all characters and scenes. This mirrors the methodological rigor of Soubki and Rambow (2024) in their study "Intention and Face in Dialog", which investigated how communicative intentions mediate face-threatening acts within dialogues using Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework. Their study exemplifies methodological robustness in recent politeness research outside cinematic contexts, which this research extends into film narrative analysis.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several validation strategies were applied. Credibility was enhanced through data triangulation—dialogues were not only gathered from the official script but also verified through multiple viewings of the film. This allowed the researchers to account for paralinguistic cues and context, ensuring accurate interpretation of speech acts. Repeated engagement with the data also helped mitigate subjective bias, contributing to the study's confirmability.

To ensure dependability, all coding and classification procedures were documented systematically, allowing for transparency and replicability in the research process. Although qualitative findings are not intended for broad generalization, transferability was supported by providing detailed contextual descriptions, allowing readers to assess how the findings may apply in similar media or sociolinguistic contexts.

The research seeks to enhance the pragmatic understanding of how politeness operates not only as a social strategy but also as a tool for constructing emotional nuance and interpersonal meaning in animated storytelling.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Result

This study analyzed the politeness strategies used by characters in *Soul* (2020) based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework. The researchers identified 65 utterances in the film that clearly demonstrated the use of politeness strategies.

These were classified into four categories: positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and bald on record. To illustrate how these strategies operate within the narrative, two representative examples from each category are presented and analyzed in detail. These examples reflect how characters navigate relationships, express emotion, and manage face-threatening acts through language. To illustrate the overall frequency of each politeness strategy identified in the film, Table 1 presents the distribution of utterances across Brown and Levinson's four categories.

Table 1. Distribution of Politeness Strategies Based on Brown and Levinson's Framework

Politeness Strategy	Count/frequency
Positive Politeness	29
Negative Politeness	8
Off-Record	7
Bald on Record	21
Total	**65**

3.2. Discussion

Positive Politeness: A total of 29 utterances were identified as employing positive politeness strategies. These strategies function to express admiration, build solidarity, and minimize social distance between interlocutors. They frequently appeared in scenes involving support, encouragment, or shared enthusiasm.

Data 1
Dialogue (p. 83/132):
JOE   : (to 22) Stop sounding insane.
22   : I mean, I was distracted getting ready to play with Dorothea Williams tonight.
Dez   : Dorothea Williams?! **That's big time, Joe! Congratulations!**

This utterance occurs during Joe's visit to Dez's barbershop, where he shares news of his upcoming performance with the renowned jazz musician Dorothea Williams which he always wanted, joe is so passionate about playing with Dorothea Williams, a well-known musician, he got accepted knowing that finally he would do what he always wanted. Dez responds with enthusiastic approval, marked by an exclamatory tone and direct address using Joe's name. The expression "That's big time" amplifies the magnitude of Joe's achievement, while "Congratulations" conveys sincere admiration. These features function as positive politeness strategies: they express solidarity, validate Joe's success, and emphasize a shared sense of excitement. Rather than minimizing the

accomplishment, Dez elevates Joe's status and reinforces their social bond, contributing to a supportive and affirming interaction.

Data 2
Dialogue (p. 112/132):
Terry : Just hold on a minute! I get to set the count right!
Jerry : Terry, **you've done a super job! We'll take it from here. You're amazing.**
Terry : (flattered) Well thank you.

In this exchange, Jerry, one of the celestial caretakers in the soul realm praises Terry after he locates Joe's soul because joe had escaped with 22. Although Jerry proceeds to relieve Terry of further responsibility, the utterance is framed with effusive compliments: "You've done a super job" and "You're amazing." These expressions serve as positive politeness strategies that acknowledge Terry's contribution and preserve his positive face. By offering praise before shifting control, Jerry minimizes the risk of offense and maintains interpersonal harmony. The language choice fosters a tone of appreciation and camaraderie, helping to prevent feelings of dismissal or inadequacy on Terry's part.

Negative Politeness: Seven were categorized as negative politeness, typically involving hedging, apologizing, or acknowledging the hearer's autonomy. These strategies were used in situations involving uncertainty, potential imposition, or formal acknowledgment.

