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Semantic Meaning and Pragmatic Intention in Politeness Strategies: A Pragmatic Analysis of Workplace Communication in The Devil Wears Prada

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the relationship between semantic significance and pragmatic purpose in courteous speech acts depicted in *The Devil Wears Prada*. Based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, the study seeks to determine the various politeness strategies employed by the characters and to examine how meaning and intention are formed in hierarchical workplace interactions. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the data were gathered from chosen conversations in the film that represent different speech acts. These statements were classified into four strategies of politeness: positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record. The results indicate that positive politeness is the strategy most commonly employed, highlighting the significance of preserving social connections and unity among characters. Nonetheless, the employment of negative politeness and bald-on-record tactics emphasizes the significant power dynamics and authority inherent in professional environments. Moreover, off-the-record tactics are used to express criticism or implicit meanings without direct confrontation. The examination reveals that the difference between semantic and pragmatic meaning significantly influences communication, especially in conveying power, navigating relationships, and upholding professionalism. This research enhances the comprehension of how politeness tactics operate in media discussions and mirrors genuine communication behaviors in structured settings.

Keywords: Politeness Strategies, Semantic Meaning, Pragmatic Meaning, Speech Acts, Workplace Communication

INTRODUCTION

Language is the heartbeat of human communication. It's not just a tool we use to trade facts and data; it's the very glue that holds our social relationships together and helps us navigate the tricky waters of interpersonal dynamics. In our day-to-day conversations, it's rarely just about **what** we say "how" we say it matters just as much if we want to avoid stepping on toes, show genuine respect, and keep the peace. Back in 1987, Brown and Levinson pointed out that politeness is essentially a strategic communication tool designed to protect people's "face" (their self-esteem and desire to be respected) and keep social interactions running smoothly. Naturally, these politeness strategies become incredibly important in environments where social status, authority, and power gaps dictate how people talk to one another.

Take the modern workplace, for example. Professional communication is often a direct reflection of company hierarchies, where language is used to assert authority, build team solidarity, and manage workplace relationships all at once. Employees and managers constantly juggle different ways of speaking to hit their targets while staying within the bounds of workplace culture. As Fathi (2024) highlighted, workplace conversations swing between being completely direct and subtly indirect, depending entirely on who holds the power and what their role is. Because of this, unpacking how politeness strategies work in the office is key to understanding how language actually builds authority and shapes professional identities.

We can see a perfect real-world reflection of this dynamic in the way workplace interactions are portrayed in pop culture and media. A standout example is the 2006 film *The Devil Wears Prada*, which drops us right into the fiercely hierarchical world of the fashion industry. The sharp, tense interactions between Miranda Priestly, Andy Sachs, Emily Charlton, and the rest of the staff reveal a complex web of communication shaped by raw power, status, and intense professional demands. Time and again, the characters use lines where the literal, surface-level meaning is miles away from what they actually mean. For instance, Miranda famously uses questions that sound polite on paper but actually land as harsh commands or biting criticisms. This kind of communication offers a goldmine of data for looking at how literal words stack up against actual intentions in office discourse.

A good amount of research has already used Brown and Levinson's framework to study politeness in movies. Isabella et al. (2022) looked at film dialogue through a language-learning lens and found that people frequently use positive politeness to forge closer bonds. Similarly, Melati and Sabaruddin (2022) dove into **The Danish Girl** to categorize the specific types of politeness strategies the characters used. Other researchers have applied this theory to classrooms and everyday conversations (Sitinjak et al., 2022; Muhammad, 2023), all adding valuable pieces to the puzzle of how politeness works across different settings.

Yet, despite this growing pile of research, most studies tend to stop at just counting and categorizing how often certain politeness strategies pop up. Very little attention has been paid to the deeper relationship between the literal meaning of these words and the underlying intentions driving them. On top of that, previous research has leaned heavily toward casual, everyday social interactions rather than the high-stakes, high-hierarchy world of workplace communication. This leaves a major gap in our understanding of how politeness strategies pull double duty acting both as a vehicle for meaning and as a subtle tool for negotiating power, authority, and professional boundaries within a company.

To bridge this gap, this study takes a closer look at politeness strategies in *The Devil Wears Prada* by blending semantic and pragmatic viewpoints. Instead of just tallying

up types of politeness, this research digs into how the literal content of a sentence clashes or aligns with the speaker's real intentions in a professional setting. By focusing squarely on a strictly hierarchical workplace, this study aims to give a much richer, more complete picture of how politeness operates beneath the surface.

The novelty of this study boils down to three key areas. First, it bridges politeness theory with a dual analysis of literal meaning and hidden intent, offering a fresh, multi-layered perspective on workplace talk. Second, it zeros in specifically on deeply hierarchical professional discourse an area that hasn't received nearly enough attention in past politeness research. Third, it examines exactly how power imbalances create a gap between what is said and what is actually meant in professional relationships. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute not just to the study of politeness, but to the broader conversations happening in semantics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis.

Theoretically, this study anchors itself in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory while weaving in semantic and pragmatic approaches to unlock meaning. Semantics allows us to pin down the literal meaning of the words used, while pragmatics helps us decode what the speaker actually meant within that specific moment. Blending these two approaches allows for a much deeper analysis of how language truly functions when people are communicating across an unequal power dynamic.

METHODOLOGY

This research utilized a qualitative descriptive design to explore the connection among semantic meaning, pragmatic intention, and politeness strategies in workplace communication as depicted in *The Devil Wears Prada* (Frankel, 2006). A qualitative approach was deemed suitable since the study sought to investigate contextual meanings, communicative intentions, and power dynamics present in naturally occurring conversations instead of testing statistical hypotheses.

