

POLITENESS STRATEGY IN REQUEST: DOES IT ALWAYS WORK WELL?

Diah Ikawati Ayuningtias
Dosen sastra Inggris Universitas Trunojoyo Madura
Email: nd.alghozy@gmail.com

Abstract: Request is one of speech act phenomena, which we encounter most frequently in everyday social interaction. When expressing a request, the speaker has an intention to the hearer to do something that is beneficial to him/her. In this circumstance, the speaker is imposing on the hearer; while the hearer has to pay cost of carrying out the request. Brown and Levinson claim request as one kind of face threatening acts (FTA). Because of the nature of request, politeness strategy must be applied when expressing a request. There are four super strategies of politeness strategy defined by Brown and Levinson, i.e. bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, as well as off record. There are some reasons underlying the use of certain strategies. They are the urgency of the request itself, the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, not to mention the speaker's willingness to lessen the imposition on the hearer. Yet, the use of the politeness strategies do not always work well. In other word, the speaker does not always gain what he wants.

Keywords: Face Threatening Act (FTA), politeness strategy, request

Introduction

In everyday life, there are many ways to convey messages. Different speakers may express the same message differently. For example, to invite someone to have lunch, people might directly say 'let's have lunch' or indirectly state 'I am already starving. Request is one of speech act phenomena, which we encounter most frequently in everyday social interaction. When expressing a request, the speaker has an intention to the hearer to do something that is beneficial to him/her. In this circumstance the speaker is imposing on the hearer; while the hearer has to pay cost of carrying out the request. Because of this condition, a speaker should employ appropriate strategy to express his/her intention in making a request. Expressing a request inappropriately may ruin the relationship between the speaker and the hearer.

There are some factors outside the language itself that must be taken into account when people want to deliver their intention. Yule (1997:59) claims that people must concern with various factors related to social distance and closeness so as to make sense of their speech. Those factors involve the social status of the participants, such as power and age, as well as degree of friendliness. Certain kinds of acts are intrinsically face threatening due to their nature (Brown & Levinson, 1987:65). One of the face threatening acts is request. Since request is naturally facethreatening act, it must be expressed as polite as possible in order not to threaten the opposite's position.

Discussing about being polite or impolite, one must relate to the politeness strategy. Politeness strategy appears naturally in every conversation and other face-to-face interaction. The use of this strategy may make the speaker get his/her intention without offending the hearer. Besides, it may affect the relationship of both participants. Considering this fact, politeness has an important role in everyday interaction.

This article will present the politeness strategy used in request and how it works to help the speakers gain their intention. The data is the request expressions expressed by the main characters in two serial of Harry Potter movie, i.e. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*.

Politeness Strategy

Politeness strategy is a particular strategy used in communication to maintain and develop relationship (Kitao, 2000). Yule (1997:60) defines this strategy as "the means employed to show awareness of another person's face." This definition implies that politeness strategy can be used to save someone's face in communication process. The central of politeness theory, according to Brown and Levinson, is the concept of "face" (1987:61). Being polite to someone means we try to save the person's self image.

Face has two aspects, negative and positive ones. Brown and Levinson state that negative face is "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others" (1987:62). Saving one's negative face means not to make the person feel being imposed by the speaker's utterance. The positive face refers to the need to be liked, approved of, respected, or appreciated by others. It is the basic need that every person wants to be accepted or treated as the member of a group. During an interaction face can be lost, maintained, or enhanced. It constantly attends in every interaction. The term of 'losing face' or 'saving face' is common in daily interaction. Giving compliment can enhance someone's face; while criticizing someone may damage his face.

In the context of maintaining each other's face, speaker (S) and hearer (H) will try to avoid the FTAs, or employ a kind of strategies to lessen the threat. To do so, he will allow for the relative weightings of at least three wants; those are the wants to communicate the content of FTAs, the want to be efficient or urgent, and the want to maintain H's face to any degree. There four possibilities of strategy when S decides to perform FTA, namely bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record (Ibid, 1987:68).

