

# THE POLITENESS STRATEGY USED BY SHERLOCK HOLMES IN *THE SIGN OF FOUR* NOVEL

Shofi Nur Aziizah<sup>1\*</sup>, Evi Pebri Ila Rachma<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> Universitas Trunojoyo Madura, Bangkalan, Indonesia.  
shofinuraziizah23@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze politeness strategy used by Sherlock Holmes in Arthur Conan Doyle's novel *The Sign of Four*, along with the social factors that influence their use. The research uses a qualitative method, with the researcher serving as the main instrument. Data are collected by examining the dialogues involving Sherlock Holmes in the novel that contain politeness strategies. The analysis applies Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory to identify the types of strategies used and the social factors influencing them. The analysis results show 81 data of bald on record strategies, 116 data of positive politeness strategies, 53 data of negative politeness strategies, and 7 data of off record strategies. The social factor analysis reveals 218 data of social distance and 39 data of power, while no data are found for the level of imposition.

**Keywords:** *politeness strategy, social factors, Sherlock Holmes*

## 1. Introduction

Humans are naturally social creatures. As social creatures, humans need a tool to interact and communicate with one another. This tool is called language (Fridolini et al., 2021). Language functions as a crucial tool in this process, acting as a bridge between the speaker and the addressee to share information. By using language in their daily lives, people can express their feelings, opinions, and more (Susana et al., 2022). Language carries not only information but also emotional and social meaning. Hence, speakers must communicate carefully to create harmonious relationships. One key aspect of effective communication is the polite use of language. Thus, paying attention to politeness is crucial when interacting with others. By employing polite language in social interactions, individuals can build harmonious relationships.

The theoretical foundation for understanding politeness strategies was extensively developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Use*. Central to their theory is the concept of "face", which refers to a person's need to maintain their self-image during social interactions. They divided this into two types: positive face, which reflects the desire to be liked, accepted, or admired, and negative face, which is the wish to act freely without being imposed upon. Since everyone has their own face and wants to protect it, people generally try to cooperate in maintaining each other's face during communication. This mutual effort helps keep social interactions respectful and smooth.

However, when someone says or does something that threatens another person's self-image, they are performing what is known as a Face-Threatening Act (FTA). They can affect either positive or negative face, depending on the situation. To minimize the potential harm and maintain social harmony, Brown and Levinson (1987) outlined four main politeness strategies to minimize the impact of FTAs: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record. 1. Bald on Record: This strategy involves delivering a message directly and clearly, without attempting to minimize the face threat. It is typically used in urgent situations or when the speaker assumes the hearer will not feel threatened. Brown and Levinson (1987) identified two types: bald on-record usage without minimizing face threats and bald on-record usage that minimizes face threats by implication. 2. Positive Politeness: This approach aims to maintain the hearer's positive face by emphasizing closeness and shared similarities, treating the hearer as part of the same group. Brown and Levinson (1987) defined positive politeness as redressive action aimed at satisfying the hearer's positive face wants. They list 15 positive politeness strategies: (1) Notice, attend to hearer's interests,

wants, or needs, (2) Exaggerate approval or sympathy, (3) Intensify interest to hearer, (4) Use in-group identity markers, (5) Seek agreement, (6) Avoid disagreement, (7) Presuppose/assert common ground, (8) Joke, (9) Assert or presuppose speaker's knowledge of and concern for hearer's wants, (10) Offer or promise, (11) Be optimistic, (12) Include both speaker and hearer in the activity, (13) Give or ask for reasons, (14) Assume or assert reciprocity, and (15) Give gifts to hearer (goods, sympathy, cooperation). 3. Negative Politeness: This strategy aims to mitigate face threats by acknowledging the hearer's need for autonomy and freedom of action. Brown and Levinson (1987) described negative politeness as a redressive action that shows respect and avoids imposition. It is marked by formality and careful attention to the hearer's desire not to be intruded upon. They list 10 negative politeness strategies: (1) Be conventionally indirect, (2) Question or hedge, (3) Be pessimistic, (4) Minimize the imposition, (5) Give deference, (6) Apologize, (7) Impersonalize speaker and hearer, (8) State the FTA as a general rule, (9) Nominalize, and (10) Go on record as incurring a debt or as not indebted to the hearer. 4. Off Record: In off record communication, the speaker avoids directness by creating ambiguity, allowing for multiple interpretations of their intention. As explained by Brown and Levinson (1987), this strategy enables the speaker to imply a message without being directly tied to a specific meaning or goal. Off record strategies include: (1) Give hints, (2) Give association clues, (3) Presuppose, (4) Understate, (5) Overstate, (6) Use tautologies, (7) Use contradictions, (8) Be ironic, (9) Use metaphors, (10) Use rhetorical questions, (11) Be ambiguous, (12) Be vague, (13) Overgeneralize, (14) Displace the hearer, and (15) Be incomplete or use ellipsis.