The main source of data was the film *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006). The researchers viewed the film multiple times and analyzed the official movie transcript to pinpoint statements featuring politeness strategies. The examination concentrated particularly on work-related interactions taking place in the professional setting of *Runway Magazine*, where the hierarchical dynamics among supervisors, assistants, editors, and other staff members are clearly evident.

Data selection was carried out using purposeful sampling. Instead of examining each statement in the film, the researchers chose only those dialogues that aligned with the goals of the study. The process of selection included four phases. Initially, the complete film was viewed multiple times to acquire a thorough understanding of the plot and communication dynamics in the workplace. Secondly, all scenes related to the workplace were recognized and transcribed. Third, statements that included possible politeness strategies were identified and classified following Brown and Levinson's (1987) model. Ultimately, only statements that unmistakably exhibited both semantic significance and pragmatic intent in workplace communications were preserved for analysis.

The research examined 22 workplace scenarios that clearly illustrated interactions among individuals holding various institutional roles, including Miranda Priestly as editor-in-chief, Emily Charlton and Andrea Sachs as assistants, Nigel as creative director, and other staff within the organization. These scenes were chosen as they featured notable instances of hierarchical communication and power dynamics in the workplace.

To maintain uniformity in data selection, various inclusion criteria were defined. An utterance was considered if: (1) it took place in a professional or workplace context; (2) it illustrated one of Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies, specifically positive

politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, or off-record; (3) it showcased a difference between semantic meaning and pragmatic intention; and (4) it featured interactions shaped by workplace hierarchy, authority, or professional relationships. On the other hand, statements were omitted if they appeared in solely personal or familial contexts, did not incorporate recognizable politeness strategies, or failed to deliver adequate contextual details for pragmatic analysis.

A total of 48 statements satisfied all inclusion criteria and were thus chosen as the final dataset. The figure was not established beforehand but emerged from the methodical evaluation process. These 48 statements exemplified the most significant and analytically valuable instances of politeness strategies observed in workplace interactions throughout the film. The dataset was deemed adequate since it encompassed all four categories of politeness strategies suggested by Brown and Levinson and offered sufficient evidence for exploring the link between semantic meaning, pragmatic intention, and power dynamics in the workplace.

The chosen utterances were examined through the lens of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory as the main analytical framework. Every statement was initially analyzed semantically to determine its literal interpretation. Thereafter, a pragmatic analysis was performed to understand the speaker's intended meaning by examining contextual elements like social status, power dynamics, situational context, and communicative objectives. The results were subsequently classified into positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record strategies to uncover how language operates in hierarchical communication within the workplace.

To improve the reliability of the analysis, the researchers continually examined the chosen scenes and contrasted meanings and practical intentions with the contextual details offered by the film. This method aided in guaranteeing that the classification of politeness tactics was uniform and matched the communicative contexts reflected in the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The analysis of 48 selected utterances from *The Devil Wears Prada* found four politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), they are: positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record and off-record. The most used strategy among the categories was positive politeness which was used 20 times (41.67%). Following this was negative politeness with 19 times (39.58%), bald-on-record with 5 times (10.42%) and off-record with 4 times (8.33%).

Positive politeness is quite prevalent, which suggests that the workplace communication in the film not only involves authority and power but also attempts to maintain interpersonal relations. Compliments, agreement, encouragement and emotional support are often used to decrease social distance and create solidarity among the characters. Although the work environment presented in the film is highly competitive, positive politeness is a way to maintain cooperation and social harmony among the employees. This finding supports the argument of Brown and Levinson (1987) that speakers often attend to the hearer's positive face by showing approval, appreciation and shared values.

But the high rate of negative politeness strategies shows one more important aspect of communication in the work place. Negative politeness is typically used in contexts of unequal power relations, especially when a subordinate is speaking to a superior. Hedge expressions, apologies, indirect requests and deferential language show the speaker's awareness of hierarchical structures within the organization. Characters regularly

endeavor to minimize imposition and not threaten the autonomy of those of higher rank. This finding is in line with Fathi (2024) who argues that negative politeness is more salient in contexts with institutional authority and social distance.

The infrequent use of bald-on-record strategies does not reduce their significance. Although these utterances are rare, they are primarily uttered by Miranda Priestly, editor-in-chief of Runway Magazine. The directness of these utterances is indicative of her institutional power and authority; Commands like “I need the Harry Potter book” and “That’s all” are good examples of how people in higher positions can communicate efficiently without mitigating possible face threats. The employment of bald-on-record strategies exemplifies the impact of workplace hierarchy on communicative behavior, enabling powerful speakers to focus on task performance at the expense of interpersonal concerns.

Similarly, off-record strategies are less frequent, but they serve important communicative functions. These statements are often conveyed through sarcasm, irony and indirect criticism. Take Miranda’s line, for example, “Florals? Spring? Groundbreaking.” is semantically positive but pragmatically negative. Such utterances oblige hearers to infer the intended meaning from context. This finding points to the complexity of workplace discourse, as speakers may employ indirectness to express dissatisfaction without direct confrontation.

One important finding of this study is the relationship between the semantic meaning and the pragmatic intention. The analysis reveals that the literal meaning of an utterance is often incompatible with its intended communicative function. This is especially true with hierarchical workplace interactions. For example, interrogative forms with a semantic function of questions often have a pragmatic function of commands, criticism or expressions of authority. