

## NEGATIVE POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH AND ARMENIAN CULTURES

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**Abstract:** A variety of techniques, including language use, are required to convey social relationships between individuals in a polite manner. Being courteous can demonstrate respect, solve issues, and maintain social distance. There is a concept of politeness in every language and culture in the world. Cross-cultural communication often results in misunderstandings due to differing politeness norms and expectations. The fundamental mechanism of human relationships is revealed by positive and negative politeness, which is based on the opposing behaviors of communicants during the communication process: rapprochement and distance. The proportion of positive to negative politeness varies among people. Furthermore, we express politeness in language and behavior in different ways. The purpose of this study is to examine impoliteness strategies in Armenian and English cultures and determine how they relate to one another. Being polite involves both verbal and nonverbal cues. The social structure of the society in which the languages are used and the role models in their socially motivated behavior have a significant impact on an individual's ability to be versatile in multiple languages. The true maxims are predicated on basic pragmatic communications, which form the foundation for the intricacy of relationships. The study shows that both languages exhibit comparable patterns of strategic use. Linguistic differences, rather than cultural, account for some significant differences between languages.

**Keywords:** negative politeness, cross-cultural pragmatics, face-to-face communication, speech act, face-threatening acts, communicative act

### Introduction

It is commonly thought that politeness is primarily associated with being courteous, humble, and kind to others. In other words, politeness is seen as

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possessing and demonstrating good manners, thoughtful consideration, and an intention to refrain from actions that could upset, sadden, frustrate, or even anger someone else. It can be noted that politeness serves as a means to demonstrate respect and modify the interaction process (Yule, 1996, p. 13).

Politeness is an important subject within the field of pragmatics. In pragmatics, the concept of 'politeness' does not pertain to social etiquette, such as yielding a seat on public transport to pregnant women or the elderly, holding doors open for others, or using a napkin instead of one's hand to wipe the mouth. Pragmatics associates the principle of politeness with the linguistic choices made in communication, specifically the expressions that create a sense of space for others and convey a friendly demeanor.

Research on politeness is conducted within sociolinguistics and pragmatics. According to R. Lakoff, politeness is a technique for building interpersonal relationships that aims to facilitate communication by lowering the likelihood of disagreement and conflict that are inherent in all human interactions. However, it is interesting to note that politeness can conflict clarity. If the speaker's primary objective is to communicate information, then the emphasis is on message clarity; if the speaker is focused on being courteous, then the focus is on taking into consideration the interlocutor and/or communication situation. These two principles frequently clash with one another (Lakoff, 1975, pp. 13-14).

Although Brown and Levinson view politeness as a means of avoiding conflict, their explanation methodology differs from Lakoff's. "Rationality" and "face" are two universal themes identifying politeness theory (Brown&Levinson, 1987, pp. 135-137).

Interlocutors seek to maintain and support each other's faces when they first start interacting. They employ an entire system of communication techniques for it and two differently focused concepts – negative courtesy and positive politeness – are introduced. While the former strategy is approach-based, the latter is avoidance-based. The fundamental mechanism of human relationships is revealed by both positive and negative politeness: it is based on the opposing behaviours.

The purpose of this article is to examine the negative politeness strategies in Armenian and English cultures and to determine to what extent they are interrelated.

## **Methodology**

The study is based on descriptive qualitative research. The object of the research is to study negative politeness strategies and to identify how they function in different linguistic and cultural contexts, with a specific focus on face-threatening acts (FTAs) and their mitigation through language. The data were collected from selected literary works by William Saroyan, an Armenian-American writer whose bilingual and bicultural background provides rich ground for cross-cultural analysis. The study focuses on face-to-face conversations between characters within these texts, analyzing both the original English versions and their

Armenian translations. The method of observation was used to extract instances of dialogue that involved potential or actual FTAs. An informal qualitative analysis was conducted, with an emphasis on descriptive interpretation rather than statistical generalization. Key excerpts were chosen based on their relevance to Brown and Levinson's framework of politeness strategies, especially those demonstrating negative politeness such as indirectness, hedging and apologizing. Comparative analysis was then conducted to identify similarities and differences between English and Armenian usage, particularly in how politeness is encoded linguistically and perceived culturally.