Bald On Record

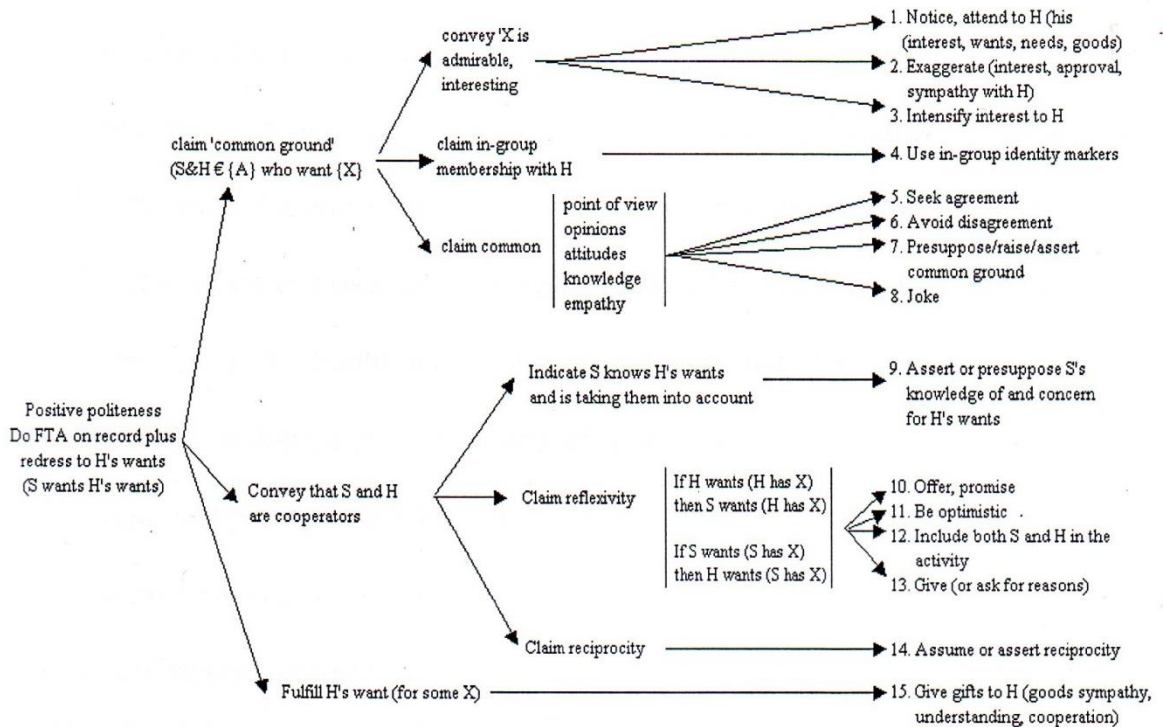
Performing an FTA baldly mean doing it directly, clearly, concisely, and unambiguously. Commonly, S chooses this strategy to do an FTA only in condition when he/she does not fear retribution from the addressee. Some circumstances which determine the selection of this strategy are : (a) S and H tacitly agree that the interest of urgency or efficiency is greater than the face demands; (b) the threat to H's face is very small; and (c) the position of S is higher than H in social or power. However, generally the main reason of bald on record usage is the desire of S in gaining maximum efficiency in doing the FTA defeating his desires to maintaining H's face. Brown & Levinson differ the usage of bald on record strategy into two cases: those

where the face is irrelevant and ignored and those where the face threat is lessened by implication (1987:69-95)

