
**POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN PHATIC UTTERANCES:
A PRAGMATIC STUDY OF FILM *A MAN CALLED OTTO***

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the politeness strategies employed in phatic utterances by the main character, Otto, and other characters in the film *A Man Called Otto*. The analysis draws on Aitchison's (1996) framework of phatic communion and its forms, as well as politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) and Yule (1996). The film and its dialogue script served as the primary data sources. A qualitative descriptive method was used to identify and classify the forms of phatic utterances and their relation to politeness strategies. The findings reveal four types of phatic utterances, dominated by supportive chat, followed by ritual words exchanged when people meet, standard topics of conversation, and meaningless or misunderstood words. Positive politeness appeared more frequently than negative politeness, off-record, or bald on-record strategies. The dominance of supportive chat and positive politeness indicates the characters' tendency to build closeness with Otto, despite his portrayal as grumpy and reluctant to engage. The study concludes that phatic utterances and politeness strategies play a crucial role in maintaining social harmony and fostering relationships in everyday communication.

Keywords: phatic communion, politeness strategies, pragmatics

ABSTRAK

*Penelitian ini mengkaji strategi kesantunan yang digunakan dalam komunikasi fatis oleh tokoh utama, Otto, dengan karakter lainnya dalam film *A Man Called Otto*. Analisis ini didasarkan pada kerangka komunikasi fatis dari Aitchison (1996) beserta bentuk-bentuknya, serta teori strategi kesantunan yang dikemukakan oleh Brown dan Levinson (1987) dan Yule (1996). Film beserta naskah dialognya menjadi sumber data utama dalam penelitian ini. Metode deskriptif kualitatif digunakan untuk mengidentifikasi dan mengklasifikasikan bentuk komunikasi fatis serta hubungannya dengan strategi kesantunan. Hasil*

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penelitian menunjukkan empat jenis ujaran fatik, yang didominasi oleh obrolan suportif, diikuti oleh kata-kata ritual ketika orang bertemu, topik percakapan umum, serta kata-kata yang tidak bermakna atau disalahpahami. Strategi kesantunan positif muncul lebih sering dibandingkan dengan strategi kesantunan negatif, off-record, atau bald on-record. Dominasi obrolan suportif dan kesantunan positif menunjukkan kecenderungan para tokoh untuk membangun kedekatan dengan Otto, meskipun ia digambarkan sebagai sosok yang pemarah dan enggan berinteraksi. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa ujaran fatik dan strategi kesantunan berperan penting dalam menjaga keharmonisan sosial dan mempererat hubungan dalam komunikasi sehari-hari.

Kata kunci: komunikasi fatis, strategi kesantunan, pragmatik

A. INTRODUCTION

Language is not only a tool for conveying information but also for building and maintaining social bonds (Trudgill, 2000). Awkwardness often arises in interaction, showing that language has functions beyond its literal meaning. Malinowski (1923) introduced phatic communion to describe expressions such as greetings, small talk, or farewells that primarily serve social interaction. As Aitchison (1996, p. 21) observed, language “oils social wheels” even when no substantial content is exchanged. Later, Aitchison (2010) noted that language often facilitates politeness, linking phatic communion with politeness strategies. Brown and Levinson (1987) emphasized politeness as a way to avoid offense and maintain respect, while Yule (1996) defined pragmatics as the study of speaker meaning, highlighting how context shapes interpretation. Both phatic communion and politeness rely on context and reveal solidarity or deference in communication.

Several studies have examined this relationship. Febrianto (2019) analysed humorous phatic utterances in the sitcom *Friends* using Yule’s (1996) framework of solidarity and deference. Ambarwati et al. (2019) studied women’s communication on Facebook, showing that phatic speech acts maintain harmony and friendship, often realized through positive politeness strategies. More recently, Ambarwati and Kuncorohadi (2023) explored phatic speech acts through cooperative principles and politeness strategies, finding differences between adult and adolescent interactions. However, most of these studies focused on online platforms or comedic contexts, without categorizing phatic communion comprehensively.