Furthermore, Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed that the choice of politeness strategies is influenced by three key social factors: social distance, power, and the rank of imposition. Social distance refers to the degree of closeness or familiarity between the speaker and the hearer. It can change based on the frequency of their interactions. Frequent interactions reduce social distance, leading to a closer relationship and the potential use of more informal language. Power refers to the speaker's ability to impose his will on the hearer, highlighting the power difference between them. The hearer's level of power influences the speaker's choice of strategy. For instance, when addressing someone with greater power, the speaker tends to use more polite language. Thus, power plays a significant role in determining the politeness strategies employed by the speaker.

Rank of imposition refers to how demanding a request is, based on cultural context. It indicates the degree to which the speaker's request threatens the hearer's face. For example, asking for a small amount of money is less demanding than requesting a large sum. As the level of imposition increases, the need for more careful and polite strategies rises to minimize the threat to the hearer's face. Politeness strategies have been widely analyzed across both fictional and non-fictional contexts, reflecting their relevance in diverse forms of communication. Recent studies have focused on how politeness operates in various media and through different characters. For example, Syakur et al. (2023) analyzed the main characters in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, identifying a range of positive and negative politeness strategies. Their findings suggest that choices in politeness are closely tied to social dynamics, particularly power relations and social distance.

In a film context, Maharani et al. (2023) studied the use of politeness strategies in *Gifted*, observing that positive politeness was commonly used in family and educational settings to foster a sense of closeness. On the other hand, non-fictional communication has also attracted scholarly attention. Purba et al. (2023) examined Joe Biden's victory speech, concluding that positive politeness was the most prominent strategy used to create a comfortable, relaxed, and audience-friendly tone.

While these studies contribute valuable insights into how politeness functions across different settings, there remains a noticeable gap in the literature when it comes to classic detective fiction. In particular, the communicative style of iconic figures such as Sherlock Holmes has yet to be fully explored through the lens of politeness theory. In particular, the communicative style of iconic figures such as Sherlock Holmes has not yet been fully explored in relation to key social variables like power, social distance, and the degree of imposition. This study seeks to address that gap by examining the politeness strategies employed by Sherlock Holmes in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four*. It also investigates the social factors that influence his language use in order to provide a deeper understanding of how politeness operates within the complex social dynamics of

detective fiction. Based on the discussion above, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) What politeness strategies are used by Sherlock Holmes in the novel *The Sign of Four*? (2) What social factors influence Sherlock Holmes in choosing politeness strategies in the novel *The Sign of Four*?

## 2. Method

This research uses a qualitative method to analyze the politeness strategies used by Sherlock Holmes in *The Sign of Four* novel. Rooted in the understanding that language reflects social behavior and human interaction, qualitative research aims to explore how individuals or groups interpret and give meaning to their experiences within specific contexts (Creswell, 2009). By adopting this approach, the study aims to closely analyze how Holmes uses politeness strategies in his interactions with various characters. This analysis offers insights into the broader social dynamics and patterns of communication portrayed in the narrative.

The source of data for this study is the dialogues spoken by Sherlock Holmes in *The Sign of Four* novel. These dialogues serve as the specific linguistic units of analysis, focusing on his conversations with other characters. These dialogues are selected based on their relevance to the research objective of analyzing politeness strategies in Sherlock Holmes' interactions. This deliberate approach ensures that the data collected meaningfully contributes to understanding Holmes's communicative choices.

The researcher is the primary instrument, responsible for data collection and analysis. The data collection process follows a clear and thoughtful series of steps. It starts with a careful reading of the entire novel to gain a solid understanding of the story, characters, and background context. After this first reading, all the dialogues involving Sherlock Holmes are identified, highlighted, and written down to allow for closer analysis. For analyzing the data, the study uses the interactive model of qualitative data analysis by Miles et al. (2014) which includes three main steps: reducing the data, displaying it, and drawing and checking conclusions. In the data reduction stage, only the parts of Holmes's dialogue that show politeness strategies are selected. These selected lines are then analyzed using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which is the main framework used to categorize the dialogue. Each selected dialogue is examined to identify which politeness strategy is used and how it is affected by social factors, including social distance, relative power, and the ranking of imposition. Finally, the findings are organized and interpreted to reveal patterns in Holmes's use of politeness strategies, with particular attention to the social motivations that shape his communicative behavior.

## 3. Results and Discussion

A total of 257 dialogues containing politeness strategies are identified in Sherlock Holmes's utterances throughout the novel. These utterances are selected based on the framework of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. The results address both research questions: the first concerns the types of politeness strategies used, and the second relates to the social factors that influence the use of those strategies. The following tables present the findings. The first table shows the frequency of each politeness strategy, and the second outlines the social factors observed in the data.

