
Building Trust in Conflictual World: Politeness Strategies in Lucy's Dialogue in the *Fallout* (2024) Series

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the use of politeness strategies in the TV series *Fallout* (2024), focused on Lucy as the main character, to build trust with strangers in a post-apocalyptic world. By applying Brown & Levinson's (1988) politeness framework and Holmes' (1995) perspective of politeness strategies which can form social bonds, the researcher identified and categorized utterances that contain politeness strategies and interpreting their role in fostering trust. The first three episodes were chosen as the data source, since they provide the narrative foundation and demonstrate how Lucy employed politeness strategies to build trust with newly encountered strangers. The researcher used qualitative descriptive method to collect and analyze the data. The findings have revealed that Lucy often employed both positive and negative politeness to mitigate threats, reduce social distance, and encourage strangers to help her. Moreover, her use of the honorific terms like "Sir" and "Ma'am" conveyed deference in a hostile situation. The way people communicate each other can serve as a means to survive in a new and full of danger environment. Moreover, it also can establish some cooperation with other people. According to the analysis, politeness in this context goes beyond social etiquette and serves as an essential tool for establishing trust in high-risk situations.

INTRODUCTION

Lewis (1975) explained that language is not just a medium for communication but also a system that assigns meaning to sounds, marks, or symbols. Language has a role to connect sounds or written symbols with specific meaning, which makes it easier to communicate and understand each other effectively. Haugh & Chang (2015) believe that in some imbalanced relationships, such as those between a child and adult, a supervisor and subordinate, or even a high-risk stranger, language serves an essential role in managing harmony, trust-building, and reducing conflict. Through this process, people can express their thoughts, ideas, and information. Thus, Lubis et al. (2025) points out that language not only serves as a tool for communication, but also as a bridge for social interaction and shared understanding.

When examining literature, the role of language becomes even more significant. Stories use language for some purposes, such as shaping the characters, revealing the relationships, and building a meaning that goes beyond the literal words. People can delve deeper into the underlying ideas of the story and the character relationships to gain insight about how language applied meaning. It can serve as a foundation for exploring how characters interact and maintain social bonds, particularly in the application of politeness strategies. This analytical perspective is particularly suitable for examining fictional narratives of literature and media, since it reproduces the patterns of everyday communication in the higher stakes. In this case, Fatmawati & Ningsih (2024) argue that the role of politeness strategies provides a compelling function in leading conflict, ensuring survival, and re-establishing trust in each other.

As explored by Mey (2021), this framework involves various techniques used by individuals to maintain harmony in conversations with others and manage social relationships to remain good in other people's eyes. Some interaction may involve face-threatening acts (FTAs) such as giving orders, making requests, or expressing criticism, which may endanger the hearer's or speaker's face. Therefore, Lubis et al. (2025) believe that politeness strategies are important for speakers to employ, as they weaken the potential threats and maintain peaceful interactions. These strategies consist of positive politeness, which expresses solidarity and intimacy; negative politeness, which avoids imposing on others; bald-on-record strategies for straightforwardness, and off-record strategies that rely on subtle suggestion. These linguistic techniques are crucial to gain insight into the complexities of social relationships and communication.

There are several previous studies that discussed the use of politeness strategies in literature and other media as a research subject. The first one is an article titled “*The Analysis of Politeness Strategy Used by The Main Character of Novel The Sun Also Rises*” by Widyastuti (2019) from IAIN Salatiga, now known as UIN Salatiga. This article analyzed the use of politeness strategies by the main character in “*The Sun Also Rises*” Novel. In addition, there is another article entitled “*The politeness requesting principle found in “Titanic” TV miniseries*” written by Putra & Agung (2023) and published in *JETLEE*. This study examined how politely the speaker’s used language to make requests in the *Titanic* (1996) TV series. Furthermore, a study by Krisanti et al. (2023) entitled “*A politeness strategy analysis of the main character on the television series “Wednesday”*” examined both the use and the function of politeness strategies employed by the main character in the *Wednesday* TV series. This research also investigated how politeness strategies reflected the character’s personality.

Similarly, Rachman et al. (2023) conducted a study under the title “*Politeness Strategies Used by the Main Characters in Christopher Robin (2018) Film.*” The results of this study show that the main character in the film has the motivation in employing politeness strategies. Moreover, Dwipayana & Irwandika (2024) from Mahasaraswati Denpasar University published an article entitled *Politeness strategies by "Ellie" from the tv series "The Last of Us."* This article identified the types of politeness strategies employed by Ellie, the main character, in *The Last of Us* (2023) series and described how these strategies were used to minimize misunderstanding in challenging situations.

Although many researchers applied Brown and Levinson’s framework in their research, the *Fallout* (2024) series have not been examined using this framework yet. This leaves a gap for conducting a new study. Furthermore, while many previous studies mainly focused on identifying the types and functions of politeness strategies, they did not examine how these strategies can serve as a means of building trust in conflict situations. This becomes the central focus of this research.

Fallout (2024) is a television series adapted from the popular video game franchise of the same name. The story is set in a post-apocalyptic world, two hundred years after a devastating nuclear war. Humanity survives either by living in underground vaults or by struggling to rebuild the community on the irradiated surface. The series follows Lucy MacLean, a young woman raised in the safety of Vault 33, who is suddenly compelled to resist the bleak realities of the wasteland after leaving the vault.

Lucy's journey highlights how to survive in a hostile world that depends not only on strength and strategy but also on communication. Utterances conveyed by people often carry weight, as words can either heighten the conflict or build collaboration. In this environment, politeness functions as more than social sympathy. It was becoming a survival mechanism that could build trust, expand hostility, and create an alliance between the divided groups.

Accordingly, this research aims to examine how politeness strategies are employed by Lucy in conflictual situations. It can reveal how trust can be constructed even amid violence, scarcity, and mistrust. By applying Brown and Levinson's politeness framework, this analysis underscores how language continues to serve as a tool for negotiation, resilience, and human connection in a world devastated by war.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this study, the researcher has explored the social interaction between characters in extreme situations and politeness theory by Brown and Levinson in the series *Fallout* (2024). This theory focused on how the main character, Lucy, uses language to manage their relationship and maintain politeness in a post-apocalyptic world.

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is the key concept in linguistic theory. It explained how individuals manage their communication style to maintain social bonds as well as show respect to their interlocutors. This idea has 4 categories of politeness strategies.

Bald-on-record politeness

According to Brown & Levinson (1988), bald-on-record politeness is when people use direct communication without being complicated. It is unlikely to offend the interlocutors. This politeness strategy is often used when talking to peers or in urgent situations.

Off-record politeness

According to Brown & Levinson (1988), off-record politeness is a politeness style that uses indirect communication or implies a purpose without explicitly stating it. This kind of politeness serves to provide freedom for the hearer to interpret the intention of the speaker.

Positive politeness

“Positive politeness is redress directed to the addressee’s positive face, his perennial desire that his wants (or the actions/acquisitions/values resulting from them) should be thought of as desirable” (Brown & Levinson, 1988). This means that positive politeness is used to establish social relations and show friendliness by using complimentary words to make the other person feel good about themselves.

Negative politeness

Brown & Levinson (1988) state that negative politeness is an action aims to respect the interlocutor’s freedom. This politeness strategy is used when someone seeks to maintain social distance but still shows respect by using formal language, hedging, and apologizing, so as not to offend others.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method. The qualitative method involved “purposeful sampling, collection of open-ended data, analysis of text or images (e.g., pictures), representation of information in figures and tables, and personal interpretation of the findings” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This method was used by the researcher to described the politeness strategies uttered by Lucy in the *Fallout* (2024) series. The data sources were collected from the transcript of the first three-episode conversation in the form of a textual transcript.

In the process of data collection, the researchers took several steps. Firstly, the researcher watched the chosen film from the beginning until the end to understand the story. Then, the researcher found the film series script on the online website. After the researcher found the transcript of the film series, the researcher read it while re-watched the movie to match the context and the utterances. The researcher then collected all the dialogue by Lucy that contained politeness strategies from the script of the movie.

In this research, the researcher analyzed the data and identified the collected data using politeness theory. The researcher then continued by analyzed and collected Lucy’s dialogue that contains politeness strategies into a listed form. Furthermore, the collected data were identified based on four kinds of politeness strategies (Bald-on-record politeness, Off-record politeness, Positive politeness, Negative politeness). Moreover, the researcher analyzed whether the dialogue can build trust between the speaker and the interlocutor or not by using Holmes (1995) perspective on the role of politeness strategies in established

social bonds. Furthermore, the researcher provided an explanation of the dialogue's context along with the analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Bald-on-record

Data 1

Willzig: "You come from a world of rules, of laws. This place is indifferent to all of that. I do not think you would be willing to do what it takes to survive up here."