This study addresses that gap by analysing phatic communion based on Aitchison’s (1996) classification and examining its relation to politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Yule, 1996). The object of analysis is the film *A Man Called Otto* (2022), which tells the story of Otto Anderson, a grumpy widower struggling with loneliness after his wife’s death, whose life slowly changes when new neighbours bring him into their community. The film is suitable for this research because it presents everyday interactions filled with greetings, small talk,

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and polite strategies that reflect both phatic communion and politeness in practice. Its relevance lies in how the neighbours consistently attempt to engage Otto despite his grumpiness, demonstrating that phatic expressions and politeness strategies function not only to maintain social bonds but also to overcome interpersonal barriers and foster inclusion.

Therefore, this research aims to answer the question: *How are politeness strategies used in phatic utterances by the characters in A Man Called Otto?* Theoretically, it contributes to pragmatics by clarifying the link between phatic communion and politeness. Practically, it provides insights for fostering better communication and respectful social interaction.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that explores aspects of meaning beyond semantic theory can fully explain. Yule (1996) stated that “Pragmatics is the study of speaker meaning,” more concerning on how context and intention shape interpretation. This study applies pragmatics to examine not only what the characters in the film *A Man Called Otto* say, but also how and why their words are chosen within specific social situations.

2. Phatic Communion

The term “phatic communion” comes from Greek verb meaning ‘to speak’ and the concept of communion which refers to the creation of social bonds. Malinowski (1923) defined it as ‘A type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words.’ This means that language is not just a tool for sharing information but also crucial for maintaining good relationships (Trudgill, 2000). Their main goal is to fulfil a social function, rather than to provoke intellectual reflection or thought in the listener.

Aitchison (1996) then divided the form of phatic communion they are: ritual words that are exchanged when people meet, standard topic of conversation, supportive chat, and meaningless words or misunderstood words. In this study, Aitchison’s classification is used to explore how the characters, especially Otto’s neighbours, use phatic expressions to engage him despite his reluctance toward friendly conversation. Phatic communion thus reveals how everyday talk helps bridge emotional distance and initiate connection.

3. Politeness Strategies

Brown and Levinson (1987) define politeness as “strategies that speakers use to save the hearer’s face by avoiding threats to their negative face or by honouring their positive face.” The notion of face refers to the public self-image individuals want to maintain, including their emotional and social identity as recognized by others. Yule (1996) explains that when a speaker produces an utterance that threatens this self-image, it is called a face-threatening act.

To mitigate such threats, speakers employ face-saving acts through specific politeness strategies such as off record, bald on record, positive politeness, and negative politeness. This framework helps analyse how Otto and other characters maintain social harmony. While Otto often speaks with cold tone and short words, his neighbours respond with politeness and warmth, balancing solidarity with respect for his boundaries.

Thus, Phatic communion and politeness strategies are closely related, as both depend on context and aim to maintain social bonds. Phatic expressions such as greetings or small talk often realize positive politeness by expressing friendliness and inclusion, while indirect forms may reflect negative politeness by showing deference. Both demonstrate how language functions to reduce distance, avoid offense, and foster understanding.

Accordingly, these two theories complement each other in analysing *A Man Called Otto*, highlighting how language through even the simplest exchanges can restore connection and empathy in tense relationships.

C. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach to analyse the utterances in *A Man Called Otto*. As Ary et al. (2010) explained, qualitative research seeks a holistic understanding of phenomena rather than numerical analysis. Since the data consisted of dialogue scripts, this study used document or content analysis. Approximately two hours and six minutes of the film were examined by watching it several times, collecting its dialogue script, and identifying phatic expressions that contained politeness strategies. To ensure systematic analysis, Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework was applied, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification.

The analysis began by identifying utterances containing phatic communion based on Aitchison's (1996) classification. After the phatic communion data were thoroughly examined, they were further analysed to determine the politeness strategies applied in each conversation. The utterances identified as phatic communion were categorized according to the politeness strategies employed. From a total of 72 findings, several representative examples were selected and discussed in detail. Finally, the analysis concluded with a summary of the overall findings and interpretations related to the research objectives.

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

From overall results, the researcher narrowed the focus to eight representative examples for discussion in this article. The analysis of these selected data is presented below.

1. Ritual Words that are Exchanged When People Meet

Datum 1

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Jimmy: Hey, Otto! A little late for your morning rounds, isn't it?

Otto : No.

Jimmy: No? (Marc Forster, 2022)

First example of ritual words that are exchanged when people meet occurs when Jimmy sees Otto starting his usual walk around the neighbourhood. His greeting is casual and familiar, showing that Jimmy already knows Otto's routine and feels comfortable addressing him.

Jimmy not only acknowledges Otto by name but also adds a light remark about his lateness. Such expressions go beyond a simple hello because they show awareness of the other person's habits, thereby maintaining familiarity and social connection. The greeting also demonstrates a positive politeness strategy. Instead of ignoring Otto, Jimmy makes an effort to engage him with a playful comment. This shows attentiveness, reduces social distance, and reinforces solidarity between neighbours. The reference to Otto being “a little late” is not a criticism but a friendly observation that creates a relaxed and approachable tone.

Datum 2

Marisol : Thanks for driving us.

Abbie and Luna: Bye, *Abuelo Luchadoro*.

Tommy : Thank you, Otto.

Marisol : Okay, *good night. Bye!* (Marc Forster, 2022)

Another example of ritual words that are exchanged when people meet also shows when Marisol ends the conversation after Otto drives her family to the hospital, while another example is Luna's farewell.

Both illustrate how ritual words are used not only in greetings but also in partings. These short expressions close the interaction politely, acknowledge Otto's role, and maintain social harmony as part of phatic. At the same time, the farewells show a positive politeness strategy. Marisol's warmth and Luna's affectionate address reduce social distance and highlight attentiveness to Otto. Despite their brevity, such words strengthen neighbourly bonds and ensure the interaction ends on friendly terms.

2. Standard Topic of Conversation

Datum 3

Otto : Hey, you can't just drive here.

Marisol : *I'm not driving. Am I driving the car? No.* (Marc Forster, 2022)

This form of phatic communion is employed in a scene when Otto was inside his house and noticed his new neighbours arriving. Otto quickly assumed

careless driving and expressed his frustration towards Marisol who is standing next to the car that Tommy was trying to park and assisting with the parking process. Then she responded with her reply.

The exchange focused on the immediate situation concerning the car, even though both of them know the one who driving is not Marisol, but her husband, Tommy. Thus, there is no information exchanged, Marisol just intended to response Otto despite his tone. Regarding politeness strategies, Marisol’s response reflects positive politeness. By directly addressing Otto’s concern and clarifying her role, she maintained a level of friendly engagement and ensured that the conversation remained cooperative. This interaction demonstrates that even in minor misunderstandings or slightly tense situations, employing positive politeness strategies within a standard conversation topic can maintain social connection and prevent conflict between neighbours.

Datum 4

Anita: *So those new neighbours of yours, they seem quite lovely, don't you think?*

Otto : *Lovely.* (Marc Forster, 2022)

Another example of standard topic of conversation also showed when Otto visited his old friends Anita and Reuben to help fix their air radiator. Before addressing the repair work, Anita initiates a casual conversation by commenting on the new neighbours. This remark is not directly related to the radiator repair nor intended to convey personal or sensitive information. Its main function is to maintain social connection and start the interaction.

Anita’s comment about the new neighbours reflects this strategy, as she chooses a socially acceptable subject that engages Otto, fosters a friendly atmosphere, and reinforces their neighbourly bond. In terms of politeness strategies, Anita’s statement illustrates positive politeness. By complimenting the new neighbours and inviting Otto’s opinion with “don’t you think?”, she emphasizes solidarity and values his perspective, including him in a shared social evaluation.

3. Supportive Chat

Datum 5

Otto : *Stop! Stop. Get outta the car. Get outta the car.*

Tommy : *I'm sorry.*

Otto : *How you could make it this far through life without knowing how to back up a trailer. My God, a dog with one front paw and cataracts coulda done better than that.*

(Marc Forster, 2022)

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First example of supportive chat highlighted in a scene when Otto became visibly frustrated when his new neighbour, Tommy, struggles to parallel park a car in front of his house. Unable to tolerate Tommy's repeated mistakes, Otto orders him to stop and get out of the car so that he can take over the task himself. Tommy, sensing Otto's irritation, quickly apologised and stepped out of the car without protest.

Tommy's brief apology falls under supportive chat. Even though it is short, it acknowledges the tension in the moment and attempts to ease Otto's annoyance. Tommy's words demonstrate his recognition of Otto's frustration while maintaining a level of social connection. From the politeness strategy point of view, this interaction reflects negative politeness. By apologizing, Tommy respects Otto's "face" by acknowledging the imposition his actions have caused. Tommy's apology allows him to step back, reducing social pressure and giving Otto space to regain control over the situation. The conversation demonstrates how even a brief acknowledgment of fault can manage tension effectively. Tommy's apology, combined with his cooperative behaviour, transforms the exchange from potential conflict into a manageable interaction.

Datum 6

Marisol: I'd say you're a little unfriendly.

Otto : I'm not unfriendly. I am not.

Marisol: *Un poquito.*

Otto : I am not.

Marisol: *No? Okay, you're not. No, no, no, no. You're not unfriendly. Every word you say is like a warm cuddle. It really is.*

(Marc Forster, 2022)

Supportive chat also found when Marisol and Tommy visit Otto's house to thank him for helping them park their car correctly. They bring food as a gesture of gratitude and to introduce themselves as Otto's new neighbours. Despite their friendly intentions, Otto responds with a grumpy tone, showing little interest in the interaction. Marisol, however, tries to lighten the mood by making playful remarks and exaggerate with humour.

Marisol's comments maintain social connection despite Otto's reluctance to engage warmly. Her playful remarks acknowledge Otto's grumpiness in a humorous way, keeping the interaction friendly and preventing tension. From the politeness strategy viewpoint, Marisol employs positive politeness. Through humour, teasing, and exaggerated compliments, she softens her critique and shows friendliness. Her exaggerated praise is ironic but serves to reduce social distance, signal goodwill, and indicate that the conversation is meant to be light-hearted rather than confrontational.

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4. Meaningless or Misunderstood Words

Datum 7

Jimmy: Aren't you supposed to be at work?
Otto : No.
Jimmy: *Oh. Cool.* (Marc Forster, 2022)

Meaningless or misunderstood words can be shown in Jimmy's response after Otto answered his greeting during Jimmy's morning exercise and asks if Otto is supposed to be at work, unaware that Otto has already retired.

The brief phrase signals that Jimmy acknowledges Otto's answer and is willing to continue the interaction. Its primary function is social rather than informational, sustaining the connection between the speakers. From the politeness strategy perspective, this exchange demonstrates positive politeness. By saying "*Cool*" in a slightly enthusiastic tone, Jimmy exaggerates his interest and approval of Otto's answer. This exchange highlights how short and seemingly insignificant words can carry social weight. "*Oh. Cool.*" functions as a conversational tool that preserves goodwill and promotes smooth interaction.

Datum 8

Otto : What?
Marisol: My father used to smile like that.
Otto : I'm not smiling.
Marisol: *Exactly.* (Marc Forster, 2022)

Another scene that is classified as meaningless or misunderstood words can be seen when Otto has just driven Marisol's family to the hospital after her husband's accident. On the way back, Marisol teased Otto about his angry expression, referencing the way her father used to smile. Otto protested, insisting he is not smiling, and Marisol responded with a single word.