Positive Politeness

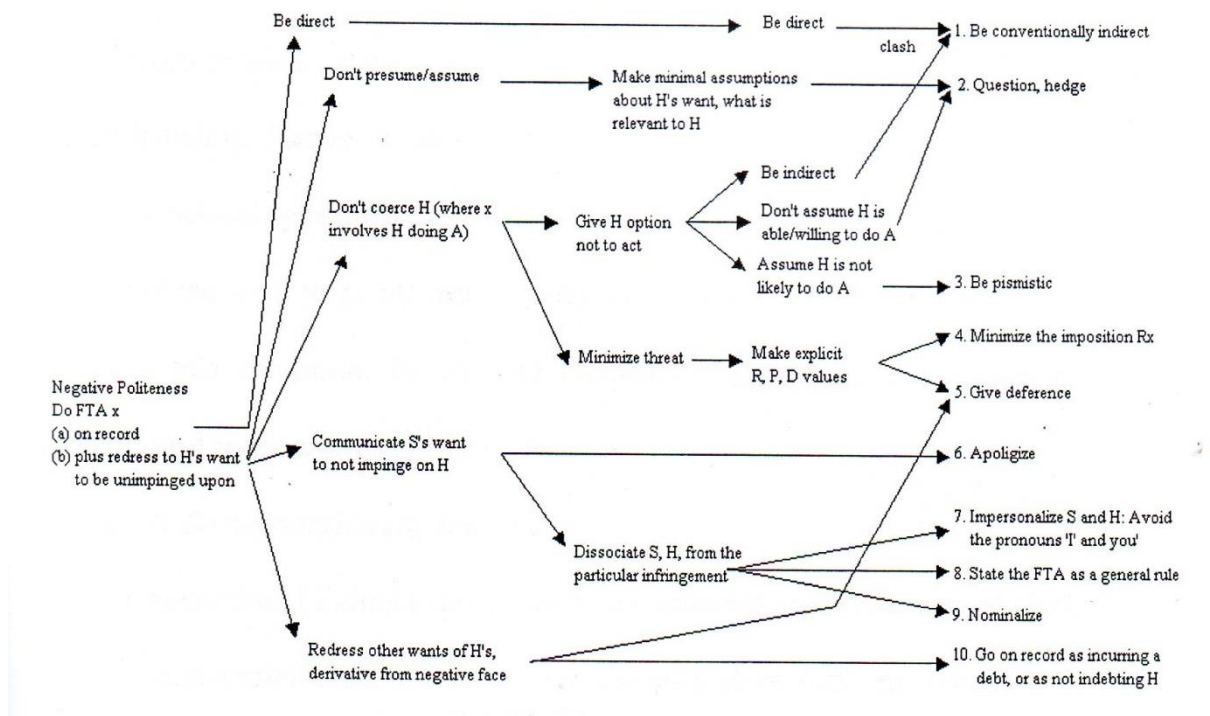
Positive politeness is oriented to satisfy the positive face, positive self-image of addressee. Doing an FTA by using this strategy means that S considers that he wants what H wants (or actions/acquisitions/values resulting them), e.g. by treating H as the member of his group, a friend, or a person whose desires and personality traits are known and liked. In positive politeness, the area of redress is not restricted to the particular face want transgressed by the FTA, but extended to the appreciation of H's desires (Brown&Levinson, 1987:70,101).

To satisfy H's positive face, S gives such modification or additions in his speech act so that H feels that both of them are in the same group. An intimate language, where interest and approval of each other's personality, presuppositions indicating shared wants and knowledge, implicit claims to reciprocity obligations or to reflexivity of wants are routinely exchange, is commonly used. In addition, positive politeness is usable to promote or maintain social relationship between S and H since S attempts to get closer to H. This strategy consists of three main strategies involving some sub strategies. The chart of this strategy can be seen figure 1.