Lucy: "**I'm not going back without my dad.**"

Willzig: "If you insist on staying, then you will have to adapt."

In this scene, Willzig warned Lucy and doubted she could survive in the wasteland. Ignoring his caution, Lucy firmly responded that she would not go back without her father. Lucy's utterance, "*I'm not going back without my dad,*" represents a **bald-on-record strategy**. By choosing this strategy, Lucy emphasized her determination and sincerity without leaving a space for ambiguity. This directness helps build trust because it signals honesty and strong commitment. Lucy's straightforward response aims to convince Willzig that her mission is for real, thereby discouraging him from obstructing her path.

Data 2

Lucy: "Hello again."

Ghoul: "Where is it? The head."

Lucy: "**I don't know where it is, okay? I lost it. I lost it.**"

Ghoul: "A Gulper got it, huh?"

Lucy meets again with the ghoul, who immediately asks about the existence of a head. The head in question was Willzig's, which Lucy wanted to bring to Moldaver to exchange with her father. Lucy replied with a firm denial, repeatedly emphasizing that she had already lost the head. Her replies contain a **bald-on-record strategy** because of her straightforward answer and directly convey what happened. In this context, Lucy's honesty, shown by the repeated phrases "*I lost it. I lost it,*" can strengthen the impression of sincerity. Although Lucy did not convey the information the ghoul wanted, her honesty has the potential to build trust, as she does not sound to be hiding anything.

Off record

Data 3

Lucy: "I just tranq'd him, and **I'll do the same to you if you try to follow me.**"

Norman: "I'm too chicken, but thanks."

Lucy: "**I'm bringing him home.**"

The trouble in the vault was getting worse. Lucy's dad, who was also a leader of Vault 33, got kidnapped by the wasteland's people. Lucy is determined to leave the vault to find her father. Lucy arrived at the exit of Vault 33, accompanied by Chet, her cousin, and Norman, her younger brother. She tranquilized Chet, who wanted to go with her. She also emphasized to Norman not to do the same as Chet and to entrust their father to her. Lucy's dialogue here presents **Off-record strategy**. Although Lucy's dialogue felt like a threat, the meaning behind her words was to make Norman believe that she would bring back their kidnapped father.

Data 4

Lucy: "Hi there. I noticed that you have an assortment of Vault-Tec equipment."

Ma June: "Uh-huh"

Lucy: "And, uh, well, because these items technically belong to Vault-Tec... **it would be safe to assume that you do business with criminals. Not judging you.** Don't imagine there's that many other options up here. But, I'm actually looking for one criminal in particular."

Lucy encountered Ma June in a shop in a small town, Filly. Ma June is a trader who possesses various Vault-Tec items. Normally, the items from vaults were not available to ordinary people. In this scene, Lucy suspects that Ma June may be involved in illegal trade. However, instead of directly accusing Ma June, Lucy carefully frames her suspicions to avoid conflict.

Lucy's utterance contains **off-record** strategy, because she does not directly blame Ma June as a person who buying and selling stolen goods. By using a phrase "*safe to assume*", and adding a sentence "*not judging you*," Lucy tries to convey meaning indirectly while reducing face-threatening. This strategy can build trust because Lucy does not seem to be judging Ma June and wants her to feel safe then provide information to Lucy.

Positive politeness

Data 5

Lucy: "**Sorry, I'm a little lost. Hi, what's that you working on?**"

Stranger man: "It's meant to be a water filter. No matter how much sand I put in it, I just get more sand."

In this scene, Lucy encountered a stranger in the desert. Initially, there was a tense situation in which she threatened him by pointing a gun. Afterward, she recognized that he was not a danger and immediately put her weapon back. She tried to create a friendly atmosphere by approaching him, apologizing for her behavior, and showing interest in what he was working on. Lucy's dialogue reflects **positive politeness**. By apologizing and shifting the

topic toward the stranger's activity, Lucy attempted to establish a friendly vibe. In this case, her caring action can help gaining his trust, reducing social distance, and allowing Lucy to achieve her goals without hostility.

Data 6

Ma Juni: "The vaults were nothing more than a hole in the ground for rich folks to hide in while the rest of the world burned."