Table 1. Data frequency of politeness strategy

Politeness Strategy	Data Frequency
Bald on record	81
Positive politeness	116
Negative politeness	53
Off record	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>257</b>

As shown in the table, various politeness strategies are used throughout the story. Positive politeness is the most frequently applied, with 116 occurrences, suggesting a strong preference for maintaining social harmony and building rapport. This is followed by the bald on record strategy, which appears 81 times and reflects a more direct and straightforward way of speaking. Negative politeness occurs 53 times, indicating some attention to formality and the need to avoid imposing on others. The off record strategy is the least common, with only 7 instances, pointing to a minimal use

of indirectness or implied meanings. These results suggest that Sherlock Holmes tends to favor open and engaging forms of communication, while more subtle or indirect strategies are rarely used.

Tabel 2. Data frequency of social factors

Social Factors		Data Frequency
Social distance	Low	160
	High	58
Power	Low	0
	High	39
Ranking of imposition	Low	0
	High	0
<b>Total</b>		<b>257</b>

Based on the data in the table, social distance appears to play a significant role in the interactions found in Sherlock Holmes' dialogues. Low social distance is the most dominant factor, occurring in 160 utterances, which suggests that many of Holmes' exchanges take place with familiar individuals or those he engages with frequently. High social distance is noted in 58 cases, indicating that some interactions do involve a degree of formality or unfamiliarity, particularly with clients or authority figures. Regarding power, the data shows that high power distance occurs in 39 data, while no cases were recorded for low power distance. This implies that when power dynamics are present in Holmes' conversations, they often involve clear hierarchies. Interestingly, there are no recorded instances for either low or high ranking of imposition, which suggests that the nature of the requests or acts under study do not involve significant burden or urgency. Overall, the findings point to a context shaped more by social closeness and occasional power imbalances than by the weight of the imposition itself.

Politeness strategies are used to manage social interactions and maintain harmony between speakers and hearers. They help speakers express their intentions in ways that consider the listener's social needs, such as the desire for approval, respect, or autonomy. In *The Sign of Four* by Arthur Conan Doyle, the use of politeness strategies by Sherlock Holmes is evident throughout the narrative. The findings show that Holmes employs several types of politeness strategies in his dialogues. Among these, positive politeness is used most frequently, with 116 data. This suggests that Holmes often seeks to appear agreeable or cooperative, particularly when he needs to maintain a working relationship or gain information. Bald on record strategies are the second most frequent, with 81 occurrences, showing his preference for directness and efficiency. Negative politeness, which occurs 53 times, reflects his occasional use of formality or indirectness when dealing with more hierarchical situations. Off record strategies appear only 7 times, indicating that Holmes rarely relies on vague or ambiguous speech to get his point across. These findings reflect Holmes' strategic approach to communication. He adapts his language based on the context and the nature of his interaction with others.

Overall, Sherlock Holmes' use of politeness strategies demonstrates a balance between social awareness and functional clarity. His speech reflects both his sharp intellect and his understanding of social dynamics, allowing him to navigate complex interpersonal situations effectively. To further understand the role of these strategies in Holmes' dialogue, each type is discussed in detail in the following sections. Sherlock Holmes gives this command to the ship's captain using a bald on-record strategy, where the threat to the hearer's face is not softened. Brown and Levinson (1987) explained that this approach emphasizes clarity and efficiency over concern for the addressee's face needs. Holmes's imperative is issued in the middle of an urgent chase involving Jonathan Small, a suspect in both murder and theft. The statement is brief and direct, designed to prompt immediate action rather than to show deference to the captain's autonomy. This choice reflects the pressure of the situation. According to the theory, in moments of high urgency, polite language can become counterproductive, as it may reduce the urgency or clarity of the message. Holmes, therefore, places the need to apprehend the suspect above any effort to maintain politeness or attend to the captain's face.

- 1) *Bald on-record usage that minimizes face threats by implication*

"Have a cigar," said Holmes; "and you had best take a pull out of my flask, for you are very wet."

This utterance, directed by Sherlock Holmes to the suspect Jonathan Small, illustrates a bald on-record strategy that reduces face threats through context and implication. Brown and Levinson (1987) noted that a direct command can function as polite when it attends to the hearer's face, especially in situations involving offers or actions that benefit the hearer. Holmes uses the imperatives "Have a cigar" and "take a pull" not as demands but as sincere offers meant to put Small at ease. He supports the offer with a clear reason, saying "for you are very wet," which shows concern for Small's comfort and well-being. This attention to the hearer's positive face reframes the directness as considerate rather than imposing. According to the theory, a firm and unambiguous offer can be more effective in overcoming a hearer's hesitation, as it reduces the social pressure of accepting a favor. In this case, Holmes's approach helps Small feel more comfortable accepting the gesture, minimizing any potential face threat and encouraging a more cooperative interaction.

