
Refusal Politeness Strategies of The Main Characters in ‘*It Starts with Us*’ A Novel by Colleen Hoover

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Received: 4th August 2023| Revised: 12th December 2023| Accepted: 9th December 2023
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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the types of refusal politeness strategies used by or towards the main characters in ‘*It Starts with Us*’ a novel that was published in late 2022 by Colleen Hoover, which was a sequel for the previous book by the same author titled ‘*It Ends with Us*’. To reveal the refusal politeness strategies, the researcher decided to use the politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1987), and the data were then analyzed by using qualitative descriptive. The result of this research were the 9 data , which contained the refusal politeness strategies. All nine of the data mentioned in this study are direct refusal,with predominantly positive politeness strategies, with six of nine data being positive politeness strategies, but the variety employed varied. The remaining three data were negative politeness strategies, which is composed of two indirect strategies and an apology.

Keywords: *It Starts with Us*, Politeness, Refusal Politeness Strategies

1. INTRODUCTION

People read novel for various types of reasons. Abrams (Peters et al., 1957) defines a novel as follows: The term “novel” is now applied to great variety of writings that has in common only the attribute of being extended works of fiction written in proses (Hale & Reiss, 1998; Hamzah et al., 2021). Novelist and critic, James Wood (Wood, 2008) suggests that the novel is “a fictional prose narrative of some length that is not a collection of short stories or a novella, and that has some sort of unity, coherence, or design”. Wood’s definition emphasizes the novel’s length, its use of fictional prose narrative, and its ability to create a cohesive and meaningful whole out of its various parts (Zupan & Blake, 2022).

A romance novel entitled ‘*It Starts With Us*’ by Colleen Hoover’s (2022) was chosen as the object of this research because of its popularity and the author style of writing, which is how the author divides

the story into two points of view of the main characters, which is unusual in a romance-fiction work. The way the author writes the novel also makes the reader feel every feeling that the main characters went through by using descriptive words to explain the emotion and situation. On its release, according to Publishers weekly (Publishersweekly, 2022) the novel had sold 800,000 copies, a number which included pre-orders and first-day sales. And The Novel '*It Starts With Us*' since their debut, occupying the number one spot on The New York Times(The New York Times, 2023) fiction bestseller list until the week ending October 22, 2022. On the Amazon (Amazon, 2022) website, it is noted that the novel '*It Starts With Us*' is included in the three best-selling books.

Novels, as works of fiction with complex characters and situations, are a rich source of data for the study of pragmatics. Pragmatics is the study of how context influences meaning interpretation in language. It investigates how people use language in various situations and how the meaning of a sentence or utterance can vary depending on the context. According to Geoffrey Leech's "Principles of Pragmatics" (Leech, 2016), pragmatics is the study of meaning in context (Rini et al., 2023). In other words, pragmatics is concerned with how language is used in real-life situations and how context affects the interpretation of language.

Pragmatics is closely related to the study of politeness, which examines how people use language to express politeness and create positive social relationships. Pragmatics is also particularly helpful for us to understand how politeness is achieved through language use in various social and cultural contexts. Politeness can be seen as a pragmatic way of managing face, or the social identity that we present to others. Politeness is defined by Brown and Levinson (Brown et al., 1987), as "showing awareness and concern for face," where face refers to a person's social identity, image, and dignity (Bacha et al., 2021). Face can be threatened in two ways, according to them: by an act that threatens a person's positive face, which is the desire to be liked, admired, and respected; or by an act that threatens a person's negative face, which is the desire to be free of action and not to be imposed upon. From this point forward, the continuation of the use of Brown and Levinson's theory after the first mentioned above will not be cited further and should just be known and mention as the "B&L Politeness Theory", for not over citing the theory.

Brown and Levinson's "Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage" (B&L Politeness Theory) , proposes a grand theory of politeness, which includes various strategies used to mitigate face-threatening acts, such as negation or refusal(Listyari et al., 2022). According to Brown and Levinson (B&L Politeness Theory), politeness is a social phenomenon that helps to maintain social relationships and avoid conflict.Brown and Levinson, propose two main strategies for politeness: positive politeness

and negative politeness (Meiratnasari et al., 2019). Positive politeness involves being friendly, showing interest in the other person's needs, and making the other person feel valued. Negative politeness involves being more indirect and less intrusive, and avoiding imposing on the other person's freedom and autonomy. In the case of negation or refusal, Brown and Levinson propose four main strategies for mitigating the face-threatening act which are, Bald on record, Positive politeness, Negative Politeness, and Off-record.

