

POSITIVE POLITENESS STRATEGY USED BY MICHELLE OBAMA ON THE NPR (NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO) YOUTUBE

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Abstract

This study, titled Positive Politeness Strategies Used by Michelle Obama on NPR's YouTube, analyzes the positive politeness strategies employed by Michelle Obama in her interview with Juana Summers on NPR's Michelle Obama Talks Parenting, Partnership, and Turning Your Rage Into Change, released on YouTube on November 15, 2022. Using Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of positive politeness, this qualitative research identifies thirteen strategies, including intensifying interest, presupposing and asserting, attending to the interlocutor, seeking agreement, exaggerating interest or approval, presenting disagreement, asserting or presupposing shared beliefs, being optimistic, offering and promising, giving empathy and understanding, using identity markers, and joking. These strategies enable Michelle Obama to create a positive public image, build rapport with the host, and facilitate a meaningful dialogue. The study underscores the value of positive politeness in public communication to foster audience connection and engagement.

Keywords: Positive Politeness, Pragmatics, Utterance

INTRODUCTION

In daily life, we communicate frequently and often use polite language to maintain smooth, respectful conversations. This highlights the importance of communication strategies in avoiding discomfort, misunderstandings, and strained relationships. Austin & Searle (1975) emphasized that effective communication strengthens social bonds, while Brown & Levinson (1978) described politeness as a rational strategy to avoid social threats. According to Yule (1996), communication also helps preserve harmony in society—a primary goal in pragmatics, which studies strategies for effective interaction.

Brown & Levinson's (1987) suggest that in public forums like talk shows, positive politeness strategies are particularly valuable for fostering connection and rapport. For instance, in her NPR YouTube interview on November 15, 2022, with host Juana Summers, Michelle Obama exemplifies positive politeness by sharing personal stories about parenting, partnership, and transforming anger into positive change. As a writer and former First Lady, Michelle Obama uses politeness strategies to foster a warm and respectful atmosphere, connecting with listeners and inspiring them through her experiences. Her approach demonstrates how positive politeness helps public figures build rapport and express gratitude, as seen when she says simple yet appreciative phrases like, "*Thanks for having me.*"

This study analyzes Michelle Obama's use of positive politeness strategies in the NPR interview, applying Brown & Levinson's (1987) theory, which identifies 15 types of positive politeness. Through examples from her conversation, this research shows how Michelle Obama's strategies reinforce her positive public image and build strong

interpersonal connections with her audience. Previous research highlights the effectiveness of positive politeness strategies in fostering successful social interactions. For example, Saragih's (2019) analysis of Eddy Zhong's TED Talk demonstrates how the speaker uses positive politeness to engage the audience, emphasizing shared goals and mutual understanding to build rapport. Similarly, Damayanti's (2020) study of Oprah Winfrey's interview with Michelle Obama illustrates how positive politeness strategies, such as expressing admiration and creating a sense of inclusivity, help establish a warm and trusting atmosphere. These studies underline the critical role of positive politeness in enhancing communication dynamics in both formal and semi-formal contexts, making interactions more relatable and impactful. Building on this foundation, this study explores how Michelle Obama's politeness strategies contribute to the effectiveness of her communication and the success of her interactions on the NPR talk show.

METHOD

This research uses qualitative methods. This is a research method that aims to describe or understand a phenomenon in detail and to describe and provide interpretations about the character, context, or even the process being studied. This research uses the theory of Grounded (1967), which contains qualitative research methods that center on inductive theory creation from empirical data collected during research. This approach is famous for allowing theories to emerge from the data without a significant prior.

This research is very much in line with Brown & Levinson's (1987) theory which describes the types of positive politeness used by Michelle Obama in "Michelle Obama Talks Parenting, Partnership and Turning Your Rage into Change" on NPR's YouTube talk show on November 15, 2022. This approach involves the process of collecting data directly from the source, in this case from the YouTube video of the NPR show, then organizing and classifying the data according to the categories of positive politeness strategies identified in Brown and Levinson's theory. The researcher collects data obtained from YouTube, organizes it, and then classifies the types of positive politeness strategies based on Brown & Levinson's theory (1987). And then, explaining what impact Michelle Obama has for herself, for the relationship with the host and the event on the NPR YouTube talk show that has been analyzed and interpreting the final data to draw conclusions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Below are the results of the data analyzed by researchers in Michelle Obama utterance from video and script. There are 13 positive politeness strategy by Brown & Levinson's (1987) theory used by Michelle Obama on the NPR YouTube episode "Michelle Obama Talk Parenting, Partnership and Turning Your Rage Into Change" on November 15, 2022.

Table 1 of Positive Politeness Strategy Used by Michelle Obama in NPR YouTube

No.	Positive Politeness Strategy	Number of the Data Found
1	Strategy 3: Intensifying interest	15

No.	Positive Politeness Strategy	Number of the Data Found
2	Strategy 7: Presupposing, raising and asserting	12
3	Strategy 1: Noticing and attending	6
4	Strategy 5: Seeking agreement	6
5	Strategy 2: Exaggerating (interest, approval, sympathy)	5
6	Strategy 6: Presenting disagreement	4
7	Strategy 9: Asserting or presupposing	4
8	Strategy 11: Being optimistic	3
9	Strategy 10: Offering or promising	3
10	Strategy 13: Giving gifts (empathy, cooperation, understanding)	2
11	Strategy 15: Giving or asking for the reason	1
12	Strategy 4: Using identity markers on activity	1
13	Strategy 8: Joke	1
Total		63

The data highlights the varied use of positive politeness strategies, with some being more prevalent. Strategy 3: Intensifying interest is the most frequent, appearing 15 times, followed by Strategy 7: Presupposing, raising, and asserting common ground at 12 occurrences. Strategies 1 and 5 are each used 6 times, while Strategy 2 appears 5 times, reflecting their balanced application in fostering connections and enthusiasm. Less common strategies, such as Strategies 6 and 9, are used 4 times each, and the least frequent ones, including Strategies 15, 4, and 8, appear only once. In total, 63 occurrences underscore the diverse and situational tailored use of these strategies. The most data found is strategy 3: intensifying interest with 15 data which is used to attract the attention of the listener. By showing a strong interest in the topic or person being discussed, one can create a warm and supportive atmosphere in the interaction, to the show the utterances used by Michelle Obama “*And so, I get a lot of questions from people. It's like, “how do I cope*” The three strategies with the lowest frequency in the data are: (1) Strategy 8: Joke, only appeared once, because the conversation was serious with the topic of parenting and Michelle Obama's personal experience; for example, “*This. These are the three steps you take to feeling seen,*” Strategy 13: Giving or Asking for Reasons, used once when Michelle asked why young people want to marry early: “*I was like, you have to be prepared to have long stretches of discomfort and long I mean, it could last for years*”. Strategy 15: Giving Gifts of Empathy, Cooperation, and Understanding, was applied when Obama talked about the isolation and challenges he and young people experience when they are unprepared for life, as in the quote you're carrying that burden rather than focusing on the task at hand. “*And that is... that makes overcoming all of that just even more difficult*”.

The differences between this research and previous studies are discussed by the researcher in this paragraph. The first is "A Pragmatic Analysis of Positive Politeness Strategies on TED Talk Video By Eddy Zhong" (2019) by Saragih, Ike Idriani et al. The results of the study found 32 data points from 15 types of positive politeness Brown & Levinson's (1987) theory used by the speakers in the Eddy Zhong video episode "How School Makes Kids Less Intelligent". The most positive politeness strategy is joking to make listeners feel comfortable is 9 data because the speaker mostly tells his experience to his work team, motivates listeners, makes small jokes, persuades listeners, and indirectly asks questions. The lowest data is, exaggerating (interest, approval, sympathy with the hearer) and presupposing, raising, asserting common ground because Both of them only occur once each other. The difference with this research is in the object used, Saragih, Ike Andriani used speakers at TED, or Technology and Entertainment, to design a video containing a non-profit organization organizing a global conference on engineering, while the latest research discuss the positive politeness used by Michelle Obama on the NPR YouTube talk show with Juana Summers.

The second previous study is "Positive Politeness In "Oprah's 2020 Vision Tour": How Reasons and Factors Influenced the Choosing of Strategy" (2021) by Damayanti, Anda et al. The result of this research is this study aims to find factors that influence the use of positive politeness strategies on talk shows, namely rewards and relevant circumstances, the relevant situations were relative power and social distance. The difference with this research is this study explores the various forms of positive politeness and the manner in which Oprah Winfrey influences her guests to establish a feeling of ease. Concurrently, recent research examines the types of positive politeness employed by Michelle Obama and the impacts they have within the context of talk shows.

The last previous research was by Aini, Nurul et al in 2022, titled "Positive Politeness Strategy on Directive Action of Moderator Talk Show Rosi Towards Pro and Contra Speakers". The most positive politeness strategy used by moderator is focusing attention are 6 data on contra to disconnect hearer attention from the focus of the problem, or diverts the topic of a discussion. The least used are 4 positive politeness strategies, namely making jokes, asking questions, expressing understanding, showing optimism, expressing reciprocity and including Mt in activities each 1 data. The purpose of this study is to classify the sub-sub strategy of positive politeness by the moderator towards the pros and cons used by the moderator to guide the debate based on Brown & Levinson's (1987) theory and find differences, namely the positive politeness strategy towards the topic of pros and cons used by Rosi in the episode of student demonstrations and Ade Armando's persecution, while the latest research discuss a casual talk show with Michelle Obama instead of debating.

This research suggests that numerous individuals utilize strategy 3: intensify interest with a data result of 15, to maintain viewers' interest and attention to stay engaged in the event, expressing strong interest in the interest can increase viewers' sense of involvement and closeness to the event. The 3 least used strategies were 1 each, namely strategy 13: giving or asking for reasons as moderators may prefer to remain neutral and not get directly involved in discussions about specific reasons. Asking or giving reasons can minimize the potential controversy or conflict that can arise when the talk show happens. Strategy 4: Since no activities with other people were mentioned much by Michelle Obama, the researcher only found one mention of her husband, Barack Obama.

Finally, strategy 8: jokes, as the talk show with Michelle Obama had a more serious or focused tone. In this context, the use of jokes may not be appropriate. The moderator should choose jokes carefully to keep them in line with the overall context.

CONCLUSION

This study identified 13 out of 15 types of positive politeness strategies according to Brown & Levinson (1987) used by Michelle Obama in her interview on the NPR YouTube show on November 15, 2022. The most frequently used strategies are intensifying interest, presupposing, raising, and asserting, and noticing and attending, which serve to show strong interest in the topic, strengthen communication, and create a warm and responsive atmosphere. In contrast, the strategies of joking, giving or asking for reasons, and giving gifts are rarely used due to the serious context of the interview. The findings suggest that the use of positive politeness helped Michelle Obama build positive interpersonal relationships, strengthen her public image, and create a comfortable and immersive atmosphere during the discussion.

The implications of this study show the importance of positive politeness strategies in public communication to strengthen the relationship between the speaker and the audience and increase the effectiveness of the message. However, this study is limited to the analysis of one episode and one speaker, which may not reflect the use of positive politeness strategies in other contexts. Future research can expand the scope of analysis by comparing politeness strategies in various public communication contexts or between multiple speakers to gain a deeper understanding of the role of positive politeness in creating effective communication and building public image.

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