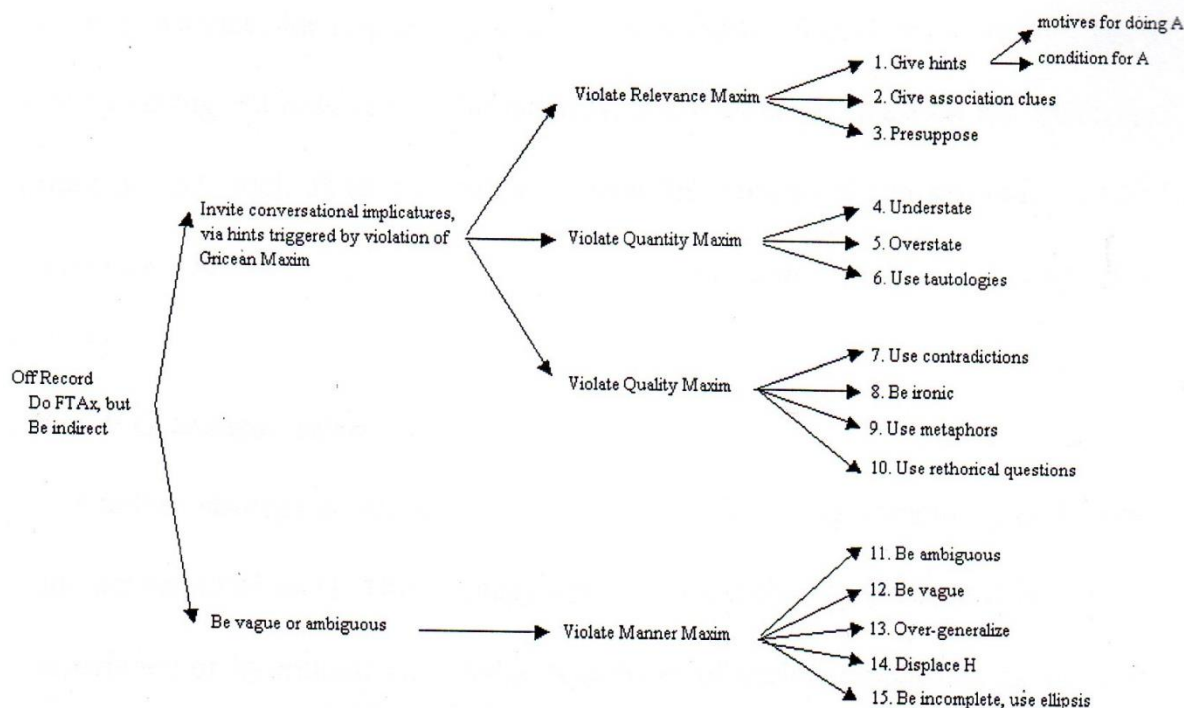
Negative Politeness

Negative politeness is oriented to satisfy H's negative face, his basic want to be free and unimpeded. It means that the speaker recognizes and respects the addressee's freedom of action and will not (or will only minimally) impede it. The characteristics of negative politeness are self-effacement, formality and restraint, with attention to very limited aspects of H's self-image, focusing on H's want to be unimpeded. In this strategy, the FTA is equipped with apologies for transgressing with linguistic and non-linguistic difference, with hedges on illocutionary force of the act, with impersonalising mechanism that make S and H distant from the act, and with other alleviating mechanism that make H feels that there is no force on his response (Brown&Levinson, 1987:70). Among other strategies, negative politeness is the most elaborate strategy for FTA redress and its linguistic realizations are very familiar and do not need introducing in western culture (*ibid*, 1987:130). Negative politeness has two aspects, i.e. those are the aspect of delivery on record of the FTA and the aspect of redressing H's negative face. Figure 2 depicts the strategies of negative politeness.



Off Record

Doing an FTA by off record means that the speaker conveys his FTA by using indirect and ambiguous utterance. By doing so S provides himself with a number of defensible interpretations so that he cannot be held to have committed to one particular intention; and therefore he leaves himself an 'out' of his FTA. For example, if S wants to do an FTA but avoid the responsibility for his FTA, he can do it off record and let the addressee decide how to interpret it. In other word, an off record utterance is usually something general (containing less information in the sense that it rules out fewr possible states of affairs) or actually different from what it is really meant. The classification of off record strategy is shown in figure 3.