## **Literature Review**

Face-saving is not always the result of human interaction. Certain circumstances can make people's words and actions extremely intimidating; in fact, according to Brown and Levinson, the majority of our actions are intimidating. A face-threatening (FTA) act is any behavior that poses a risk to an interaction partner's face. It can harm one's positive or negative face; hence, acts that threaten one's positive or negative face are different. Both the addressee's freedom of action and social norms are violated by negative, face-threatening actions. Positive FTAs, on the other hand, are actions that demonstrate one's disapproval or indifference to the desires and wishes of others. FTAs can be detrimental to oneself and others, both positively and negatively (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 64).

Therefore, when the face is in danger and must be protected, civility is applied. Based on this, the researchers offered five politeness techniques that had varying effects on the speaker's or hearer's face:

- Bald on-record – no attempt to reduce the impact on the face;
- Positive politeness – minimizes threat to the hearer's positive face;
- Negative politeness – minimizes threat to the hearer's negative face;
- Off-record (indirect) – takes pressure off the speaker;
- No act – no action is taken.

In every culture, the idea of the face as public self-image is crucial. It molds a speaker's personality and the way that others see them. Consequently, one of the most important areas of research in any social science is the cross-cultural analysis of the face. Acts that harm the hearer's face and those that harm the speaker's face are further categories under which negative and positive FTAs can be distinguished.

A person can convey the essence of human communication through both positive and negative politeness, which is based on opposing the actions taken during speech communications. Put differently, because of the strategies that are followed and the equilibrium that exists in interpersonal conversations, this process functions as a pivot for human communication. In spoken communication, these two forms are closely related to one another, and it is through their interactions that the lingo-cultural traditions of other languages—in addition to English—are shaped. When delivering a refusal, people typically try to

be courteous and maintain their public persona in order to facilitate effective communication. Yule (1996) distinguishes between the negative and positive faces of the public self-image.

The positive value that an individual successfully asserts for themselves is based on the stance that other people take when they interact with them. Face is an image of oneself defined by socially acceptable characteristics; it is an image that others may also share, for example, when someone presents well for their profession or religion through their own persona (Goffman, 1995). Positive politeness conveys the speaker's sympathy and support for the addressee, which helps to strengthen the positive impression of the interlocutor. Positive politeness includes things like paying attention, avoiding arguments, and fostering a sense of intragroup identity.

Therefore, it is the self-assumption of an individual's appearance in public, which is influenced by socially defined characteristics like gender, ethnicity, profession, and religion. A conversation is characterized by the hearer's direct reaction to the speaker's face. Over the course of a lifetime, a person's perception of their face may change, which could either improve or worsen their face (Yerznkyan, 2018).

The negative face of a person can be interpreted as a reflection of their desire for independence and freedom. Conversely, a person's need for acceptance from others is their positive face. When delivering a refusal, the hearer must be able to determine which face to display based on the preferences of either the speaker or the interlocutor. For example, the speaker's good reputation will be harmed if they use unpleasant language to deny the interlocutor's request (Yule, 1996, pp. 61-62). Negative politeness serves to preserve the individual's independence, requiring the inviolability of their territory and borders. It assumes social distance and awkward communication. "Negative" politeness includes restraint, formality, and the expression of respect. Positive and negative facial differences are opposed to one another.

Leech has also discussed the subject of etiquette, arguing that pragmatics requires a rhetorical approach. The highly conventional term "rhetorical" refers to the study of effective language use in communication. With a secondary focus on more prepared or public uses of language, Leech defines rhetoric as the effective use of language in everyday conversation as opposed to the historical traditions that define rhetoric as the art of skillfully using language for literary expression, public speaking, or persuasion (Leech, 1983, p.15).

According to Leech, being polite is much more than merely being civil. There is a discrepancy between the issue of how to relate sense to the illocutionary force and Grices's cooperative principle. Different circumstances demand varying degrees and types of civility. Based on their relationship to the social objective of creating and upholding comity, he divides illocutionary functions into four categories:

- Competitive: the illocutionary goal competes with the social goal (e.g. ordering, asking, demanding, begging).