Overall, Politeness, as a social phenomenon, is important in maintaining positive social relationships and avoiding conflict, and it is achieved through a variety of strategies that the researcher already mentioned. Additionally, novels are an important source of data for the study of pragmatics, particularly in understanding how language is used to manage face and express politeness in various social and cultural contexts. The use of refusal politeness strategies in a novel by Colleen Hoover, will demonstrate how language can be used to navigate complex social situations and manage relationships, even in difficult circumstances. It also shows how cultural and social norms around politeness can influence the way that characters communicate with one another.

'It Starts with Us' is a contemporary novel that deals with complex social issues such as domestic violence, forgiveness, and redemption. The novel's characters are multi-dimensional and have diverse backgrounds and perspectives, which could provide a rich source of data for studying how politeness strategies are used in different contexts and relationships. Colleen Hoover is known for her distinctive writing style, which could offer unique insights into how refusal politeness strategies are used to convey the characters' thoughts and feelings. This could be particularly relevant for linguistic research that aims to understand how language is used to navigate complex social dynamics and relationships, especially when including those that are marked by power imbalances, trauma, and conflict.

The research problems are to understand deeper the author's writing style and also mainly to be able to deepen our understanding of refusal politeness strategies in *'It Starts with Us'* by examining the interactions where main characters, which are Lily and Atlas were involved in the exchange. The research focuses on understanding the type of the refusal politeness strategies that are used in *'It Starts with Us'* by determining the types of refusal politeness strategies used by or towards the main characters in *'It Starts With Us'* and how they vary depending on the social context and the requester's identity.

This study aims to provide some new ideas or perspectives on how people should understand the refusal politeness strategy. Hopefully, future scholars will be able to see another side of how and why people refuse offers from others, and they will be able to take every part and context into account before finally accepting their decision to refuse an offer and understanding why they refuse it. Especially for

someone who has experienced a traumatic relationship with a former partner. This will be a great insight for future scholars to see where those refusals came from and what went through the mind of someone who had gone through what the main characters had gone through.

Politeness is defined by Brown and Levinson (B&L Politeness Theory) as “the means employed to show or be claimed to be attending to what others think, feel, or want” (Iris Irma Fitriani, 2023). Politeness, they argue, is a universal aspect of human communication, but it varies across cultures and contexts. Politeness stems from the desire to keep one’s face, which refers to one’s social identity and how they want to be perceived by others. According to Hill, Politeness is one of the constraints on human interaction whose purpose is to consider other’s feelings, establish levels of mutual comfort, and promote rapport (Issa, 2017). There are some researches related to Politeness & Politeness Strategies. One research, namely Politeness Strategies Reflected by the Main Character in “Bridge To Terabithia” Movie. This qualitative method research aimed to identify politeness strategies reflected by the main character in “Bridge to Terabithia” movie and the conclusion was the most type that used is bald on record strategy and positive politeness strategy (Fitria et al., 2020).

The factors in using politeness strategies by the main character in this movie are payoffs in each strategy and circumstances (sociological variables). Other than that, Supatmiwati & Khalik (Khalik & Supatmiwati, 2019) has also analyzed researched titled Politeness strategies as persuasive tools used in Lombok commercial magazines. This study applied Brown and Levinson's theory as well. This research aimed to illuminate the pragmatic function of politeness in the world of advertising. In this research, a corpus of 91 advertisements, both in English and Indonesian, was collected from Lombok Guide, Lombok Magazine and Majalah Bandara magazine. Each advertisement was then analyzed in terms of category and sub-category of politeness strategy in the two languages. The research found that the use of politeness strategies indicated that English advertisements exploited more “off record”, “bald on-record,” and “positive face strategies,” while Indonesian advertisements tended to use a negative politeness strategy.