Marisol's "*Exactly*" does not provide new information but functions to continue the conversation in a light and playful manner. The word emphasizes her teasing and helps maintain a friendly, humorous atmosphere, preventing the interaction from feeling tense after the earlier stressful event. From the politeness strategy viewpoint, this instance reflects positive politeness. Marisol's playful comment strengthens the social bond with Otto, showing familiarity and shared understanding. By teasing gently, she signals friendliness and support, rather than criticism, which encourages Otto to engage without feeling offended.

Table 1. Data Findings

No	Utterances	Forms of Phatic Communion				Types of Politeness Strategies			
		RE	ST	SC	MW	PP	NP	OR	BO
1.	Hey, Otto! (06:32)	✓				✓			
2.	I'm not driving. Am I driving the car? No. (13:44)		✓			✓			
3.	Yeah that, uh...that didn't go so well huh? I'll it another try. (14:11)		✓				✓		
4.	I'm sorry. (14:50)			✓			✓		
5.	No, I knew that. (15:07)				✓				✓
6.	Hello. (15:24)	✓				✓			
7.	Nice to meet you. (15:44)			✓		✓			
8.	Thank you, sir. (16:9)			✓		✓			
9.	Okay, okay. Got it. (16:26)				✓				✓
10.	Bye! (16:27)	✓				✓			
11.	Thank you! Thank you, sir. (16:28)			✓		✓			
12.	Hi. (18:14)	✓				✓			
13.	I'd say you're a little unfriendly. (19:33)			✓		✓			
14.	No? Okay, you're not. No, no, no, no. You're not unfriendly. Every word you say is like a warm cuddle. It really is. (19:44)			✓		✓			
15.	Enjoy it, heh. (19:50)			✓					✓
16.	Thank you. (21:12)			✓		✓			
17.	Aw, thank you. We go because you have things to do, so... (21:13)			✓		✓			
18.	Hey, Otto! A little late for your morning rounds, isn't it? (31:27)	✓				✓			
19.	Oh. Cool. (31:38)				✓	✓			
20.	You wanna come over for lunch, then? (31:38)			✓		✓			
21.	Hello. (33:27)	✓				✓			
22.	Congratulations. (33:36)			✓		✓			
23.	Thank you. (34:06)			✓		✓			
24.	Otto, hate to bother you (34:16)			✓			✓		
25.	Otto. Don't be rude. (34:32)			✓					✓
26.	Otto, can't you just go breathe Anita's radiators for her? (35:15)			✓			✓		
27.	Oh, sorry. (35:31)			✓			✓		
28.	Okay. (35:36)				✓	✓			

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29.	Thank you. (35:38)		✓	✓	
30.	Come in. (37:09)		✓		✓
31.	So those new neighbours of yours, they seem quite lovely, don't you think? (37:16)	✓		✓	
32.	Does he even know we're here? (38:04)	✓		✓	
33.	Oh, thank you, Otto. I'm sorry it took so long to give it back. Um, you wanna stay for lunch? (39:35)		✓	✓	
34.	Well, you found me. (46:02)	✓		✓	
35.	Thank you. (46:46)		✓	✓	
36.	Exactly. (51:13)			✓	✓
37.	Thanks for driving us. (51:31)		✓	✓	
38.	Bye, <i>Abuelo Luchadoro</i> . (51:33)		✓	✓	
39.	Thank you, Otto. (51:35)		✓	✓	
40.	Okay, good night. Bye! (51:37)	✓		✓	
41.	Oh. I'm sorry. (54:01)		✓		✓
42.	Well, it was great seeing ya, as usual. (54:11)		✓	✓	
43.	Are you trying to scare me to death? (58:24)	✓			✓
44.	What? <i>Que?</i> You're gonna teach me? Really? Otto, thank you! (01:04:30)		✓	✓	
45.	That's really, really nice of you, Otto. Thank you. (01:04:41)		✓	✓	
46.	I am not shouting at you. (01:05:39)		✓	✓	
47.	You're learning. (01:06:00)		✓	✓	
48.	No. Don't be silly. It's gonna be very fun. (01:13:00)		✓	✓	
49.	You did a good job, Otto. You should pat yourself on the back. (01:17:00)		✓	✓	
50.	Thank you, Otto. (01:17:34)		✓	✓	
51.	Have a good night. (01:17:00)	✓		✓	
52.	Hi, Otto. (01:18:06)	✓		✓	
53.	Wow. It's great. That's amazing. (01:18:41)		✓	✓	
54.	Thanks, Otto. (01:18:49)		✓	✓	
55.	A million? A million. Why can't people mind their own business? (01:19:40)	✓			✓
56.	Otto! Hi! Good morning. Good morning. Uh...So you ready for another driving lesson? (01:20:05)	✓		✓	
57.	Otto! It's me. She's gone. (01:20:30)	✓		✓	