The Theory of Request

Request is a speech act that is performed when a speaker wants another person to do something. In this situation, the speaker is imposing on the addressee and obtaining certain advantage of it, while in reverse, the addressee has to pay the cost in carrying out the request (Kitao, 2000). According to Blum-Kulka, requests are pre-event acts which express the speaker's expectation of the hearer with regards to prospective action either verbal or non-verbal. It must be noted that request is different from command. Request leaves to the addressee the option of refusal to comply it. Whereas command does not (Lyons, 1987:749)

As a speech act, request has its own sequence. The sequence consists of alerters, preposed supportive moves, the request proper or head act, optionally elaborated with down graders or upgraders, and postposed supportive moves. For example, the utterance 'Judith, I missed class yesterday, do you think I could borrow your notes? I promise to return them by tomorrow.' The sequence of this request are alerter *the address term (Judith)*, preposed supportive move: *I missed class yesterday*, head act: *could I borrow your notes*, optionally elaborated down-grader *do you think*, postposed supportive move *I promise to return them by tomorrow* (Lyons, 1987:17). The explanation of the sequence is as follows:

Alerters. This part usually comes first in request expression. Alerters are considered as the attention getters of the hearer. Alerters include title+surname, surname only, and all verbal means used for this purpose such as *darling, my dear, and you fool*.

Supportive move. After alerters, speaker then mentions certain supportive moves that may be able to persuade the addressee. The supportive move may include checking on the availability of the addressee and trying to gain a precommitment, and be followed by grounders that can be the reason for the request or by promises and threats.

Head act. It might be the main part of requests since it can serve independently to realize the act. There are two dimensions of head act: strategy type and perspective.

Internal modifications (downgraders and upgraders). The presence of internal modifiers, which link to head act in request utterance are needed to give pragmatic force on the utterance. The functions of modifiers vary in two distinct ways. Firstly, modifiers can act both as indicating devices and sociopragmatic devices. As indicating devices, modifiers are used to signal pragmatic force; while as sociopragmatic device, they are used to affect the social impact the utterance is likely to have. Secondly, in sociopragmatic role, modifiers may act either as downgraders which is meant to soften the act or upgraders that emphasize the degree of coerciveness (*Ibid*, 1989:17-19).

Discussion

From the two serial of *Harry Potter*, there are 89 utterances that indicated request expression. The data show that the characters in the movie applied all of the super strategies of politeness strategy in expressing their request, i.e. bald on record non minimization face-threat, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record.

The first politeness strategy that is mostly used in the two movies is bald on record non minimization face-threat. The most reason of the use of this strategy is the urgency of the request. It is in line with the statement of Brown and Levinson that one of the reason of applying this strategy is that S and H tacitly agree that the interest of urgency or efficiency is greater than the face demands. This kinds of request usually occur in emergency situation and are granted by H. It can be seen from the conversation below:

Harry: Run!
Ron & Hermione: (*running away following Harry*)
Hermione Stop! Stop! You're going to take someone's eyes
Ron (*stopping waving his wand*)

The two conversations above occurred when the three kids accidentally entered a restricted room. They were running away from the guard. They faced an emergency situation that made them state the request in a straight way. In this situation both S and H agree that not being captured by the guard is more urgent than their self-image is. That is why the response given by H is positive.

The next reason of the use of bald on record is that expressing the request directly is considered more effective to gain the speaker's desire. It can be seen from the data below:

Harry: Hey...give me back! It's mine
Mr. Dursley: Yours? Who'll be writing to you?

In the conversation above, the speaker applied bald on record non minimization face-threat in expressing his request regardless the relationship between both of them. Mr. Dudley was Harry Potter's uncle who had raised Harry since he was a baby. In this situation Harry ignored that H was older and had more power than he did. He requested the letters that was considered his without minimizing the face-threat. This condition is different from what Brown and Levinson

have stated that one of the factors determining the use of this strategy is that the position of S is higher than the position of H in social and power. Yet, applying bald on record strategy does not always help the speaker gain his desire. In the above conversation, Mr Dudley did not grant what Harry requested. The factors that may cause it to happen are that Mr Dudley did not like Harry and considered Harry's request illogical.

The next strategy applied is positive politeness. The application of this strategy is mostly based on one reason, i.e. the unwillingness of S to damage H's face (self-image) when delivering his request. This situation is depicted in the following conversation:

Harry: Not to be rude you anything, but this isn't a great time for me to house elf in my bedroom
Dobby: oh...yes sir, Dobby understand...it's just... Dobby has come to tell you...it is difficult sir. Dobby wonders where to begin.

The above conversation occurred when Harry asked Dobby, an elf who visited him in his bedroom when his uncle's family was receiving visitors. Harry considered that it was not a good time to meet Dobby. That is why he asked Dobby to leave his bedroom. In expressing his request, Harry applied positive politeness sub strategy give (or ask for) reason because he did not want to offend Dobby. Yet, this strategy did not work well since Dobby refused to fulfill Harry's request. Dobby thought that his interest was much more important than Harry's.

The third strategy is negative politeness. The speaker usually uses this strategy when the hearer has distant relationship with the speakers and higher power. Hence, the speaker tries to be as polite as possible when expressing his request. This condition can be seen in the conversation below:

Harry: Excuse me, excuse me, excuse me sir, can you tell me where I might find platform nine and three quarters?
Officer: nine and three quarters?think it's been funny, do you?

This conversation occurred at the train station. Harry asked the officer to show him platform 9¾. Due to the fact that Harry had never met the officer before, Harry tried to be polite when expressing his request by using negative politeness sub strategy 1, be conventionally indirect and sub strategy 6. apologize. The use of modal auxiliary 'can' does not mean that Harry asked the officer's ability about the platform, but it was only 'tools' to show the politeness of Harry's to the officer. However, this strategy did not help Harry gain his desire. It was because the officer considered what Harry requested was nonsense. There was no platform 9¾.

The other example of the use of sub strategy 1 can be seen in the following conversation which took place in Hogward school between Harry and his two best friends, Ron and Hermione. Hermione requested Ron to help Harry look for information about Nicolas Flamel in the restricted section by stating it indirectly. She used modal auxiliary 'can' in her

statement. The phrase 'not in the restricted section' implies that the boys had not visited that section, thus she asked them to visit that room also.

Hermione: Good. You can help Harry then. He's going to go in the library for information about Nicolas Flamel
Ron: We've looked a hundred of times
Hermione Not in the restricted section....Happy Christmas

The reason why Hermione used this strategy is that she did not want to offend Ron with her request. She did not want to give an impression that she was commanding Ron. The use of this strategy seemed to work well because Ron agreed to do what Hermione asked. Even though the indirect statement is stated without force, it is useful to help the speaker gain what she wants.

The use of two sub strategies of negative politeness can also be seen in the following conversation between Harry and Mr. Dursley:

Harry: But he is bored. If I could ... only let her out for ... an hour or two
Mr. Dursley Te he.. so you can send secret messages to your freakish friends, no sir.

In the conversation above Harry asked for Mr. Dursley's permission to take his owl out for a walk. In expressing his request, Harry combined two sub strategies of negative politeness, i.e. strategy 3. Be pessimistic and strategy 4. Minimize the imposition. The use of conditional type 2 'if I could...' shows that the speaker was pessimistic that his request would be granted; while the use of the word 'only' indicates that the speaker tries to minimize the imposition to the hearer. The speaker employed these sub strategies due to the distant relationship between the speaker, Harry, and Mr. Dursley even though he was his uncle. Still, this request is not granted because the hearer considered that granting the speaker's request will give the speaker opportunity to do something that he did not want. In other word, the speaker requested something that he did not like. That is why the use of the two sub strategies does not work well.