"For my part," said Holmes, "whatever you may choose to say will go no further." This statement from Sherlock Holmes is an example of positive politeness, specifically the strategy of noticing and attending to the hearer's interests, wants, or needs. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), this approach involves the speaker demonstrating awareness of and sensitivity to the hearer's condition or desires. It helps to support the hearer's positive face, which is the desire to be valued, appreciated, and understood. In this situation, Holmes perceives an important but unspoken need for confidentiality before the hearer is willing to share sensitive information. By saying, "whatever you may choose to say will go no further," he offers a clear assurance that their conversation will remain private. In doing so, Holmes directly addresses the hearer's need for security and discretion. This act of recognition fosters trust and encourages openness, allowing the hearer to feel respected and safe enough to speak freely.

"A wooden-legged man?" said Holmes, with bland surprise. This utterance by Sherlock Holmes illustrates positive politeness through the strategy of exaggerating interest and surprise. Brown and Levinson (1987) explained that a speaker can express positive politeness by using exaggerated responses to show approval or sympathy with the hearer. This kind of response signals that the speaker shares the hearer's sense of what is important, meeting the hearer's positive face need to feel understood and appreciated. Holmes repeats the hearer's words as a question, saying "A wooden-legged man?" with a deliberate expression of bland surprise. His reaction is not aimed at clarification but at showing a strong interest in what the hearer has said. Brown and Levinson (1987) noted that this approach can emphasize the speaker's engagement with the conversation. By treating the information as noteworthy, Holmes affirms the value of the hearer's contribution, making them feel acknowledged and encouraging them to continue. This helps to establish a cooperative dynamic, which supports Holmes's broader investigative goals.

"At that moment who should come down but Mordecai Smith, the missing owner?" In this moment in the narrative, Sherlock Holmes uses positive politeness by applying the strategy of intensifying interest to the hearer. Brown and Levinson (1987) described this strategy as a way of making one's contributions more engaging, essentially "making a good story" to involve the hearer in the speaker's experience. This technique supports the hearer's positive face by drawing them into the conversation as an active and interested participant. Holmes uses a rhetorical question, "who should come down but..." as a narrative device to build suspense and capture the listener's attention. He then names the individual as "Mordecai Smith, the missing owner," offering just enough detail to make the moment seem important and intriguing. This storytelling approach functions as a politeness strategy by making the interaction more vivid and engaging for the hearer. According to the theory, intensifying interest in this way expresses a willingness to share an experience and establish common ground, which strengthens the cooperative tone of the conversation.

"My dear doctor," said he, kindly, "pray accept my apologies." In addressing Dr. Watson, Sherlock Holmes uses positive politeness through the use of in-group identity markers. Brown and Levinson (1987) explained that speakers can establish common ground and express closeness by using familiar or affectionate forms of address. These markers, including terms of endearment, help soften potentially face-threatening acts by reinforcing the bond between speaker and hearer. Holmes's phrase "My dear doctor" functions as a term of endearment that reflects the warmth and

familiarity of their relationship. This form of address introduces an apology, which is itself a face-threatening act that may undermine the speaker's own positive face. By beginning with a gesture of solidarity, Holmes reduces the impact of the apology and reassures Watson of their continued closeness. In doing so, he addresses both his own face needs and Watson's, maintaining the sense of mutual respect and shared identity within their relationship.

"That was the idea which occurred to me the instant I saw the drawn muscles of the face." In response to an observation from Dr. Watson, Sherlock Holmes demonstrates positive politeness by using the strategy of seeking agreement. Brown and Levinson (1987) described this strategy as a way to claim common ground with the hearer by affirming their opinions, which supports the hearer's positive face. Instead of simply acknowledging Watson's point, Holmes explicitly states that he had arrived at the same conclusion, saying, "That was the idea which occurred to me..." This clear affirmation not only validates Watson's reasoning but also highlights the alignment of their perspectives. As a politeness strategy, this act of agreement is particularly effective. According to the theory, confirming another person's opinion affirms their competence and strengthens the shared understanding between speaker and hearer. In this context, Holmes's agreement reinforces the collaborative nature of his relationship with Watson, presenting them as intellectual partners who approach problems with a shared logic and mutual respect.

"It is more than that. It is the only hypothesis which covers the facts." In responding to Dr. Watson's concern about speculation, Sherlock Holmes uses positive politeness by applying the strategy of avoiding disagreement. Brown and Levinson (1987) described this as the use of "token agreement" to ease the delivery of a contradictory opinion. Instead of directly rejecting the hearer's view, the speaker first acknowledges part of it before offering a different perspective, often using a "Yes, but..." structure. Holmes's response subtly disagrees with Watson's point. The phrase "It is more than that" acts as a token agreement by recognizing Watson's comment about speculation, while gently shifting the discussion. Rather than saying "No, it's not speculation," Holmes builds on Watson's idea and reframes it, suggesting that his reasoning is based on evidence rather than mere conjecture. This strategy functions as a form of positive politeness by protecting Watson's face. Since direct disagreement can be face-threatening, Holmes avoids confrontation and maintains a tone of cooperation, helping to keep their dialogue focused on solving the case.

"You remember that we saw the name upon the chart in Captain Morstan's possession." With this statement to Dr. Watson, Sherlock Holmes employs positive politeness through the strategy of presupposing and asserting common ground. Brown and Levinson (1987) explained that a speaker can express positive politeness by indicating shared knowledge or experience with the hearer. One way to achieve this is by presupposing the hearer's familiarity with past events, which serves as a subtle expression of solidarity. Holmes does not present his point as new information but rather as a shared memory. The phrase "You remember..." explicitly assumes that Watson already knows what is being referred to and took part in the original event, while the use of "we" further highlights their joint involvement. This strategy reinforces their partnership by framing Holmes and Watson as collaborators with a shared history. According to the theory, asserting mutual knowledge positions the hearer as an in-group member whose perspective is aligned with the speaker's. By recalling a moment they experienced together, Holmes is not merely conveying information. Holmes is affirming Watson's role in the investigation and supporting his positive face through a reaffirmation of their close working relationship.

"Viewing the matter as an abstract problem, I had forgotten how personal and painful a thing it might be to you." Responding to Dr. Watson's anger, Sherlock Holmes uses positive politeness through the strategy of asserting his knowledge of and concern for the hearer's wants. Brown and Levinson (1987) identified this as a cooperative strategy in which the speaker shows an awareness of the hearer's feelings and desires in order to support their positive face. Holmes's statement functions as an apology by openly acknowledging Watson's emotional response. When he admits that he had "forgotten how personal and painful" the matter was, he demonstrates a recognition of Watson's perspective and expresses concern, even while admitting to a moment of oversight. This approach serves as a positive politeness strategy because it affirms the legitimacy of Watson's feelings. According to the theory, showing concern for a hearer's wants signals that the speaker views the interaction as cooperative and based on shared understanding. By expressing this empathy,

Holmes helps repair their working relationship and meets Watson's positive face need to feel that his emotions are recognized and respected.

"It will be clear enough to you soon," he said, in an off-hand way. Addressing Dr. Watson's confusion, Sherlock Holmes uses positive politeness through the strategy of making an implicit promise. Brown and Levinson (1987) explained that offers and promises function as a way for the speaker to demonstrate cooperation and goodwill toward the hearer. This satisfies the hearer's positive face by showing that the speaker is committed to supporting their goals or desires. In this moment, Watson is confused and therefore seeking clarity. Holmes's statement, "It will be clear enough to you soon," serves as a promise that this need will be met. While he does not immediately offer a full explanation, he provides reassurance that understanding is forthcoming. This functions as a positive politeness strategy by acknowledging and responding to Watson's desire for comprehension. According to the theory, a promise of this kind signals the speaker's intention to assist the hearer in achieving what they want. By offering this reassurance, Holmes supports Watson's positive face and reinforces the cooperative nature of their relationship.

"With all these data you should be able to draw some just inference." In this remark to Dr. Watson, Sherlock Holmes employs positive politeness through the strategy of being optimistic. Brown and Levinson (1987) described this strategy as the speaker assuming that the hearer will cooperate because it aligns with their shared goals. This optimistic assumption helps minimize potential face threats by emphasizing common interests and the likelihood of a positive outcome. Holmes is not simply suggesting a possibility, but he is also expressing a confident expectation of Watson's success. By stating that Watson "should be able" to reach a conclusion, Holmes presents this success as both natural and expected, based on their shared efforts and Watson's abilities. This functions as a positive politeness strategy by reinforcing Watson's positive face and showing confidence in his competence. According to the theory, optimism about a cooperative result signals solidarity and mutual understanding. Holmes's confidence serves as encouragement, positioning Watson as a capable and valued partner and reinforcing the collaborative nature of their relationship.

"Let us go down." In inviting Dr. Watson to join him, Sherlock Holmes makes use of positive politeness by including both himself and Watson in the proposed action. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), using an inclusive form like "let us" allows the speaker to present a directive in a more cooperative light. This strategy softens the imposition by appealing to shared goals and mutual involvement. When Holmes says "Let us go downstairs," he frames the suggestion not as an order, but as a joint decision. This inclusive phrasing shifts the tone from directive to collaborative. It highlights their partnership and emphasizes mutual respect. Within the framework of politeness theory, involving the hearer in this way helps reduce the potential face threat of giving instructions. By presenting the action as something they will do together, Holmes affirms their shared purpose and acknowledges Watson as an active, valued participant. This approach supports Watson's positive face needs by treating him as a respected companion rather than a subordinate.