Data 3
Dialogue (p. 21/132):
Joe (in 22's body) : Uh look, I'm not sure I'm supposed to be here.
Counselor Jerry A : **I understand. Mentoring isn't for everyone. You're more than welcome to opt out.**
                (The Counselor open portal straight to The Great Beyond!)

This exchange takes place early in the film, shortly after Joe Gardner unexpectedly finds himself in the spiritual realm. After falling into an open manhole due to his excitement about finally securing a gig with the legendary Dorothea Williams, Joe's soul is separated from his body and mistakenly sent toward the Great Beyond. In his attempt to escape death, Joe accidentally stumbles into the Great Before—a metaphysical space where souls are prepared before being born on Earth. There, he is misidentified by the ethereal administrators known as the Jerrys and is assigned as a mentor to an unborn soul named 22. At this point in the film, Joe (in his spirit form) is overwhelmed by the unfamiliar environment and role he never signed up for. Noticing Joe's visible hesitation and unease, Jerry A responds with a sequence of statements that exemplify Negative Politeness, a strategy used to respect the listener's autonomy and minimize imposition. The utterance begins with "I understand," a face-saving acknowledgment that validates Joe's feelings without judgment. This is followed by "Mentoring isn't for everyone," which further generalizes Joe's discomfort as normal rather than problematic, softening any implication of failure or incompetence.

Finally, the phrase "You're more than welcome to opt out" extends a non-imposing offer, giving Joe a clear choice while carefully avoiding coercion. These elements collectively show respect for the listener's negative face—their desire to be free from obligation. The Counselor does not pressure Joe, but instead invites him to withdraw if he wishes, underscoring the institution's flexibility. Additionally, the use of positive framing ("more than welcome") softens what could otherwise be a rejection or dismissal. The use of calm, indirect language and the invitation to leave without consequence illustrate how authority figures in the soul realm, like the Jerrys, maintain institutional power without authoritarianism. By offering Joe a respectful exit, Jerry A avoids threatening Joe's sense of autonomy, thereby reinforcing a non-coercive and empathetic tone. The exchange shows how politeness is used not just as etiquette, but as a mechanism for preserving dignity and managing delicate social situations, even in an abstract, otherworldly setting.

Data 4
Dialogue (p. 130/132):
Counselor Jerry A : **Do you have a moment? I think I'm speaking for all the Jerrys when I say… thank you.**
Joe   : For what?
Counselor Jerry A : A we're in the business o inspiration, Joe, but it's not often we find ourselves inspired.
Joe   : Oh, really.
Counselor Jerry A : So, we all decided to give you another chance.

This moment occurs near the end of the film, after Joe's journey on Earth has unexpectedly helped 22 discover her "spark"—the final element needed for her to be born into the world. Before Joe, many mentors had failed to connect with 22, leaving him stuck in the Great Before. However, through their shared experiences, conflicts, and growing bond, Joe unwittingly becomes the key to 22's transformation. His influence allows 22 to finally understand the beauty of living, leading to her readiness to begin life on Earth.

Recognizing the emotional significance of Joe's actions, Counselor Jerry A approaches him with gratitude and humility. The utterance begins with the phrase "Do you have a moment?"—a textbook instance of negative politeness, which serves to minimize imposition and show deference to Joe's time and autonomy. Instead of jumping directly into the message, Jerry carefully constructs an entry that respects Joe's personal space. Additionally, by saying "I think I'm speaking for all the Jerrys," he frames the appreciation as a collective sentiment, diffusing personal pressure and reinforcing the institutional nature of the gesture. The line "It's not often we find ourselves inspired" reveals genuine admiration, as even these spiritual beings are moved by Joe's impact. This moment not only affirms Joe's growth but also elevates the emotional resolution of the narrative, demonstrating how politeness can be used to convey deep respect and closure without overwhelming the recipient.

Off Record: Seven utterances were identified as off-record strategies, which relied on implication, metaphor, or ambiguity. These allow speakers to communicate indirectly and avoid direct face-threatening acts.

Data 5
Dialogue (p. 102/132):
Libba : Your father had me. Most times this shop what paid the bills. So, when I'm gone, who's gonna pay yours?
Joe   : Music is all I think about. From the moment I wake up in the morning to the moment I fall asleep at night.
Libba : **You can't eat dreams for breakfast, Joey.**
Joe   : Then I don't want to eat! This isn't about my career, Mom. It's my reason for living. And I know Dad felt the same way. And… I'm just afraid that if I died today, that my life would've amounted to nothing.