- Convivial: the illocutionary goal coincides with the social goal (e.g. offering, inviting, greeting, thanking, congratulating).
- Collaborative: the illocutionary goal is indifferent to the social goal (e.g. asserting, reporting, announcing, instructing).
- Conflictive: the illocutionary goal conflicts with the social goal (e.g. threatening, accusing, cursing, reprimanding).

The social distance and power dynamics between speakers influence the choice of politeness formulation. More indirectness and encoded politeness are present in socially distant environments; conversely, negative politeness and indirectness are less prevalent in socially closer environments. The degree of familiarity and differences in status, roles, age, gender, education, class, occupation, and ethnicity are the variables that determine social distance (Yerznkyan, Sujyan, 2007).

## Results and Discussion

There are significant similarities and differences between Armenian and English cultures, and these differences are primarily based on shared beliefs and values within the speech community and, therefore cannot be interpreted independently of social and cultural contexts.

In response to "How are you?" when asked how they are doing, someone who does not know them well might select a generic, easy response like "I'm fine, thank you." It is inappropriate to respond in this instance by listing all of the symptoms of any illnesses you may have experienced. Selecting such a response indicates that the two speakers are fairly familiar with one another. If not, this could lead to an awkwardness.

Berger and Bradac noted that "How are you?" is often not intended to produce self-revelation but rather merely to signal acknowledgement of the other. The authors also commented that literalist interpretations of "How are you?" are the basis of an old joke:

"How are you doing?" as noted by Berger and Bradac is frequently only meant to indicate recognition of the other, not to elicit self-revelation. The writers added that an old joke stems from literalist interpretations of the question "How are you?"

A: How are you?

B: I have bursitis; my nose is itching; I worry about my future; and my uncle is wearing a dress these days (Berger and Bradac, 1982, p. 22).

We can compare the Armenian and British responses to the question "How are you?" from this perspective and claim that what the former find humorous is actually quite normal for the latter. When asked a simple question, "How are you?", Armenians frequently talk about current affairs, various medical symptoms, the daughter of a neighbour who married a wealthy man, and other topics. This is particularly valid for senior citizens.

The study demonstrates that older speakers, on average, exhibit more disclosive behaviour than younger ones. Only a handful of uncontroversially emphatic answers surfaced:

A: Alright, thank you.

B: Oh, I'm fine thank you.

We conducted a survey to compare the responses of senior Armenian citizens. Surprisingly, not a single elderly person responded positively or emphatically when the same question was posed to them; instead, they responded negatively or did not answer at all.

A: Այնքան ել լավ չեմ:

B: Դե, հեսու մի բան կատարվում է, ամեն ինչ վաս է:

C: Ո՞նց պիտի լինեմ, նույնիսկ դեղի փող չկա:

In many cases the native English speakers used filled pauses (e.g., oh; well; erm; etc.) which signal the pragmatic function of self-appraisal.

A: Oh (...) not too bad. (There are five initial oh-s.)

B: Well (...) up and down like you know. (There are 2 initial wells.)

C: Erm, not too bad.

It is significant to note that in Armenian culture, people are inclined to act in the best interests of society, and families and communities play an essential role. People who exhibit kindness, generosity, helpfulness, dependability, and a general consideration for others' needs and desires are considered to be "good" in Armenian society. This leads to the conclusion that Armenians are inclined to maintain social proximity, which results in more direct and immediate interaction.

The use of politeness strategies avoids giving offense by highlighting friendliness. Someone uses politeness strategies as the best expression to foster smooth social interaction. There are several strategies of negative politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

- **Be conventionally indirect**

The speaker is communicating with the hearer in an indirect manner and on record. This one is resolved by the speaker by employing phrases and words that are obviously meaningful.

- **Use questions and hedging**

It is not the speaker's intention to assume or coerce the audience. In order to shift the focus and hedge, it addresses a question to start a conversation. The communicative speaker may endanger the interaction with the hearer by employing this tactic.

- **Minimize the imposition**

This strategy aims to minimize the imposition of the listener by reducing the threat-of force or power to the listener's face. The speaker probably imposes on the hearer when asking the hearer to do something.

- **Give deference**

There are two ways to show the deference. First, the speakers humble themselves. Second, the speaker admits superiority of the hearer and shows greater respect to the person, activity, or thing.