Sub strategy 2, hedge, was also employed in expressing request. This sub strategy was combined with sub strategy 1, be conventionally indirect. The use of these two sub strategies can be seen in the following conversation in which Harry asked Ron to see something that amazed him very much.

Harry: Ron, you've really got to see this. Ron, you've got to see this. Ron, come on! Get out of the bed.
Ron: Why?
Hermione There's something you get to see now. Come on!

The word 'really' indicates the use of hedge. Using this word, the speaker wants to give emphasis on his statement that the thing he asked was important to do. The speaker also employs bald on record in delivering his request. He uses these sub strategy because he has close relationship to the hearer. From the conversation we can see that his request was granted.

The last strategy employed by the characters in the two movies is off record. The first sub strategy employed is sub strategy 1, giving hints which can be seen in the conversation below.

Dudley: 36? But last year last year I had 37?
 Mr. Dursley: ya...ya...ya, but some are quite bigger than last year
 Dudley: I don't care how big they are
 Mrs. Dursley: no...no... this is what we're going to do ... is it where we go... we're going to buy you two new presents... how's that popkin?

The conversation above took place on Dudley's 11 year birthday. He wanted to get more presents every year. However, he did not mention his desire baldly. He conveyed his request by stating the number of present he got in the previous year. He knew that by giving this hint his parents would be able to catch his intention. He also stresses his request with the second statement that the size of the presents did not matter. Dudley employed this strategy for some reasons. The first reason is that he knew that he was speaking to his parents, hence it would be considered impolite if he stated the request baldly. The second reason is that mentioning the previous presents he got would be more effective. Dudley got what he wanted. It was not because he employed the strategy, but because Mr and Mrs. Dudley loved their kid very much.

The next application of off record strategy is represented in the following conversation in which the main characters in the movie, Harry, Hermione, and Ron, visited Hagrid to ask for explanation about the sorcerer's stone.

Hermione: *Hagrid*
 Hagrid: Hallo, sorry don't want to be rude but I've no fix time to entertain
 The three of them: We know about the sorcerer's stone
 Hagrid: Oh [let them in]

In the conversation above Hermione's mentioning Hagrid's name indicates that she wanted Hagrid to let them in because they had something to discuss. In this case, Hermione applied the off record sub strategy 15: be incomplete, use ellipsis. In the conversation above, Hermione did not mention her real intention because she considered that Hagrid knew what they wanted. It was true, but Hagrid refused to accept the children's visit. When failing with the first strategy, the children then applied the other strategy, namely off record sub strategy 2: give association clues. The clues given by the children was related to the most important topic in the school, i.e. the sorcerer's stone.

Conclusion

There are some reasons underlying the use of politeness strategies. The urgency of the request is the most reason in the use of bald on record strategy, while the use of negative politeness is based on the reason that the speaker wants to lessen the imposition. In addition, based on the data above, the speakers used this strategy regardless to the age of and the relationship of the hearer. However, it is also proven that politeness strategies do not always work well to help the speakers gain what they want. In most cases, the substance

of the requests themselves determines whether or not the hearers grant the speakers' requests.

References

- Blum-Kulka, Shoshana, et. Al. 1987. *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies Volume XXXI*. New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Blum-Kulka, Shoshana, et. Al. 1987. Playing it Safe: The Role of Conventionality in Indirectness. In *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies Volume XXXI*. New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Brown, Gillian; Yule, George. 1993. *Discourse Analysis*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, Penelope; Levinson, Stephen C. 1987. *Politeness, Some Universals in Language Usage*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kitao, Kenji. 2000. *Differences Between Politeness Strategies Used in Requests by Americans and Japanese – From the Rules Perspective*.
- Lyons, John. 1987. *Semantics*. New York: Longman, Inc.
- Thomas, Jenny. 1995. *Meaning in Interactions. An Introduction to Pragmatics*
- Yule, George. 1996. *Pragmatics*. New York: Oxford University Press