



An Analysis of Politeness Strategies Used by Theo Faber in Alex Michaelides' Novel *The Silent Patient*

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article history Received : March, 27th 2026 Revised : April, 30th 2026 Accepted : June, 12th 2026 OPEN ACCESS	This study investigates the use of politeness strategies employed by Theo Faber, the main character in Alex Michaelides' novel <i>The Silent Patient</i>, based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. The objectives of this study are to identify the types of politeness strategies used, determine the most dominant strategy, and examine the sociological factors influencing Theo's choice of strategies, namely distance, power, and rank of imposition. This research applies a descriptive qualitative method, with 266 utterances taken from Theo Faber's dialogues as the primary data. The findings reveal that all four politeness strategies are employed by Theo Faber. Negative politeness is the most dominant strategy with 95 occurrences, followed by positive politeness (78 occurrences), bald on record (72 occurrences), and off record (21 occurrences). The dominance of negative politeness reflects Theo's tendency to minimize imposition, show deference, and maintain professional distance in various interactions. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the use of politeness strategies is strongly influenced by social distance, power relations, and the rank of imposition involved in each interaction. Overall, this study demonstrates that politeness strategies function not only to manage interpersonal relationships but also as strategic narrative devices that reflect Theo Faber's complex characterization and hidden motivations within the novel.
Keywords:	<i>Politeness Strategies, Brown and Levinson, Face Threatening Acts, The Silent Patient</i>

1. Introduction

Language plays an essential role in human interaction as it enables individuals to express ideas, emotions, and intentions. In communication, speakers do not only convey information but also manage social relationships. One important aspect of interaction is politeness, which functions to maintain harmony and avoid conflict between interlocutors. In pragmatics, politeness is closely related to the concept of face, which refers to an individual's public self-image that they seek to maintain during interaction. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), speakers often employ politeness strategies to mitigate face-threatening acts. They propose four main types of politeness strategies: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. Bald on record is used when the speaker communicates

directly without minimizing threats to the hearer's face. Positive politeness aims to reduce social distance by emphasizing solidarity and friendliness. Negative politeness focuses on respecting the hearer's freedom of action and minimizing imposition, while off-record strategies convey meaning indirectly so that the speaker avoids full responsibility for the message. The use of these strategies is influenced by sociological factors such as social distance, power relations, and the rank of imposition.

Although politeness strategies are commonly examined in everyday communication, they can also be analysed in literary works where characters interact through dialogue. Literary texts often reflect complex social relationships and communication patterns similar to those found in real-life interactions. Through dialogue, authors construct characters' personalities, relationships, and intentions. Therefore, the analysis of politeness strategies in literary discourse can reveal how language functions as a tool for persuasion, manipulation, and characterization within narratives. One literary work that presents complex interpersonal communication is Alex Michaelides' psychological thriller novel *The Silent Patient*. The novel follows Theo Faber, a psychotherapist who becomes obsessed with uncovering the truth behind Alicia Berenson's silence after she is accused of murdering her husband. Throughout the story, Theo interacts with various characters, including colleagues, patients, and acquaintances, providing rich examples of politeness strategies in different social contexts.

Previous studies have examined politeness strategies in films, everyday conversations, classroom interactions, and novels. These studies generally focus on identifying the types of politeness strategies and their functions. However, most tend to treat politeness as a cooperative and socially motivated phenomenon that focuses on a positive approach, with little attention to its potential use as a strategic or manipulative tool. Furthermore, relatively few studies have explored politeness strategies within psychological thriller narratives, where communication often involves deception and hidden intentions.

In addition, existing research scarcely addresses how politeness strategies relate to the existence of unreliable narrators, specifically, how such strategies are used to gain trust, secure cooperation, and manipulate others. The application of politeness in professional contexts, such as psychotherapy, is also underexplored. In *The Silent Patient*, Theo Faber presents himself as an empathetic psychotherapist, however, his language reveals calculated efforts to obtain cooperation and conceal his true motives. This highlights a significant gap in pragmatics and literary discourse, where politeness serves not only as a means to

maintain face but also as a tool for narrative control. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the politeness strategies used by Theo Faber in *The Silent Patient*. Specifically, it seeks to identify the types of politeness strategies employed, determine the most dominant strategy, and examine the sociological factors influencing their use.

2. Research Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the politeness strategies used by Theo Faber in Alex Michaelides' novel *The Silent Patient*. The qualitative method is used because the research focuses on interpreting linguistic phenomena in the form of dialogues and understanding how politeness strategies function within literary discourse.