This line is delivered during a confrontational yet emotionally charged conversation between Joe and his mother Libba in her house, as Joe reaffirms his desire to become a full-time jazz musician. Rather than directly rejecting his aspirations, Libba employs metaphorical language to imply that dreams are not practically sustainable, here Joe confronts his mom to convince her that being a musician is his dream, in response her mom says "you can't eat dreams for breakfast", which means that Joe's dream is unrealistic, she's afraid that her son can't eat or live well just by being a musician. She chooses not to say it straightly such as "you can't live like this" or "your salary as a musician wouldn't be enough to support you". This indirectness exemplifies an off-record politeness strategy, in which the speaker conveys criticism or disapproval in a veiled, non-explicit manner. By using a metaphor instead of a blunt statement, Libba invites Joe to interpret the message, thus preserving his face and reducing the potential for direct conflict. The utterance also reflects culturally embedded forms of parental concern, where criticism is softened by implication to maintain relational harmony and protect the listener's self-esteem.

Data 6
Dialogue (p. 119/132):
Dorothea   : We come back tomorrow night and do it all again. Joe looks confused, slightly disheartened
Dorothea   : What's wrong, Teach?
Joe   : It's just... I've been waiting on this day for my entire life. I thought I'd feel... different.
Dorothea   : **I heard this story about a fish. He swims up to this older fish and says 'I'm trying to find this thing they call the ocean.' 'The ocean?' says the older fish, 'That's what you're in right now.' 'This?' says the young fish, 'This is water. What I want is the ocean.**

Dorothea recounts this allegorical story in response to Joe's quiet disillusionment after fulfilling his lifelong dream of performing. Rather than offering direct advice or comfort, she opts for an indirect approach—telling a parable that subtly mirrors Joe's internal struggle. Here we can see that he has achieved his dream, which he thought would make him happy or at least feel any different, but no it feels nothing, that's why Dorothea gives him an advice that could open his eyes, her words means that sometimes in life we have been blessed we just don't realize it, just like the Fish don't realize that it is already in the ocean, This constitutes a classic off-record

strategy, wherein meaning is implied rather than asserted, encouraging inference rather than confrontation. By embedding her message within metaphor, Dorothea avoids challenging Joe's feelings directly, thereby preserving his autonomy and dignity. The strategy fosters reflection, suggesting that fulfillment is often found not in grand achievements, but in appreciating the present. It demonstrates the nuanced emotional intelligence at play in interpersonal communication, especially when addressing existential uncertainty.

Bald on Record: A total of 21 utterances fell into the bald on record category. These were used in moments requiring urgency, authority, or emotional intensity, without attempts to soften the impact.

Data 7
Dialogue (p. 109/132):
Joe   : **You come back here right now!**
Joe   : You stole my body!

This direct imperative is uttered by Joe during a highly charged emotional moment when 22, overwhelmed and hurt, runs away, the reason for this is because while on earth 22 had seen a lot and had experienced adventures which have changed his view of the earth, which he once thought was bad, now because of that 22 wants to be human forever by living in joe's body, that's why in response Joe said "you come back here right now" because Joe needs his body back In order to reach his goal which is being a musician . The command (come back here right now), expressed without any softeners, hedges, or indirectness, exemplifies a bald on record politeness strategy. Such utterances prioritize clarity and immediacy over politeness, often employed when the speaker is under stress or when the situation demands urgent intervention. Joe's heightened emotional state and desperation override social decorum, as the imperative seeks to reestablish control and prevent further emotional deterioration. The directness reflects the gravity of the moment, where maintaining the relationship momentarily gives way to addressing the crisis.

Data 8
Dialogue (p. 80/132):
Joe   : **Don't move, 22.**
22   : I'm not moving! You're moving!
           (Joe loses his footing on the stack of records. They shoot out from under him. The clippers sail out of his paws and take a big, long divot of hair out of 22's scalp. They hit the floor across the room, shattering. Joe looks at the reverse-mohawk on 22's scalp, horrified).