- **Apologize**

Apologize is an attempt done by the speaker to make up a previous, present, and future action. It could be used to repair social norms and maintain the relationship.

- **Impersonalize speaker and hearer**

This strategy avoids the pronouns I and You. It conceals who the interlocutors are. Thus, it could be a way to be polite.

- **State the face-threatening act as a general rule**

In this strategy, face-threatening acts are stated as a general social rule that applied to the addressee. The face-threatening act is the acts which in some way threatens the "face" of the hearer.

- **Nominalize**

The speaker uses the degree of nominalisation to provide more formality, thus demonstrating negative politeness.

- **Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting hearer**

The process of meaningfully sharing knowledge among people from diverse cultural backgrounds is known as cross-cultural communication. It includes a broad range of elements, such as social norms, language, context, and nonverbal clues. Since cross-cultural interactions are widespread in today's globalized society, it is imperative to comprehend and navigate these differences successfully. The goal of cross-cultural communication research is to pinpoint the fundamental processes that either support or obstruct successful communication between people or groups from different cultural backgrounds. Understanding cultural diversity is one of the core components of cross-cultural communication. If not handled appropriately, cultural differences in values, attitudes, and communication styles can result in misunderstandings.

Speakers from the same culture have comparable backgrounds and assumptions. However, these factors vary across cultures, leading to disparate interpretations of the same speech act and perceptions of politeness. Each culture has its own set of guiding principles and values that affect how people perceive politeness and communication style. Developing cultural competence and sensitivity to different politeness strategies is of vital importance (Spencer-Oatey

and Franklin, 2012). The pragmatics of politeness is a multifaceted field that reveals much about the cultural values and social norms of different societies.

An essential element of intercultural communication is language. The way that words are used and interpreted is just as important as the actual words that are uttered. Communication may be impacted by the cultural norms and values that are encoded in different languages. Effective cross-cultural communication requires an understanding of these linguistic nuances (Gudykunst and Kim, 2013).

People simultaneously express their culture via speech acts because language is a reflection of the culture of the language owner. Courtesies are one way that language reflects culture. Different cultural perspectives give rise to diverse values, which influence politeness standards and result in variations in a number of areas.

Fictional texts are regarded as intricate forms of communication. They are, on the one hand, acts of communication between a writer and a reader, who may read a work centuries or even decades after it was first written. Simultaneously, they show interactions between the characters in their stories. Whether the focus is on the politeness within the literary text or the politeness of the literary text itself, it is crucial to remember that this kind of analysis does not utilize literature as an imprecise approximation to "real" interaction. It treats the various literary communication levels as distinct entities with unique constraints and requirements. By being indirect, the speaker avoids putting his or her wants directly. This is usually the case when the interlocutors belong to different social ranks, age groups, or are not intimate friends. Let's examine the following examples:

E.g., "Fine. I didn't find any money, though. Not even a penny."  
 ("My Heart's in the Highlands", p. 30).  
 «Հրաշալի է: Բայց փող չզսա: Նույնիսկ մի պենսանց: »  
 («Բմ սիրտը լեռներում է», Էջ 16).

In English and Armenian options politeness strategy is the same. Indirectness made the request more polite. By delivering indirect speech acts, the utterance goes on record and the speaker's intention to deliver his/her desire still remains indirect.

Negative politeness is expressed here by means of an imperative sentence. The latter is the conversational convention of casting an imperative statement in question or declarative form to communicate a request without causing offense. The speaker does not impose and takeup the hearer's time.

E.g., "How about a little music?"  
 ("My Heart's in the Highlands", p. 29).  
 «Գուցե մի բան նվազե՞՞ք: »  
 («Բմ սիրտը լեռներում է», Էջ 16).

In the following examples the speaker seeks-the addressee's forgiveness. These requests for forgiveness are usually followed by explanations on the part of the speaker. Here we come up with communicating the speaker's wants without impinging the addressee.

E.g., "I'm sorry but I've got nothing I can give you. I'm hungry myself."  
 ("The Hungers",  
 «Ներողամիտ կլինեք, ես ոչինչ չունեմ ձեզ տալու: Ես ինքս քաղցած  
 եմ:» («Առվալները», էջ 152)

By means of minimizing imposition the speaker intends to emphasize the social distance existing between him/her and the addressee and to show that they assume and not presume. By mitigating the face-threatening act, the hearer will do the speaker's request. This strategy suggests reducing the extent of imposition and showing that the degree of it is not great.