Lastly, Silitonga (Silitonga, 2022) also conducted a study entitled An Analysis of The Politeness Strategy used in Mata Najwa Talk Show on Trans7. This study also applied Brown and Levinson's theory. This study aimed to describe the Politeness Strategies used in Mata Najwa Talk Show. The result showed that the host not only use Positive Strategy to reveal the guests’ issue but also use a Negative strategy to reduce the interference with the guests’ freedom of action. The guests tend to use Positive Politeness because they tried to convince society about their new policies and state that they share the same specific wants, goals, or values, namely a better condition for this country. From the analysis, the researcher found

out the result that Positive politeness (76,32%), Negative Politeness (18,42%) and off Record Strategy (5,27%) and there is no Bald Record Strategy used in this analysis.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study used the approach of qualitative descriptive method and is analyzed by using the theory of Politeness Strategies by Brown and Levinson. The data in this study are obtained not in the form of numbers but the form of words. Qualitative research is a method of inquiry that involves understanding social phenomena from the perspective of those being studied. According to Creswell, qualitative research is "a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Abdullah Kamal, 2019). It emphasizes the exploration of human experiences and meanings. Creswell (Creswell, 2014) also stated qualitative research is a study methodology that focuses on examining and understanding complex phenomena in their natural setting by collecting and analyzing non-numerical data such as words, images, and observations (Mulisa, 2022). Thus, why according to Neuman (Neuman, 2013) the descriptive research focuses on collecting and analyzing data in a non-numerical format to provide a detailed description of a research phenomenon (Mohajan, 2020).

The limitation of this research is limited and also specified following the significances of the research, formulation of problem, and objectives of the research regarding the subject of refusal politeness strategies in '*It Starts With Us*' novel. The researcher is specifying this research into just the interactions where the main characters were involved. Because in this novel we are going to look into this story from 'Lily' and 'Atlas' perspective or point of view, so the researcher only looks at how these two main characters to narrow it down and make it more specific, whether it is in their way of refusing an offer or suggestion or/and their way of offering or suggesting.

The source of this research's data comes from Colleen Hoover's novel '*It Starts with Us*', the novel was published on October 18, 2022, by Mont lake Romance, an imprint of Amazon Publishing. This novel is a sequel to '*It Ends with Us*', which was published in mid-2016. The main data of this research were the utterance of the two main characters in this novel, "Atlas" and "Lily", whether it is their utterances for offering or suggesting and/or their utterances for refusing. The data was in the form of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences that were discovered in the data. The data is collected from March 2023 to June 2023. The researcher employs a type of library documents research in this study, one that consists of a series of activities associated to library data collection methods. According to Mahsun (Mahsun, 2017), document analysis can provide useful information regarding language use in various contexts such as literature, journalism, politics, and education (Wendra & Tantri, 2021). It can assist

academics in identifying patterns, themes, and cultural values encoded in language use, as well as comprehending how language reflects and develops social activities and ideas.

After the data has been gathered, technique for data analysis was applied. According to Miles and Huberman (Miles et al., 2014) is a qualitative research method that comprises a complete, iterative, and systematic approach to data analysis (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019). The method of analyzing data in this research was qualitative descriptive method, which according to Miles and Huberman (Miles et al., 2014), consisted of three stages, which are data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A romance novel entitled '*It Starts With Us*' by Colleen Hoover's (2022) was chosen as the object of this research because of its popularity and the author style of writing, which is how the author divides the story into two points of view of the main characters, which is unusual in a romance-fiction work. The way the author writes the novel also makes the reader feel every feeling that the main characters went through by using descriptive words to explain the emotion and situation. '*It Starts with Us*' is a sequel for the previous book of the same author entitled '*It Ends with Us*'. The story in '*It Starts with Us*' continued right after the ending of the previous book. It shows the characters and relationship growth of the main characters and the side characters from the previous book.

It's important to note that politeness strategies can vary across cultures and individual preferences. Different societies may have their own norms and expectations regarding the expression of disagreement and refusal. Therefore, it is advisable to consider personal background and contextual factors when analyzing politeness strategies in specific situations. The data is examined using politeness strategies to see the refusal politeness strategies employed by the characters in the novel and how they vary depending on the social context and the requester's identity. The following are some of the samples of excerpts for further analysis:

Excerpt 1 (Ch. 1 – Pg. 2-3)

....."*You should call the police,*" Darin says. "*We'll have to file a report for insurance.*" Before I object, Brad appears at the back door, his shoes crunching the broken glass beneath his feet. Brad has been inside taking inventory in order to see if anything was stolen.

He scratches the stubble on his jaw. "They took the crou-tons."