"We have not heard your story, and we cannot tell how far justice may originally have been on your side." In responding to Jonathan Small's outburst, Sherlock Holmes uses positive politeness by giving reasons for his request. Brown and Levinson (1987) described this strategy as a cooperative move in which the speaker includes the hearer in their practical reasoning. By explaining the motive behind a request or other potentially face-threatening act, the speaker encourages collaboration rather than resistance. Holmes wants Small to share his story, which could feel like a significant imposition. Instead of issuing a direct demand, he offers a clear rationale. He explains that they cannot assess the fairness of Small's actions without first understanding the full account. By saying "we have not heard your story," Holmes presents the request as a necessary part of forming a fair judgment. This approach frames Small as someone whose viewpoint matters and whose cooperation is both expected and respected. According to the theory, giving reasons includes the hearer in the activity and assumes their willingness to participate. Holmes is not simply asking for information. He is inviting Small to contribute to a shared understanding, which acknowledges Small's perspective and affirms his value as a rational collaborator.

"Thanks. I hope that you will hear soon from Mr. Smith." In this remark to Miss Smith, Sherlock Holmes employs positive politeness through the strategy of giving gifts to the hearer, specifically in the form of appreciation and sympathy. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), a

speaker can attend to a hearer's positive face by fulfilling one of their wants, which may include intangible gifts such as understanding, recognition, or emotional support. Holmes offers two such gestures in his statement. First, when he says "Thanks," he expresses appreciation for Miss Smith's cooperation, acknowledging her contribution. Second, by voicing hope that she will "hear soon from Mr. Smith," he shows sympathy and concern for her emotional state, responding directly to her known desire for news. This strategy functions as a positive politeness move because it shows that Holmes recognizes and respects Miss Smith's needs. The theory holds that responding to a hearer's wants in this way helps to mitigate the potential threat of social distance or authority. By offering both gratitude and empathy, Holmes ends the interaction on a respectful note and affirms Miss Smith's value in the exchange.

"What do you make of it?" When Sherlock Holmes seeks Dr. Watson's opinion, he uses negative politeness through a strategy known as conventional indirectness. Brown and Levinson (1987) explained that this strategy involves indirect speech acts, where the intended meaning differs from the literal expression but is understood through social convention. This allows the speaker to express their intent while also showing a desire to be indirect, which helps protect the hearer's negative face, or their wish to act freely without interference. Instead of issuing a direct command like "Tell me your opinion," Holmes frames his request as a question. This is a more typical and less imposing way to ask for something, in this case, Watson's analysis. It works as a negative politeness strategy because it respects Watson's autonomy and his right not to be pressured. Indirect speech also gives the hearer an opportunity to decline without conflict. By asking for Watson's input rather than insisting on it, Holmes minimizes the imposition and supports a relationship built on mutual respect and collaboration.

"I wish you particularly to notice these footmarks." In this directive to Dr. Watson, Sherlock Holmes uses negative politeness by including a hedge. Brown and Levinson (1987) described hedging as an important strategy for softening a face-threatening act. Through hedging, the speaker avoids assuming the hearer's cooperation and reduces the sense of pressure. Rather than giving a direct command such as "Notice these footmarks," Holmes presents his request as a personal wish: "I wish...". This phrasing functions as a hedge that softens the force of the command and turns it into a more modest expression of desire. As a result, the directive becomes less imposing and more considerate. Within the framework of politeness theory, this kind of hedging shows respect for the hearer's negative face, or their right to act freely without being pressured. By framing the directive as a wish, Holmes offers Watson a sense of choice and positions the act as a shared decision, which helps sustain the respectful and collaborative nature of their relationship.

"I will wait for you here if you will drive out again. Or perhaps you are too tired?" In this statement to Dr. Watson, Sherlock Holmes employs negative politeness by combining the strategies of hedging and expressing pessimism in order to avoid exerting pressure. Brown and Levinson (1987) explained that negative politeness aims to protect the hearer's negative face, or their wish to act freely without interference. This is often achieved by clearly allowing the hearer the option to decline a request. Holmes communicates this sense of choice in two ways. First, he frames the request as a conditional using the hedge "if you will drive out again," which makes his own proposed action dependent on Watson's willingness. Second, he offers a ready excuse for refusal by adding, "Or perhaps you are too tired?" This expression of doubt about Watson's ability to comply makes it easier for him to decline without discomfort. By combining these strategies, Holmes reduces the force of the request, shows consideration for Watson's autonomy, and lessens the potential imposition.

"Preserve it carefully, then, Miss Morstan, for it may prove to be of use to us." In this directive to his client, Sherlock Holmes uses negative politeness by employing the strategy of giving deference. Brown and Levinson (1987) described this strategy as a way to meet the hearer's desire to be treated with respect, often through formal address that highlights social distance or acknowledges status. Holmes softens the directive "Preserve it carefully" by addressing his client as "Miss Morstan." This use of a formal title and last name serves as a clear marker of deference. It helps reduce the imposition of the command by signaling respect for her position. According to politeness theory, using deferential language shows that the speaker is not assuming authority over them. By choosing a respectful form of address, Holmes maintains his client's sense of autonomy and frames

the exchange in a professional, courteous manner. This approach encourages cooperation without relying on direct or forceful language.

*"I am sorry, Mrs. Smith, for I wanted a steam launch."* When making a request of Mrs. Smith, Sherlock Holmes uses negative politeness by employing the strategy of apologizing. Brown and Levinson (1987) noted that a speaker can soften an imposition on the hearer's negative face by expressing regret for the intrusion. Holmes begins his request for a steam launch with the straightforward apology, "I am sorry." This functions as a negative politeness strategy by openly acknowledging that his request places a burden on the hearer. According to the theory, an apology signals the speaker's awareness of the hearer's right to act freely and their desire not to be disturbed. By expressing regret for the potential inconvenience, Holmes shows respect for Mrs. Smith's autonomy, reduces the pressure of the request, and increases the likelihood of a cooperative response.

"That is understood, then?" In this statement, Sherlock Holmes uses negative politeness by employing the strategy of impersonalizing both the speaker and the hearer. Brown and Levinson (1987) explained that a speaker can reduce the force of a face-threatening act by avoiding direct references to "I" and "you." Impersonal forms, such as passive constructions, help distance the participants from the act and lessen its imposition. Holmes uses the passive phrase "is understood" to check for comprehension, rather than the more direct and hearer-focused question "Do you understand?" By omitting the pronoun "you," he shifts attention away from the hearer and makes the statement feel less pointed. This serves a negative politeness function by softening what could be taken as a challenge to the hearer's attentiveness or intelligence. According to the theory, the use of passive voice helps impersonalize the act, reducing the pressure it might place on the hearer and showing respect for their autonomy and competence.

"Our friend won't keep us out in the cold now, I am sure." In this remark to a guard, Sherlock Holmes uses an off record strategy by offering a hint. Brown and Levinson (1987) defined off record strategies as indirect speech acts that leave room for multiple interpretations, allowing the speaker to avoid taking full responsibility for a face-threatening act. One common off record approach is giving a hint, where the speaker says something not directly relevant to the situation. This prompts the hearer to infer the intended meaning. Rather than directly asking to be let inside, Holmes comments on their uncomfortable situation by mentioning that they are "out in the cold." The actual request is left unstated and must be inferred. This qualifies as an off record strategy because the meaning remains ambiguous. According to politeness theory, such hints often work by expressing the motive for a desired action, which encourages the hearer to draw the intended conclusion on their own. This approach allows the guard to appear generous by offering entry rather than simply following a command. Holmes avoids the imposition of a direct request, and in doing so, protects the face of both himself and the guard.

"On which the dead man very considerably got up and locked the door on the inside." When pointing out a flaw in Athelney Jones's theory, Sherlock Holmes uses an off record strategy by employing irony. Brown and Levinson (1987) described irony as a way of expressing the opposite of what is literally said. Irony encourages the hearer to infer the speaker's real, often critical, intention. Holmes presents an obviously absurd scenario in which a dead man acts "considerately" and treats it as if it were a logical result of Jones's theory. The impossibility of this statement signals that it is not meant to be taken literally. This serves as an off record form of criticism. According to the theory, irony allows a speaker to express disagreement indirectly, placing the burden of interpretation on the hearer. Instead of directly stating, "Your theory is illogical," which would openly challenge Jones and risk threatening his face, Holmes uses irony to point out the flaw in a more tactful way. This method allows him to deliver his critique effectively while maintaining politeness, giving Jones the chance to recognize the problem without being directly confronted.

"How does all that fit into your theory?" In challenging Athelney Jones's conclusion, Sherlock Holmes uses an off record strategy by asking a rhetorical question. Brown and Levinson (1987) explained that asking a question without expecting an answer is a way to make a point indirectly. The speaker is not genuinely seeking information, instead, the question prompts the hearer to infer the intended, often critical, meaning. Holmes poses a question to which he knows there is no satisfactory answer, implying that the facts do not support Jones's theory. This functions as an off record form of criticism. According to politeness theory, rhetorical questions can be used to perform

face-threatening acts such as criticism in a less direct manner. Rather than openly stating that Jones is wrong, which would pose a clear threat to his face, Holmes guides him toward that realization on his own. This approach allows Holmes to challenge the conclusion while maintaining politeness and giving Jones the space to reconsider without feeling directly confronted.