58.	I thought you handled it really well. I mean, closing her in your garage. That was, like, excellent strategy. Good job. (01:20:46)		✓		✓	
59.	Those are not bad. They're not bad. (01:21:10)		✓		✓	
60.	Otto, what's going on? Are you okay? Do you feel okay? (01:23:04)		✓		✓	
61.	What d'ya want? It's freezing. (01:31:37)	✓				✓
62.	No. I'm sorry. (01:31:47)		✓			✓
63.	Good morning. The power's still out so I cooked up the last of the eggs while they're still good. Hope you don't mind. (01:33:33)	✓			✓	
64.	Uh, some eggs? (01:33:57)		✓			✓
65.	All right. (01:34:02)			✓	✓	
66.	Hey, Otto! Making your rounds? You mind if I join you? (01:34:34)	✓				✓
67.	I love it. (01:48:37)		✓		✓	
68.	Thank you. Thank you. (01:48:40)		✓		✓	
69.	Are you kidding me? (01:52:18)			✓		✓
70.	What? Otto! Thank you. Oh, thank you. Oh, my gosh. (01:52:19)		✓		✓	
71.	Wanna go for a ride? (01:52:46)		✓		✓	
72.	That's a nice truck, Otto (01:52:52)		✓		✓	

Note:

RE	: Ritual words that are exchanged when people meet	PP	: Positive politeness
ST	: Standard topic of conversation	NP	: Negative politeness
SC	: Supportive chat	OR	: Off record
MW	: Meaningless words or misunderstood words	BO	: Bald on record

E. CONCLUSION

This study found that all four types of phatic communion identified by Aitchison (1996) were employed in *A Man Called Otto*. Supportive chat emerged as the most dominant, followed by ritual words exchanged when people meet, standard topics of conversation, and meaningless or misunderstood words, totalling 72 instances. The analysis of politeness strategies shows that positive politeness was used most frequently, followed by negative politeness, bald on record, and off record.

The dominance of supportive chat and positive politeness reflects the neighbours' persistent efforts to connect with Otto despite his grumpy and withdrawn nature. At the beginning of the film, Otto avoids casual talk and limits

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interactions. However, through repeated use of warm and supportive exchanges, the neighbours gradually reduce social distance and build emotional closeness. Language plays a vital role in these moments through small talk and friendly remarks, the characters sustain connection and show care even when no new information is exchanged. These interactions demonstrate that supportive chat and positive politeness dominate because they convey empathy, warmth, and sincerity, helping to ease tension and foster mutual understanding.

Based on these results, future research is encouraged to investigate phatic communion and politeness strategies in other films, television series, interviews, or real-life conversations, as well as to apply additional pragmatic frameworks such as Leech's Politeness Maxims or Grice's Cooperative Principles for comparative insight. This study contributes to pragmatics and discourse analysis by showing that phatic communion is an essential tool for building and maintaining relationships. Practically, the findings suggest that supportive chat and positive politeness can ease tension, foster empathy, and strengthen social bonds, even with individuals who may initially seem reluctant to engage.

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