Lucy: "**We vault dwellers recognize, uh, and are grateful for the privileged position we were born into,**"

This scene takes place in a small shop in Filly, a small town in the wasteland. Lucy encountered Ma June, the shopkeeper, who criticized her as a vault dweller who lived peacefully and comfortably when the rest of the world suffered. As a response, Lucy acknowledges this critique by expressing her gratitude for her position as a vault dweller. The dialogue uttered by Lucy contains **positive politeness**. She acknowledges the privilege as a vault dweller: "*We vault dwellers recognize, uh, and are grateful for the privileged position we were born into,*" and attempted to show empathy toward the difficulties experienced by people in the wasteland. Lucy initiated to align herself with Ma June's perspective to reduce social differences and try to gain trust or acceptance.

Negative politeness

Data 7

Willzig: "You should know better than to light a fire after dark."

Lucy: "**Sir, I'm looking for my father.** He was kidnapped by this woman named Moldaver. Have you seen her?"

Willzig: "Listen, you need to go home, miss. Vault dwellers are an endangered species here."

Lucy was in the middle of her journey to find her father. When Lucy was sleeping in the middle of the woods to take a rest, a dog suddenly appeared in front of her, followed by an older man, Willzig. He warned Lucy to be careful in the dark. Lucy ignored his warning and asked him a question. She wants to know where the person who took her father away is. Her question contains **negative politeness** through the use of the honorific term "Sir". She tried to ask while giving some respect, even though he was a stranger.

Data 8

Lucy: "Hi, hello, excuse me, may I approach?" (while pointing a gun)

Stranger man: "I ain't got a weapon, or money."

Lucy: "Oh, it's okay, **I just want to ask you for directions.**" (put her gun back to its case)

Stranger man: "Okay."

In this scene, Lucy was walking in the middle of the desert when she encountered a stranger. Lucy initially approached him cautiously while pointing a gun, signaling her awareness of possible danger. However, after Lucy found out that the man was harmless, she lowered and put her gun back to its case, clarified her intention by politely asking for directions.

Lucy's utterance contains **negative politeness** as she dropped the threat by lowering her gun and clarified her simple point. Lucy explicitly shows that she is not a danger and perceive the stranger's right to be safe. Her act not only minimized potential conflict but also functioned as an initial trust-building strategy, since her non-threatening behavior reassured the stranger of her peaceful intentions.

The finding shows how Lucy's dialogues in the *Fallout* series reveal that politeness strategies are not only employed as conversational tactics. These can also serve as an essential process for building trust in high-stakes and conflictual situations. In this series, particularly after Lucy left the vault for the wasteland, she encountered many people who were initially distrustful, hostile, or indifferent to her presence as a vault dweller. In such a context, her utterances expose on how important in mitigating threats and fostering good relationships.

In an extreme danger moment, Lucy employed bald-on-record strategies to indirectly foster trust. These direct imperatives were required for survival in a conflictual world. In addition, off-record strategies were used by Lucy, which allowed her to avoid direct confrontation while communicating urgency. This type of politeness can give room for interlocutors' flexible responses and reduce face-threat to advance their trust. Furthermore, the used of positive politeness by Lucy was created rapport and emphasized the common goals. Her positive politeness served as a bridge in transforming initial suspicion into cooperation. At the same time, one significant pattern was Lucy's use of negative politeness strategies when interacting with strangers. She often used some honorific terms and behavior, such as apologizing and lowering the threat, to foster the interlocutor's trust among her. Lucy's politeness aligned with this principle by reducing fear and opening space for dialogue.

Overall, the employment of politeness strategies by Lucy was used to survive in the new environment. According to Holmes (1995), trust can't be given automatically, yet needs a careful negotiation through language and interaction. In the context of the *Fallout (2024)* series, Lucy, as a vault dweller, was initially distrusted by the wastelanders due to their

different level of social status. Thus, Lucy's ability in balancing positive and negative politeness was illustrated how trust can be established even in a conflictual world.

CONCLUSION(S)

In conclusion, this study has examined how a character in a film employed politeness strategies to build trust in a broken environment. The results show that Lucy has employed a wide-range strategies proposed by Brown & Levinson (1988), depending on the context and its threat risk. Lucy was used effectively both negative and positive politeness to reduce other people suspicion. Those strategies was also used by her to create an initial acceptance toward a newly encountered stranger and fostering the sense of friendliness.

Furthermore, Lucy's used of bald-on-record strategies was perfect in reinforced her reliability in a pinch. Moreover, her used of off-record strategies provided an indirect means to convinced other people. Lucy's politeness strategies have succeeded in forming affiliations, resolving mistrust, and showing trustworthiness in an unfriendly world. Therefore, in *Fallout*, politeness is not merely a matter of etiquette, but a significant means of survival, shaping interpersonal trust in a broken society.

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