There's a confused pause.

"Did you say 'croutons'?" Darin asks.

"Yeah. They took the whole thing of croutons that were prepared last night. Nothing else seems to be missing, though."

That wasn't at all what I was expecting him to say. If someone broke into a restaurant

and didn't take appliances or anything else of value, they probably broke in because they were hungry. I know that kind of desperation firsthand.

"I'm not reporting this."

Darin turns to me. "Why not?"

"They might catch whoever did it."

"That's the point."

I grab an empty box out of the dumpster and start picking up shards of glass. "I broke into a restaurant once. Stole a turkey sandwich."

Brad and Darin are both staring at me now. "Were you drunk?" Darin asks.

"No. I was hungry. I don't want anyone arrested for stealing croutons."

"Okay, but maybe food was only the beginning. What if they come back for appliances next time?"

The background and settings of this interaction was in early morning in front of Atlas's restaurant that just recently been broken into by an unknown individual. They were shocked and baffled by the incident that just happened. The characters that were involved in this interaction were Darin, Brad, and Atlas. Atlas is the owner of the restaurant and Brad and Darin is his employees. They have known each other for a long time. They have been close friends to each other since Atlas left the military and opened his first restaurant, which is Bib's. They have little distance between each other, since they all know they can rely on each other when they need to. Based on the interaction shown on the **Excerpt 1** above for the context of the interaction above, and after further analysis, the researcher came to a conclusion that the refusal strategies used here to be the Direct Refusal Strategy. It involves directly refusing the request without attempting to soften or mitigate the refusal. This is generally considered impolite in many cultures but from the context and the relationship that the two characters have with one another, it is considered common for the two of them to be direct with one another and they both won't consider it to be inappropriate or offensive to be direct with each other.

Excerpt 2 (Ch. 10 – Pg. 69)

"Mom, it's fine, really" I'm holding the phone between my cheek and my neck, "I'm already at Alyssa's; it's not an inconvenience at all."

"Are you sure? Rob said he could watch her."

"No, Rob needs to take care of you."

"Okay. Tell Emmy her nannie is sorry."

"Nannie? Is that what you're going by now?"

"I'm trying it out," she says. "I didn't like grandma."

She's referred to herself as a grandmother in four different ways since Emmy was born, but none of them have stuck yet. "Love you, Mom. Hope you feel better."

"Love you, too."

The background and settings of this interaction was in early evening in parking lot of Alyssa's apartments. The characters that were involved in this interaction were Lily and her mom. Lily and her mom were discussing that Emmy should still stay with Lily's mom because she already promised her

prior. Although Lily insisted that it was okay because she already contacted Alyssa and she was okay with Lily leaving Emmy to stay with her whilst Lily going out on a date with Atlas. The distance between Lily and her mom was better ever since the death of Lily's father at the start of *'It Ends with Us'* book, which is the prequel for this book. They were closer than ever with each other. Although Lily still isn't comfortable to tell her everything, they had a healthy mother-daughter relationship with one another. Based on the interaction shown on the table above for the context of the interaction above, and after further analysis, the researcher came to a conclusion that the refusal politeness strategies used here to be the Direct Refusal Strategy. It involves directly refusing the request without attempting to soften or mitigate the refusal. This is generally considered impolite in many cultures but from the context and the relationship that the two characters have with one another, it is considered common for the two of them to be direct with one another and they both won't consider it to be inappropriate or offensive to be direct with each other.

Excerpt 3 (Ch. 11 – Pg. 76)

I feel bad, like maybe she's too exhausted for this date. I have no idea what it's like to raise a child. I feel kind of selfish that I'm not offering to reschedule, so before I back out of the parking lot, I speak up: **"If you'd rather go home and sleep, we can do this next weekend."**

"There's nothing else I'd rather do than this, Atlas. I'll sleep when I'm dead."
She clicks her seat belt.

Lily: "There's nothing I'd rather do than this, Atlas. I'll sleep when I'm dead."

The background and settings of this interaction was in the evening on their way to the restaurant where they had a dinner reservation. The characters that were involved in this interaction were Atlas and Lily. They were in their way driving to the restaurant that they had their dinner reservation for their date when the data appeared whilst they were having a conversation to catch up about each other's live. The distance between these two characters was close to nothing. They had known each other since they were a teenager and got really close at that time, but some unfortunate events had to separate the two of them and they finally met one another when Lily moved to Boston and had a dinner in a restaurant that Atlas was working at before he had his own restaurant with her ex-husband Ryle. After Lily's divorce with Ryle, they then ran into each other when they both were on their way to work. From then on, they started talking to each other more frequently and eventually had their first date after so many years of having a crush and feeling for one another.

