

A Pragmatic Study of Persuasive Politesse in Martin Luther King's Speech "HOW LONG? NOT LONG"

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Abstract

A public speech is considered a way in which a person communicates his/her message for multiple reasons, and one of them is to persuade. It influences people's decisions and behaviours to act according to the intended purpose of the speaker. To accomplish this, one needs to use some techniques to maintain social relations, support and gain respect from the audience. One of these techniques is using polite language. Being polite has specific effects and can serve as a persuasive tool in speeches. This study analyses Martin Luther King's speech "HOW LONG? NOT LONG" pragmatically following Brown and Levinson's (P. Brown et al., 1987) politeness theory. It seeks to identify the politeness strategies used by the speaker to persuade the audience and highlight the most used ones. The analysis shows that four politeness strategies are used at different frequencies. The highly used strategy is positive politeness (226) since the speaker attempts to build intimacy and establish a close relationship with the audience. In contrast, the least frequent is negative politeness (12) because he does not want to strengthen the audience's desire to be free of influence.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987), Martin Luther King, FTA, Persuasion

1. Introduction

Language has crucial importance in any civilisation. It is the vehicle by which people communicate with others, make relations, and form a sense of belonging. In this sense, people can use it to demand their rights in society, specifically their civil rights, since they are a fundamental part of democracy and assurances of equality and legal protection, regardless of race, religion, or other factors. Such demands can be obtained not only by personal effort but also by cooperation and rapport with others. To achieve this, people need to use procedures that attract others to their side. One of these techniques is persuasion since it helps influence, encourage, or convince others to accept a particular point of view or perspective.

Furthermore, language can be studied from different perspectives and aspects, such as pragmatics, a branch of linguistics that deals with how users use language and its intended meaning. There are various theories in the realm of pragmatics, one of them is the politeness theory. This theory has been tackled by multiple scholars and applied in different fields (e.g. Lackoff, 1970; (P. Brown et al., 1987). The analysis of this study is based on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (P. Brown et al., 1987) as a means of persuasion. Their theory consists of four strategies which enable people to interact with others efficiently and ensure that the message is conveyed and received as the speaker intends in his/her speech.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a discipline of linguistic investigation established by Morris, Carnap, and Peirce in the 1930s (Horn & Ward, 2008)¹. (Leech, 2016) defines pragmatics as “how language is used in communication”². Similarly, (Yule & Widdowson, 1996) stated that pragmatics deals with “the study of meaning as communicated by the speaker (writer) and interpreted by the hearer (listener)”. Accordingly, it deals with analyzing the meaning of the people’s utterances rather than the meaning of words or phrases themselves in these utterances. As well, pragmatics can be used to make a complete, profound, and mostly more sensible consideration toward the behaviour of the human language since language is mainly considered a means of communication in society (Mey, 2001).

2.2 Politeness Theory

The pragmatic perspectives toward the study of politeness started to appear in the mid-1970s (K. Brown, 2009). (Yule & Widdowson, 1996) proclaim the possibility of treating politeness as a stated notion, as “polite social behaviour” or good manners within a culture. Brown and Levinson presented a single set of ‘politeness’ rules associated with the concept of face, clarifying both the motivations behind various linguistic methods and their effects (Kleparski & Pikor-Niedziałek, 2016)³. According to them, politeness is a rational and rule-governed interaction feature and a valid basis for deviating from efficiency. Its primary goal was to preserve social cohesion by protecting the public face of individuals (K. Brown, 2009).

2.3 The Notion of Face

Face is better described under politeness theory as a participant’s sense of “self-worth” or “self-image”, which can be harmed, preserved, or strengthened by communication with others (Thomas, 2014). Brown and Levinson (1987, p.61) used the term “face” to refer to “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself”. The concept of face has two sides: positive and negative face. The former is every member’s want to be desirable to at least some others. While The latter is the want of every “competent adult member’ that his actions be unimpeded by others (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.62)⁴. Thomas (Thomas, 2014) proclaimed that a face-threatening act (FTA) is an illocutionary act that can ruin or has the power to harm the addressee’s positive or negative face. It occurs when an addresser speaks something that threatens another person’s assumptions concerning self-image (Yule & Widdowson, 1996). While A face-saving act occurs if an action could be viewed as a threat to another’s face, the speaker can say anything to mitigate the threat (Yule & Widdowson, 1996).