This scene unfolds during a chaotic moment when Joe and 22 have swapped bodies—Joe inhabiting a therapy cat and 22 occupying Joe's human form. Joe, determined to fulfill his long-awaited opportunity to perform with jazz legend Dorothea Williams, attempts to help 22 (in his body) prepare for the evening. Because appearance is crucial for this debut, Joe insists on trimming his own hair despite the obvious difficulty of doing so while in feline form.

The utterance "Don't move" is delivered sharply and without any mitigating devices such as modals ("please," "could you"), hedging, or indirect phrasing. This marks the statement as a clear example of bald on record politeness, which prioritizes clarity and efficiency over face-saving or social harmony. In high-stress situations—especially those involving urgency or potential consequences.

Overall, the patterns of politeness strategies identified in *Soul* (2020) directly reflect Brown and Levinson's (1987) theoretical claims regarding face management, social distance, power relations, and degrees of imposition—but also extend previous film-based studies (e.g., Fitri, 2022; Dewi & Ayomi, 2023; Septaria & Ambalegin, 2023). The predominance of positive politeness reinforces the theory's claim that solidarity-building and face-enhancing strategies are central to maintaining relational harmony, while negative politeness illustrates how autonomy and non-imposition are negotiated in institutional and transitional contexts. Off-record strategies further demonstrate how indirectness and metaphor function to convey existential reflection without overt face threat, and bald on record strategies appear in moments of urgency where clarity outweighs face concerns, fully aligning with Brown and Levinson's framework. By showing how these strategies operate across multiple characters and contribute to both emotional and philosophical meaning, this study moves beyond the largely classificatory focus and limited scope of earlier literature. It demonstrates that in existential animated narratives such as *Soul*, linguistic choices function not merely as pragmatic devices, but as narrative mechanisms that shape character growth, emotional depth, and the construction of meaning.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study has examined the use of politeness strategies in the animated film *Soul* (2020), employing the theoretical framework of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness model. A total of 65 utterances were identified and classified into four primary strategy types: positive politeness (29 instances), bald on record (21), negative politeness (8), and off-record (7). Among these, positive politeness emerged as the most prevalent strategy used throughout the film.The dominance of positive politeness underscores the film's emphasis on empathy, affirmation, and relationship-building. Characters frequently employ language that praises, encourages, and fosters solidarity, aligning closely with the film's thematic focus on mentorship, emotional connection, and the affirmation of individual worth. Examples such as Dez's enthusiastic congratulations to Joe, or the Jerrys' supportive tone in the soul realm, illustrate how dialogue is used to create a sense of warmth and belonging. Although used less frequently, negative politeness appears in moments marked by deference, uncertainty, or formal respect, such as when Joe hesitantly questions his place in the Great Before. Off-record strategies, while limited in number, serve important functions by conveying critique or insight through indirect means. Characters like Libba and Dorothea use metaphor and implication to express concern or provoke reflection without direct confrontation.

Meanwhile, bald on record strategies are employed in emotionally charged scenes where urgency or emotional intensity outweighs the need for mitigating language, such as when Joe tries to stop 22 from leaving or attempts to assert control. Taken collectively, the use of these strategies reveals how *Soul* integrates politeness not only as a means of social coordination, but also as a vehicle for conveying emotional nuance and existential reflection. The prominence of positive politeness in particular reinforces the film's central message: connection, encouragement, and the appreciation of everyday experiences are essential to a meaningful life.

However, despite offering meaningful insights, this study has certain limitations that may guide future research. The analysis focused on 65 verbal utterances that explicitly contained politeness strategies, excluding potential multimodal cues such as tone, gesture, or visual framing. Although multiple major characters were analyzed, the study did not include a wider range of character interactions, particularly from minor or less frequent speakers, which may reveal further pragmatic variation across the narrative. Because the analysis was limited to a single animated film, the findings cannot be generalized across different genres or storytelling styles. Future studies may therefore expand the dataset, incorporate more character interaction patterns, and apply multimodal approaches to capture non-verbal politeness markers. Comparative research across animated and live-action films with similar thematic depth may also offer richer cross-contextual insights. Furthermore, integrating alternative theoretical frameworks, such as Leech's Politeness Principle or Watts' discursive model may deepen understanding of how politeness constructs identity, emotion, and social meaning.

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