### **Social Factors**

The social factors that influence Sherlock Holmes's use of politeness strategies can be categorized into three key dimensions: social distance, power, and the ranking of imposition. These elements help explain how Holmes adjusts his speech depending on his relationship with the hearer and the nature of the act being performed. Based on the data, social distance emerges as the most dominant factor. Out of 218 data, 160 occur in situations of low social distance, while 58 involve high social distance. This indicates that Holmes most often interacts with people he knows well, such as Dr. Watson, allowing for more familiarity and less need for formal politeness. In contrast, interactions involving power dynamics are less frequent, with only 39 data showing high power on Holmes's part and no cases involving low power. This suggests that while Holmes sometimes asserts his authority, the majority of his interactions do not heavily rely on hierarchical status. Notably, the ranking of imposition does not appear in the data, with both low and high imposition categories recording zero utterances. This absence implies that the weight of the act is not explicitly marked in the analysis or that imposition remains relatively constant. Overall, the findings show that social distance plays the most significant role in shaping Holmes's politeness strategies, while power and imposition have more limited influence. The following section will explore examples from the data to illustrate how these factors are reflected in Holmes's utterance.

### **Social distance**

#### *1) Low social distance*

"It is cocaine," he said, "a seven-per-cent solution. Would you care to try it?"

In this statement, the low social distance between Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson is the key factor shaping the interaction. Brown and Levinson (1987) argued that close relationships allow for greater familiarity and the assumption of shared perspectives, which influences how face-threatening acts are managed. Holmes's offer of cocaine is conceivable only within the context of deep trust and intimacy that defines his friendship with Watson. His casual, almost offhand manner reflects this closeness. At the same time, the phrasing of the offer as a polite question, "Would you care to try it?", shows that Holmes still acknowledges Watson's autonomy. The low social distance enables the offer to be made, while the respectful form in which it is delivered ensures that Watson retains the freedom to decline without strain on their relationship.

#### *2) High social distance*

"What do you intend to do, Miss Morstan?"

In this statement, the high social distance between Sherlock Holmes and his client, Miss Morstan, is the main factor influencing his choice of language. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), high social distance often prompts the use of negative politeness strategies, which show respect for the hearer's autonomy and reduce the imposition of the act. Holmes reflects this distance in two key ways. First, he uses the formal address "Miss Morstan," a clear marker of deference appropriate to their professional relationship. Second, rather than proposing a course of action, he asks an open-ended question, "What do you intend to do?", which places the decision entirely in her hands. Both the formal title and the non-directive question help maintain professional boundaries while allowing Holmes to support his client without overstepping.

### **Power**

#### *1) High power*

"You must not be later."

In this directive to his client, Sherlock Holmes's use of language is shaped primarily by the high power he holds within their professional relationship. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), a significant power imbalance reduces the speaker's need to use redressive or polite strategies. When the speaker holds authority over the hearer, face-threatening acts such as commands can be delivered bald on record, without mitigation. Holmes's statement, "You must not be later," is a clear example of this. The strong modal "must" signals an unambiguous directive, leaving no space for negotiation. This directness reflects Holmes's role as the expert leading the case, where his authority is the

dominant social factor. Because his high power minimizes the perceived threat of the command, he can prioritize clarity and efficiency over concern for Miss Morstan's negative face. In this context, such bluntness is both expected and socially acceptable.

#### 4. Conclusion

This research aimed to analyze the politeness strategies used by Sherlock Holmes and the social factors that influence his choice of strategies in Arthur Conan Doyle's novel *The Sign of Four*. Based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, the findings show that positive politeness strategies are the most frequently used by Holmes, with 116 data. These are followed by bald on record strategies with 81 data, negative politeness strategies with 53 data, and off record strategies with only 7 data. This suggests that Holmes tends to favor strategies that foster social connection and express consideration for others, rather than strategies that emphasize distance or indirectness.

Regarding the social factors that influence these strategies, the research found that low social distance is the most dominant factor, appearing in 160 utterances. This is especially evident in Holmes' frequent interactions with close companions such as Dr. Watson, which helps explain the prevalence of positive politeness strategies. Power also plays a role, with 39 data indicating high power differences between Holmes and other characters, although no instances of low power difference were found. Interestingly, the ranking of imposition did not appear at all in the data, suggesting it does not significantly impact Holmes' choice of politeness strategies. These findings indicate that Holmes primarily chooses his strategies based on his social relationships, rather than the seriousness or weight of what he is saying.

The results of this study provide insight into how politeness strategies reflect the character's social world and relationships within the narrative. Future research may consider exploring these strategies in other Sherlock Holmes stories or adaptations, or examining how other characters use politeness to navigate social dynamics in similar detective fiction.

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