Figure (1) illustrates the available ways of doing the FTA, as stated by Brown and Levinson (1987, p.69). The speaker can primarily choose whether to perform FTA or not. If the speaker chooses to perform FTA, then he/she has to show one of the possible ways presented above for making FTA. It should be noted that the strategy of do not do the FTA is not explained by Brown and Levinson (1987) and therefore is not tackled in this research.

¹ Horn & Ward, 2004, p.xi

² Leech (2016, p.1)

³ Kleparski & Pikor-Niedziałek, 2016, pp.152-153

⁴ Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.62

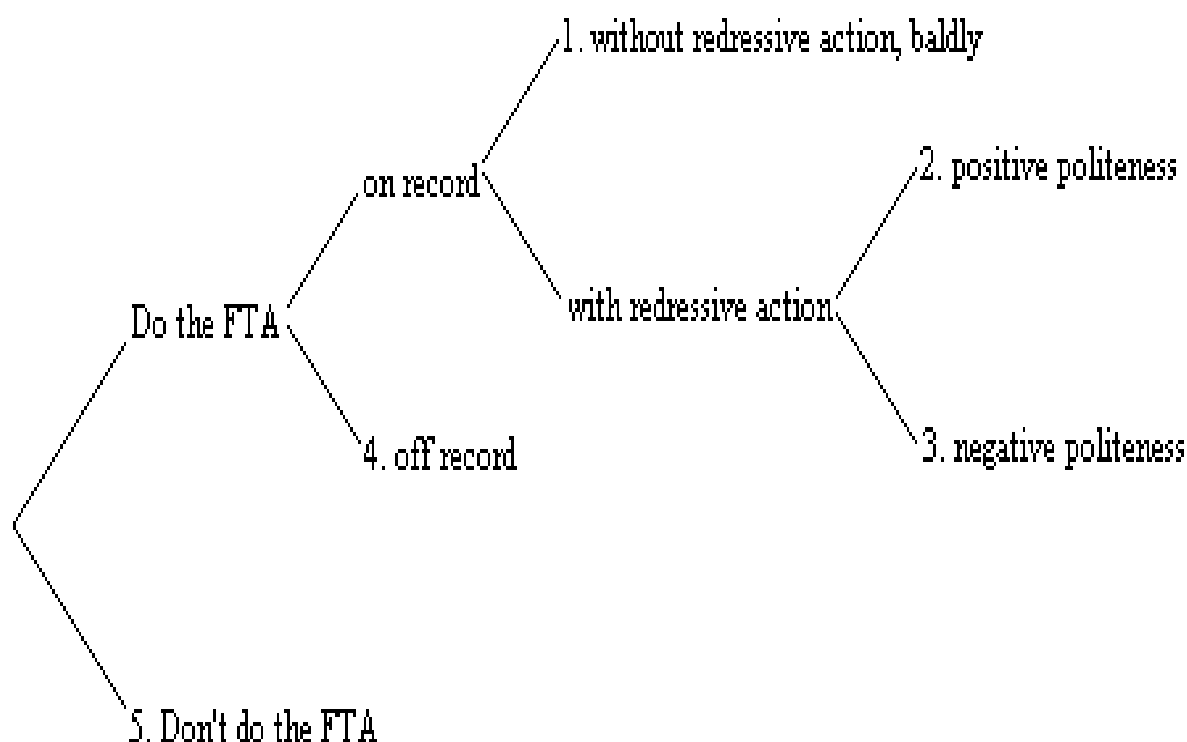


Figure 1. *The Possible Strategies for Doing FTAs* (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p.69) ⁵

2.4 The Notion of Persuasion

In the fifth BCE, Greek scholars such as Protagoras, Gorgios, Plato, Isocrates, and especially Aristotle dated the systematic thinking about persuasion (Seiter & Gass, 2003). The Philosopher Charles L. Stevenson, in his article published in the journal *Mind* (1938), explored the persuasive definition as a concept used in a specific case (way) in argumentation (Walton, 2007). Therefore, persuasion can be illustrated as “all linguistic behaviour that attempts either to change the thinking or behaviour of an audience or to strengthen its beliefs should the audience already agree”, according to Salmi-Tolonen (2005, p.61) Cited in (Orts et al., 2017). In such a case, this mental state is mainly recognised as attitude. Even though the persuader’s main goal is to alter another’s behaviour, that goal is often accomplished by changing a process of attitude. As a result, this leads to the assumption that attitude change is an instrument of behavioural change (O’Keeffe, 2015, p.26).