The primary data of this study consist of Theo Faber's utterances in the novel that contain politeness strategies. The data source is the novel *The Silent Patient* written by Alex Michaelides. Data were collected through close reading and note-taking techniques. The researcher carefully read the novel to identify dialogues spoken by Theo Faber and selected utterances that contain politeness strategies.

The data were analyzed using Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, which classifies politeness strategies into four types: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. The analysis was conducted through several steps: identifying relevant utterances, categorizing them based on the four types of politeness strategies, calculating their frequency to determine the dominant strategy, and interpreting the findings by considering the sociological factors of social distance, power, and rank of imposition.

3. Research Findings and Discussion

Research Findings

This study analyses the politeness strategies used by Theo Faber in Alex Michaelides' novel *The Silent Patient*. The analysis is based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, which classifies politeness strategies into four types: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. The findings show that Theo Faber employs all four types of politeness strategies throughout the novel. A total of 266 utterances containing politeness strategies were identified in the data. Among these, negative politeness appears as the most dominant strategy with 95 occurrences, followed by positive politeness with 78 occurrences, bald on record with 72 occurrences, and off-record strategies with 21

occurrences. The results also indicate that Theo's use of politeness strategies is influenced by sociological factors proposed by Brown and Levinson, namely social distance, power relations, and rank of imposition, which shape how he communicates with different characters in various contexts.

4.1. The Types of Politeness Strategies Used by Theo Faber

Among the four types of strategies identified in the analysis, negative politeness appears as the most dominant strategy with 95 occurrences out of 266 utterances. This is followed by positive politeness with 78 occurrences, bald-on-record strategies with 72 occurrences, and off-record strategies with 21 occurrences.

The findings show that Theo Faber employs all four types of politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), namely bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. From the analysis of 266 utterances, each type of strategy appears with different frequencies. The results show 72 utterances of bald-on-record strategies, 78 utterances of positive politeness strategies, 95 utterances of negative politeness strategies, and 21 utterances of off-record strategies.

Bald-on-record strategies are used when Theo communicates directly without attempting to minimize the threat to the hearer's face. This type of strategy often occurs in situations where clarity or urgency is required. Theo often uses this strategy when he needs to give straightforward instructions, ask direct questions, or convey urgent informations.

Positive politeness strategies are used when Theo attempts to create a sense of solidarity and closeness with other characters. In the novel, this strategy appears when Theo tries to show sympathy, offer praise, convey gratitude, and to make the interaction smoother so he can obtain the information or cooperation he needs.

Negative politeness strategies appear when Theo tries to minimize imposition and respect the hearer's freedom of action. This strategy helps Theo reduce imposition, show deference, and respect the hearer's autonomy, especially when speaking to authority figures, colleagues, patients, or individuals who may feel pressured. He often softens requests, uses hedges, and apologizes to avoid direct confrontation while still obtaining the information or cooperation he needs.

Meanwhile, off-record strategies are used when Theo conveys meaning indirectly, allowing the hearer to interpret the implied message. This strategy involves indirect and

ambiguous expressions that allow the speaker to hint at a message without stating it explicitly, giving the hearer room to interpret the meaning. By going off record, the speaker avoids direct imposition and reduces responsibility for the message. In *The Silent Patient*, Theo employs off record strategies when he wants to suggest something subtly, avoid confrontation, or lead others to certain conclusions without openly asserting them. The use of these various strategies reflects the complexity of Theo's interactions with different characters in the novel. Below are some of the Theo's utterances that use politeness strategies.

Table 1. Examples of Politeness Strategies Used by Theo Faber

No.	Type of strategy	Chapter	Utterance	Explanation
1.	Bald on Record	Part 2 – Ch. 11	“Are you hearing voices, Elif? What are they saying?”	Theo asks direct questions to quickly assess Elif's mental condition in a clinical situation where immediate clarity is necessary and essential for ensuring patient's safety.
2.	Positive Politeness	Part 1 – Ch. 5	“Thank you. I don't really have anything to add. Just that I'm very happy to be here. Excited, nervous, hopeful. And I'm looking forward to getting to know everyone particularly the patients.”	Theo expresses enthusiasm and friendliness to create goodwill with everyone. He presents himself as friendly and approachable in a setting where is the newcomer.
3.	Negative Politeness	Part 2 – Ch. 14	“I just want to ask you a couple more questions if you don't mind.”	Theo minimizes the burden of his request to maintain cooperation. he frames the inquiry as a brief and minor request, suggesting that it will not take much of Max's time. He further acknowledges Max's autonomy and his right to refuse.
4.	Off Record	Part 2 – Ch. 12	“I sense you're wearing two different hats. The lawyer's hat... And the brother's hat. It's the brother I came to see.”	Theo uses metaphor to indirectly suggest that Max is withholding information. This figurative language softens the criticism, allowing Theo to signal that he wants a more honest, personal response.