E.g., "Excuse me, I want you to tell me what do grapes mean?"  
 ("My Heart's in the Highlands", p. 107).  
 «Կսերեք, ես ուզում եմ, որ ինձ ասեք, թե խարողը ի՞նչ միրզ է:»  
 («Առվալները», էջ 154).

Redressing the addressee's wants is essential for the speaker to give the addressee the chance to express their wants, opinions and desires. That is why instead of using imperative sentences, which do not actually seek for verbal answer, the speaker makes use of tag questions or wh-questions, the so-called whimperatives. These interrogative sentences, by virtue of their structure might imply that the addressee is free to have his/her opinion and the speaker acknowledges the existence of a possible difference between individual point of view. In the Armenian version we face to some additions, but the politeness strategy is the same in both sentences.

E.g., "No, I wouldn't, and neither would she. Would you?"  
 ("The Hungers", p. 106).  
 «Ոչ, ես չեմ մեռնի, ոչ էլ նա: Չէ՞:» («Առվալները», էջ 154).

Negative politeness is demonstrated here by means of forgiveness. The example shows that – to save the hearer's negative face, the speaker apologizes for not giving something to eat to make the hearer's negative face fulfilled.

E.g., "I'm sorry, but I told you I couldn't promise to laugh".  
 ("The Hungers", p. 108)  
 «Յավում եմ, բայց ասացի չէ՞, որ չեմ խոստանում ծիծաղել:»  
 («Առվալները», էջ 155)

According to representative statistics, negative politeness should still be used to convey messages and preserve social relationships, especially under trying circumstances. By offering—the addressee the choice to accept or reject the speaker's request, the use of questions also softens the speaker's demands or directives.

## Conclusion

The study reveals significant insights into how politeness strategies vary across different cultural contexts and the profound impact these differences have on intercultural interactions. Both English and Armenian cultures employ similar negative politeness strategies, such as hedging, apologizing, and minimizing imposition. However, the frequency, context, and degree of directness vary, reflecting broader cultural values regarding individualism and community orientation. Armenian culture, with its strong emphasis on family and collectivism, often exhibits more self-disclosure and less formality in face-threatening situations. In contrast, English speakers tend to rely on structured indirectness and more encoded politeness. The findings confirm that politeness is not a universal formula but a culturally embedded system of communication. Negative politeness serves as a crucial tool for navigating social interactions, reducing face-threatening acts, and maintaining harmonious relationships. Understanding these strategies enhances intercultural communication and emphasizes the need for cultural awareness in both linguistic study and real-world interaction.

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**Ս. Յաղուբյան, Գ. Սավոյան – Բացասական քաղաքավարության ռազմավարություններն անզիհական և հայկական մշակույթներում.** – Սույն հոդվածում դիտարկվում են բացասական քաղաքավարության ռազմավարական ձևերն անզիհական և հայկական մշակույթներում: Կատարված վերլուծությունների արդյունքում հեղինակները եզրակացնում են, որ երկու լեզվամշակույթներում կայունաբերվել են ռազմավարական օգտագործման նմանատիպ օրինաչափություններ: Որոշ նկատելի տարբերություններ պայմանավորված են լեզուների կառուցվածքային, այլ ոչ թե մշակութային տարբերություններով:

**Բանալի բառեր.** բացասական քաղաքավարություն, միջմշակութային գործառնություն, առերես հաղորդակցություն, խոսքային ակտ, դեմքին սպառնացող ակտեր, հաղորդակցական ակտ

**М. Ягубян, Г. Савоян – *Стратегии негативной вежливости в английской и армянской культурах.*** – В данной статье рассматриваются стратегические формы негативной вежливости в английской и армянской культурах. В результате анализа авторы приходят к выводу, что сходные закономерности стратегического использования обнаружены в обеих языковых культурах. Некоторые заметные различия обусловлены структурными, а не культурными различиями между языками.

**Ключевые слова:** негативная вежливость, межкультурная pragматика, личное общение, речевой акт, угрожающие действия, коммуникативный акт