2.5 Martin Luther King (MLK)

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929 - 1968) was one of the most influential and memorised figures in the history of America, especially among African Americans. He was a social activist and a leader in the civil rights movement. He became the leading voice and symbol of people fed up with racial oppression and discrimination. He, on the one hand, mastered the use of non-violent protests to overcome segregation, prejudice, and racism and, on the other hand, get equal social treatment. MLK passed away in Memphis, Tennessee, in an assassination operation attempt while supporting sanitation workers on strike. Nevertheless, even after his death, he remained a legend in the eyes of the people for standing in the face of injustice, tyranny and racial discrimination through peaceful protest.

⁵ Brown and Levinson, 1987, p.69

3. Methodology

In order to obtain the goals of this research, the researcher adopted a mixed approach along with the use of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. A mixed study combines the usage of both qualitative and quantitative techniques in collecting, analysing, and presenting the data results. The aim behind choosing a mixed study is that qualitative techniques observe the speaker's numerous intentions concerning place, time and other elements related to the context. In contrast, the quantitative techniques provide frequency tables to display and discuss the results.

Over the years, Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory has been considered one of the most influential and popular theories in politeness. They propose a universal theory of politeness that composites four different strategies, namely (Bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record). In return, each of these strategies consists of other sub-strategies.

3.1 *Brown and Levinson's Politeness Strategies*

Brown and Levinson (1987, pp.94-227) stated various politeness strategies with their sub-strategies as the following ⁶:

1. *Bald on Record Strategy*

Brown and Levinson (1987, p.95) clarify that bald on record is mainly used when the addresser wishes to perform FTA as efficiently as possible ⁷, rather than satisfying the addressee's face. In addition, the usage of the bald-on records varies in different situations since the addressee has various motivations for his/her wishes for doing FTA as efficient as possible (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.95) ⁸. These are divided into two groups: those in which the face threat is not reduced, in the case that the face is eliminated or unrelated; and those in which address reduced face threats by implication in performing the FTA baldly on record (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.95).

2. *Positive Politeness Strategy*

Positive politeness is reformation pointed towards the addressee's positive face, his constant desire for his/her needs (or the behaviours/acquisitions/importance that emerge from them) to be regarded as acceptable (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.101) ⁹. Reformation depends on partly pleasing that need by communicating that one's desires (or part of them) are comparable to the addressee's desires in specific ways (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.101).

Brown and Levinson (1987, pp.101-103) claimed that the exaggeration feature distinguishes positive politeness reformation from everyday intimate language behaviour ¹⁰. This feature behaves as a marker by stating that if the addresser cannot say genuinely 'I want your wants', he/she may at least heartily refer to 'I want your positive face to be satisfied' (Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp.101-103).

Positive-politeness strategies can be used not only for FTA reformation but also as a form of a social accelerator, in which the addresser uses them to express that he/she wants to

⁶ Brown and Levinson (1987, pp.94-227)

⁷ Brown and Levinson (1987, p.95)

⁸ Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.95

⁹ Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.101

¹⁰ Brown and Levinson (1987, pp.101-103)

‘come closer’ to the addressee (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.103)¹¹. The positive politeness composites of (15) sub-strategies presented as the following:

Table 1. *Positive Politeness Strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.102).*