The Most Dominant Strategy

Among the four types of strategies identified in the analysis, negative politeness appears as the most dominant strategy with 95 occurrences out of 266 utterances. This is followed by positive politeness with 78 occurrences, bald-on-record strategies with 72 occurrences, and off-record strategies with 21 occurrences.

Tabel 2 Frequency of Politeness Strategies Used by Theo Faber

No.	Types of Politeness Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1.	Bald on Record	72	27.1%
2.	Positive Politeness	78	29.3%
3.	Negative Politeness	95	35.7%
4.	Off Record	21	7.9%
Total		266	100%

This predominance indicates that Theo Faber frequently relies on strategies that minimize imposition and soften requests. Such a tendency reflects his dual identity as both a psychotherapist and the hidden perpetrator, who must communicate cautiously to avoid suspicion. Theo often interacts with authority figures such as Professor Diomedes, Stephanie Clarke, and other senior staff at the Grove. In these hierarchical contexts, negative politeness helps him maintain respect and avoid directly challenging their authority. Many of Theo's interactions also involve patients or emotionally vulnerable individuals, where indirect questions and hedging are necessary to avoid appearing intrusive. However, the frequent use of negative politeness also reflects Theo's strategic communication style. By appearing polite and respectful, he is able to gain the trust and cooperation of other characters. This allows him to obtain information and maintain control over interactions while concealing his deeper intentions.

Factors Influencing the Use of Politeness Strategies

Theo Faber's choice of politeness strategies is influenced by sociological factors proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), namely social distance, power, and rank of imposition. These factors shape how speakers adjust their language in different social situations. Throughout the novel, Theo adjusts his language based on how close he feels to the hearer, who holds more or less authority, and how demanding or sensitive the speech act is. These variables explain why he shifts between being deferential, warm, indirect, or completely direct, revealing how calculated his communication becomes as he manipulates relationships while pursuing information about Alicia.

Social distance plays an important role in determining how Theo communicates with different characters. When interacting with people who are not closely related to him, such as colleagues or acquaintances, Theo tends to use more polite and indirect strategies to maintain formality and respect. In contrast, when the social distance is lower, communication may become more direct and less formal. For example, when he asks Yuri, "Can I join them? I can settle in later. If it's all the same to you?", the phrasing reflects high distance, Theo avoids sounding pushy and emphasizes that the decision lies with Yuri.

Power relations also influence the use of politeness strategies. When speaking with individuals who hold higher authority or institutional power, Theo is more likely to employ negative politeness to show respect and avoid threatening the hearer's face. Meanwhile, when the power difference is smaller, he uses more direct strategies. A clear example appears when Theo says, "Not at all. It was wrong of me to see her without your permission, Professor. I'm sorry...", showing apology and explicit acknowledgment of overstepping.

The rank of imposition also affects Theo's linguistic choices. Requests or statements that impose a greater burden on the hearer tend to be expressed using more polite and indirect forms. Theo mitigates especially when addressing emotionally charged topics such as trauma, medication, accusations, or personal history. When the request risks intruding on someone's time or privacy, he uses strategies that minimize burden. When he asks Max for information about Alicia's suicide attempt "I just want to ask you a couple more questions, if you don't mind." He minimizes the inquiry as small (a couple) and adding a deferential clause (if you don't mind).

In addition, the findings show that Theo's politeness strategies often function strategically. Although he presents himself as an empathetic psychotherapist, he is later revealed as an unreliable narrator and the main antagonist of the novel. His polite language frequently functions as a tool to gain trust, obtain cooperation, and gather information from others. This demonstrates that politeness strategies in literary discourse can serve not only to maintain social harmony but also to support persuasion, manipulation, and narrative development.

Discussion

The findings show that Theo employs all four politeness strategies described in Brown and Levinson's framework: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record. The presence of all four strategies indicates that Theo's communication is context-dependent and shaped by interpersonal relationships and situational demands. This variation reflects both his professional role as a psychotherapist and his concealed role within the narrative.