Based on the interaction shown on the table above with the context of the interaction above, and after further analysis, the researcher came to a conclusion that the refusal politeness strategies used here to be the Direct Refusal Strategy. It involves directly refusing the request without attempting to soften or

mitigate the refusal. This is generally considered impolite in many cultures but from the context and the relationship that the two characters have with one another, it is considered common for the two of them to be direct with one another and they both won't consider it to be inappropriate or offensive to be direct with each other.

Excerpt 6 (Ch. 18 – Pg. 166)

"Marshall told me he told you I cheated on him."
I am so glad she's changing the subject. "Yeah, that was a shock."
"Drunken mistake. I was nineteen; nothing counts before you turn twenty-one." I laugh. "Is that right?"
"Yep." She hops on the counter and starts swinging her legs. "Tell me more about Atlas. Tell me like I'm your best friend and not your ex-husband's sister."
And we're back to this conversation. That was a quick break. "You sure this isn't awkward for you?"
"Why? because Ryle is my brother? No, not awkward at all He should have been nicer to you, and then you wouldn't have to date Greek gods." She wiggles her eyebrows with a grin.

The background and settings of this interaction was in Lily's flower store in the afternoon. The characters that were involved in this interaction were Lily and Alyssa. The situation in this interaction was just the two of them having some chit-chat type of conversation, which was still in the same interaction as the last data. In this conversation, Lily was afraid if this next topic wasn't going to be too weird or too much for Alyssa. In conclusion, the context of this data also depended on the conversation and context of the last data, since it was the next subject after the last one. As had already explained before, the distance between these two characters were close to nothing, it could be argued that Alyssa and Lily had the same connection as Lily and Atlas. Alyssa was Lily's first friend when she first moved into Boston, and ever since day one they just clicked to each other. Lily then found out that Alyssa and Ryle were siblings and when Lily got married to Ryle, they become in-law and their relationship and bond became stronger and closer. Although, Lily and Ryle then split up and got divorce because of the abuse and manipulation Ryle has put Lily through, Lily and Alyssa still maintain their relationship and Alyssa supported Lily's decision and would always pick Lily's side in this matter. Lily fully trusted Alyssa to back her up and sides with her. Nothing Lily said could be taken into an offense to Alyssa, and the same goes to the other way around. They trust each other, they were loyal and honest to one another, and they both knew they can just talk about everything to one another without getting any sense of judgment. They were each other's best friend.

Based on the data shown on the table above with the context of the interaction above, and after further analysis, the researcher came to a conclusion that the refusal politeness strategies used here to be the Direct Refusal Strategy. It involves directly refusing the request without attempting to soften or mitigate the refusal. This is generally considered impolite in many cultures but from the context and the relationship that the two characters have with one another, it is considered common for the two of them to be direct with one another and they both won't consider it to be inappropriate or offensive to be direct with each other.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings and discussions from this study reveal that politeness strategies and refusal politeness strategies are regular human interactions, including those of the characters in this novel. On the other hand, positive politeness strategies predominated in this novel's politeness strategies, with six of nine data being positive politeness strategies, but the variety employed varied. The remaining three data were negative politeness strategies, consisting of two indirect strategies and one apology. It is also shown that the main characters in this novel were usually the one that does the refusal part. Seven of the nine data showed that it is the two main characters were the one that did the refusal part, with Lily four times and Atlas three times. Meanwhile, the other two of nine data showed that it is the supporting characters that do the refusal part, which were Josh and Alyssa.

The findings of this study will perhaps help future scholars who are undertaking research on the same topic, which is a politeness and refusal politeness strategy. The findings are also expected to contribute to the literature of politeness study in a novel and also characters or individuals with traumatic backgrounds on how they employ politeness in everyday encounters. However, more research is needed in terms of refusal politeness strategies in real-life situations that are influenced by factors such as traumatic background and prior toxic relationship, particularly through the language choices they will use to communicate and how they use language in refusing a suggestion or request.

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