Positive politeness sub-strategies	Examples
1: Notice; attend to the addressee’s needs, wants, etc.	<i>What a beautiful vast this is! Where did it come from?</i> (p.103).
2: Exaggerate (interest approval, sympathy, with H).	<i>What a fantastic garden you have!</i> (p.104).
3: Intensity (show interest to the addressee).	<i>I come down the stairs, and what do you think I see? - a huge mess all over the place, the phone’s off the hook and clothes are scattered all over...</i> (p.106).
4: Use of in-group identity markers.	<i>Here mate, I was keeping that seat for a friend of mine...</i> (p.108).
5: Seek agreement.	<i>A: I had a flat tyre on the way home. B: Oh God, a flat tyre!</i> (p.113).
6: Avoid disagreement.	<i>A: So, is this permanent? B: Yeh, it’s ‘permanent’ permanent until I get married</i> (p.114).
7: Presuppose / raise / assert common group.	<i>It’s at the far end of the street, the last house on the left, isn’t it</i> (p.119).
8: Joke.	<i>How about lending me this old heap of junk? (H’s new Cadillac)</i> (p.124).
9: Assert or presuppose knowledge of and concern for the addressee’s wants.	<i>I know you love roses but the florist didn’t have any more, so I brought you geraniums instead. (offer + apology)</i> (p.125).
10: Offer, promise.	<i>I’ll drop by sometime next week</i> (p.125).
11: Be optimistic.	<i>Wait a minute, you haven’t brushed your hair! (as husband goes out of the door)</i> (p.126).
12: Include the addressee in the activity.	<i>Let’s have a cookie, then. (i.e., me)</i> (p.127).
13: Give (or ask for) reasons.	<i>Why don’t I help you with that suitcase?</i> (p.128).
14: Assume or assert reciprocity.	<i>S may say I did X for you last week so you do Y for me this week (or vice versa)</i> (p.129).
15: Give gifts to the addressee.	<i>goods, sympathy, understanding, and cooperation</i> (p.129).

3. Negative Politeness Strategy

Negative politeness is an action of reformation directed at the addressee’s negative face: his/her desire for being free of action and attention. It is the foundation of respectful behaviour.

¹¹ Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.103

It is directed and aimed to reduce the specific imposition that the FTA inevitably causes (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.129)¹². This strategy consists of sub-strategies as the following:

Table 2. *Negative Politeness Strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.131)*¹³.

Negative Politeness Sub strategies	Examples
1: Be conventionally indirect.	<i>Can you play the piano? (in the presence/absence of a piano) (p.134)</i> ¹⁴ .
2: Question, hedge.	<i>I guess/ suppose/ think that Harry is coming (p.145)</i> ¹⁵ .
3: Be pessimistic.	<i>I don't suppose/imagine there'd be any chance possibility hope of you... (p.174)</i> ¹⁶ .
4: Minimise the imposition.	<i>I just dropped by for a minute to ask if you... (p.177)</i> ¹⁷ .
5: Give difference.	<i>We look forward very much to dining/eating with you (p.181)</i> ¹⁸ .
6: Apologise.	<i>I'm sure you must be very busy, but... (p.188)</i> ¹⁹ .
7: Impersonalize the addresser and the addressee.	<i>Do this for me (I ask you to do this for me.) (p.190)</i> ²⁰ .
8: State the FTA as a general rule.	(a) <i>International regulations require that the fuselage be sprayed with DDT.</i> (b) <i>I am going to spray you with DDT to follow international regulations (p.206)</i> ²¹ .
9: Normalise.	(a)... and that impressed us favourably. (b)...was impressive to us. (c)... made a favourable impression on us (p.208) ²² .
10: Go on record as incurring debt or as not indebting the addressee.	<i>I'd be eternally grateful if you would (request)... (p.210)</i> ²³ .

4. Off-Record Strategy

According to Brown and Levinson (1987, p.211), a communicative act can be off-record if the act can be performed in a way without the possibility of describing one specific communicative goal of his/her act. In another sense, the actor tends to give himself an 'out' by offering a variety of plausible explanations; he cannot be held responsible for only one explanation of his act (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.211). Off record strategy can be done when the speaker wants to do a FTA without taking responsibility and letting the hearer determine how to analyse it (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.211).

Off-the-record utterances are fundamentally indirect uses of language: an off-record utterance can be created by saying something that is either more generic (has little information)

¹² Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.129

¹³ (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.131).

¹⁴ Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.134

¹⁵ Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.145

¹⁶ Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.174

¹⁷ Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.177

¹⁸ Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.181

¹⁹ Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.188

²⁰ Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.190

²¹ Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.206

²² Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.208

²³ Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.210

or genuinely distinct from what one intends (intends to be understood). The hearer will have to infer something to figure out what was intended in any situation (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.211)²⁴. The sub-strategies of the off-record strategy are presented as the following:

Table 3. *Off-record strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.214)*²⁵.