Among the four strategies, negative politeness is the most dominant, occurring 95 times in the data. This pattern suggests that Theo frequently minimizes imposition and protects the interlocutor's autonomy through hedging, indirect requests, and deferential expressions. In professional contexts, such linguistic behavior aligns with therapeutic communication norms, where therapists are expected to avoid pressuring patients and maintain a supportive conversational environment. However, within the narrative structure of the novel, Theo's reliance on negative politeness also functions strategically. By appearing cautious, respectful, and non-intrusive, he is able to gain trust, guide conversations, and gather information without attracting suspicion. Thus, the dominance of negative politeness illustrates how linguistic politeness may serve not only interpersonal harmony but also strategic self-presentation.

Positive politeness, which appears 78 times, functions primarily to establish rapport and reduce social distance. Through expressions of empathy, reassurance, and appreciation, Theo presents himself as supportive and approachable. Such linguistic behavior strengthens his professional image as a caring therapist while encouraging cooperation from other characters. At the same time, the findings indicate that these expressions of solidarity often serve instrumental purposes, helping Theo obtain information or maintain access to individuals connected to Alicia. This dual function demonstrates how positive politeness may operate both as a relational strategy and as a tool for achieving communicative goals.

Bald-on-record strategies, identified in 72 utterances, occur mainly in situations requiring clarity or immediacy. According to Brown and Levinson, this strategy is typically used when efficiency becomes more important than maintaining face. The data support this claim, as Theo employs direct questions or statements during urgent or confrontational moments. These instances reveal that although Theo generally maintains a polite conversational style, he occasionally prioritizes directness when rapid information exchange is necessary.

Off-record strategies, appearing 21 times, represent the least frequent category but remain significant in the narrative context. Through hints, metaphors, or ambiguous statements, Theo indirectly conveys meaning while preserving plausible deniability. This indirectness allows him to suggest suspicions or encourage disclosure without explicitly committing to a statement. Consequently, off-record strategies support his investigative objectives while protecting his social position.

The findings further demonstrate that Theo's strategy selection is influenced by the sociological variables proposed by Brown and Levinson: power (P), social distance (D), and rank of imposition (R). Interactions with individuals who hold higher institutional authority tend to trigger negative politeness, reflecting Theo's awareness of hierarchical relationships within the Grove. Conversely, when social distance decreases or cooperation is required, he shifts toward positive politeness to build solidarity. Situations involving high imposition often led to the use of hedging or indirect expressions, whereas urgent situations encourage bald-on-record communication. These patterns confirm that politeness strategies in the novel are systematically shaped by contextual factors rather than random linguistic choices.

Beyond interpersonal dynamics, the findings also suggest that politeness in the novel functions as a narrative mechanism that contributes to character construction. Theo's consistent use of polite and controlled language reinforces his outward identity as a rational and professional therapist. However, the contrast between his polite speech and his concealed motives reveals the strategic dimension of his communication. In this sense, politeness operates not only as a pragmatic phenomenon but also as a literary device that supports the portrayal of Theo as an unreliable narrator and antagonist.

In summary, Theo's politeness strategies are not merely conversational choices but narrative tools that reflect his psychological complexity and concealed motives. His dominant use of negative politeness, strategic use of positive politeness, selective directness, and occasional reliance on off record hints all work together to create a layered character who manipulates language to maintain control and avoid exposure. By integrating empirical

findings with Brown and Levinson's theoretical framework, this discussion demonstrates how politeness strategies shape both character development and narrative dynamics in *The Silent Patient*.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the politeness strategies used by Theo Faber in *The Silent Patient* by Alex Michaelides based on the politeness framework proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). The findings show that Theo employs all four types of politeness strategies: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. Among these, negative politeness is the most dominant strategy, with 95 occurrences out of 266 utterances, indicating Theo's tendency to minimize imposition and maintain respectful distance in his interactions. The use of these strategies is influenced by the sociological variables of power, social distance, and rank of imposition, which shape how Theo adjusts his language in different situations.

Overall, Theo's politeness strategies reflect both the professional communication expected of a psychotherapist and a strategic effort to maintain trust and avoid suspicion while pursuing hidden motives. These findings suggest that politeness strategies in literary narratives do not function merely to maintain good harmony. They extend beyond their usual function and are utilized for manipulation and control. This reveals that Brown and Levinson's framework can be applied not only to real-life interaction but also to the analysis of narrative deception in fictional texts.

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