Off-Record sub-strategies	Examples
1: Give hints.	<i>It's cold in here. (c.i. Shut the window) (p.215)</i> ²⁶ .
2: Provide association clue.	<i>Oh God, I've got a headache again (p.215).</i>
3: Presuppose.	<i>I washed the car again today (p.217)</i> ²⁷ .
4: Understate.	<i>A: What a marvellous place you have here. B: Oh I don't know, it's a place. (p.219)</i> ²⁸ .
5: Overstate	<i>Oh no, Mr Smith, we never meant to cause you any trouble. Nothing could have been further from our minds. I can't imagine how you could come to that conclusion. It's out of the question...</i> (p.220) ²⁹ .
6: Use tautologies.	<i>War is war (p.220).</i>
7: Use contradictions.	<i>Well, John is here and he isn't here (p.221)</i> ³⁰ .
8: Be ironic.	<i>Lovely neighbourhood, eh? (In a slum) (p.222)</i> ³¹ .
9: Use metaphors.	<i>Harry's a real fish (c.i. He drinks/swims/ is slimy/is cold-blooded like a fish) (p.222).</i>
10: Use rhetorical questions.	<i>How was I to know...? (c.i. I wasn't) (p.223)</i> ³² .
11: Be ambiguous.	<i>John's a pretty sharp/smooth cookie (p.225)</i> ³³ .
12: Be vague.	<i>Perhaps someone did something naughty (p.226)</i> ³⁴ .
13: Over-generalises.	<i>The lawn has got to be mown (p.226).</i>
14: Display hearer	<i>where one secretary in an office asks another - but with negative politeness – to pass the stapler, in circumstances where a professor is much nearer to the stapler than the other secretary. His face is not threatened, and he can choose to do it himself as a bonus 'free gift' (p.226.227)</i> ³⁵ .
15: Be incomplete; use ellipsis.	<i>Well, if one leaves one's tea on the wobbly table...</i> (p.227) ³⁶ .

5. Data Collection and Description

The data collected in the current research is Martin Luther King's speech, "HOW LONG? NOT LONG", one of his famous speeches. The speech was given on March 25, 1965,

²⁴ (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.211)

²⁵ Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.214

²⁶ (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.215)

²⁷ (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.217)

²⁸ (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.219)

²⁹ (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.220)

³⁰ (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.221)

³¹ (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.222)

³² (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.223)

³³ (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.225)

³⁴ (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.226)

³⁵ (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.226-227)

³⁶ (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.227)

in Montgomery, Alabama, to an audience of 25,000 people. This speech aimed to patronise African-American people to gain their voting rights and continue their fight against racism.

The speech has been transcribed from a web source “<https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu>”³⁷. It should be noted that the researcher has analysed the whole speech to show the politeness strategies used by the speaker. By dint of length, only two extracts of Martin’s speech are presented with their explanations to show how politeness strategies are worked throughout the text.

4. Analysis

The sub-strategies of politeness put forward by Brown and Levinson (1987) are listed in this section to show the frequencies of their usage:

Table 4. *Frequencies of politeness strategies in MLK’s speech.*

Sub-strategies	No. of Fr.
1) Bald on record Politeness	21
2) Positive politeness	226
1: Notice; attend to the addressee’s needs, wants, etc.	/
2: Exaggerate interest (approval, sympathy, etc.).	/
3: Intensity (show interest to the addressee).	/
4: Use of in-group identity markers.	110
5: Seek agreement.	/
6: Avoid disagreement.	/
7: Presuppose / raise / assert common group.	/
8: Joke.	3
9: Assert or presuppose knowledge of or concern for the addressee’s wants.	/
10: offer, promise.	4
11: Be optimistic.	/
12: Include the addressee in the activity.	96
13: Give (or ask for) reasons.	13
14: Assume or assert reciprocity.	/
15: Give gift to the addressee (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation).	/
3) Negative Politeness	12
1: Be conventionally indirect.	4
2: Question, hedge.	8
3: Be pessimistic.	/
4: Minimise the imposition.	/
5: Give difference.	/
6: Apologise.	/
7: Impersonalize the addresser and the addressee.	/
8: State the FTA as a general rule.	/
9: Normalise.	/
10: Go on record as incurring debt or as not indebting the addressee.	/
4) Off Record	14
1: Give hints.	/
2: Provide association clues.	/
3: Presuppose.	/
4: Understate.	/
5: Overstate	8
6: Use tautologies.	1
7: Use contradictions.	2
8: Be ironic.	/
9: Use metaphors.	/
10: Use rhetorical questions.	1
11: Be ambiguous.	/
12: Be vague.	/
13: Over-generalises.	2
14: Display hearer	/
15: Be incomplete; use ellipsis.	/

³⁷ <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu>

5. Discussion

The result in table (4) shows that MLK highly uses positive politeness strategies, which saves the hearers' positive face. He uses the strategies: in-group identity markers, including the hearers in the activity, to show closeness and attention to his hearers and state their unity in standing up against racism. He purposely approaches his audience and notices their desires and needs by using strategies such as: making jokes, giving reasons, and offering promises.

Nevertheless, his usage of bald-on record strategy with his followers comes from his duty as a Civil rights leader. Such a strategy is targeted toward providing his audience with advice to guide them in the right way of peaceful protests. Furthermore, he demands black people's power, what they can do, and how to achieve such demands.

Alternatively, he uses off-record strategies in situations when he needs to depend on the audience's understanding and comprehension of what is said. Likewise, he uses rhetorical questions to emphasise the audience's information and attract their attention. In other cases, he uses over-generalised and overstatement strategies to motivate his audience by indicating their strength and power. He uses an off-record strategy when he uses contradictions in his speech.

In contrast to the strategies above, the speaker rarely uses the negative politeness strategy. The situations in which it is used are when he tries to deliver the message indirectly or asks questions to the audience. These usages illustrate the consideration of his audience's feelings. In addition, the hedge indicates his uncertainty at some points and situations.

Undoubtedly, MLK's intention behind using these four politeness strategies is to persuade his audience to accept and believe his perspective. He aims to attract his audience to his side and gain their support to stand up against the inequality and injustices they have faced throughout their struggle.

It is crucial to note that one example may simultaneously contain more than one strategy and sub-strategy in some cases where it is possible. To clarify this point and to show how the analysis worked, some examples will be provided as the following:

Extract (1)

But today as I stand before you and think back over that great march, I can say, as Sister Pollard said—a seventy-year-old Negro woman who lived in this community during the bus boycott—and one day, she was asked while walking if she didn't want to ride. And when she answered, "No," the person said, "Well, aren't you tired?" And with her ungrammatical profundity, she said, "My feets is tired, but my soul is rested." (Yes, sir. All right) And in a real sense this afternoon, we can say that our feet are tired, (Yes, sir) but our souls are rested.

The speaker uses two positive politeness strategies; one is strategy number (4), in-group identity marker, represented by the word (negro) to show brotherhood to the audience and pronouns (we, our) used in the last line to show their insistence and unity in completing their struggle. The other is strategy number (12) which is applied by the use of markers (we, our) to have the hearers in the action of facing that struggle. The off-record strategy (7) is used in the last two lines, "My feets is tired, but my soul is rested, our feet are tired, (Yes, sir), but our souls are rested", which is the use of contradictions presented by the words "rested, tired", that illustrates their resistance on their rights.

Extract (2)

Today I want to tell the city of Selma, (Tell them, Doctor) today I want to say to the state of Alabama, (Yes, sir) today I want to say to the people of America and the nations of the world, that we are not about to turn around. (Yes, sir) We are on the move now. (Yes, sir).

The speaker uses the bald on-record strategy as a way to declare his wants on the one hand, in “*Today I want to tell..., today I want to say..., today I want to say to...*”, and to say the intentions of black people on the other “*that we are not about to turn around. (Yes, sir), We are on the move now. (Yes, sir)*”. This strategy, of course, included face-threatening acts. The positive strategies (4-12) are used together in the pronoun (we). The speaker includes the audience in representing unity and attitude toward their struggle.

6. Conclusion

Martin Luther King successfully used these strategies to persuade his audience by manifesting polite and smooth language in his speech to convince them about his ideas and points of view. As a leading figure, he tries to create intimacy and maintain a friendly relationship with the hearers in his speech through positive politeness strategies as they are related to the notion of belonging to a group. Furthermore, the speaker employs bald-on record strategy, on the one hand, to provide his audience with a piece of advice and, on the other, to give some orders to guide their protest correctly. Occasionally, the off-record strategy is used when the speaker wants to rely on the audience’s comprehension of what he says to convey his aims. Finally, the speaker infrequently uses negative strategies since he does not want to enhance the audience’s desire to be free from imposition. The only situations when he uses negative politeness are: saying things indirectly, asking a question, and using hedges.

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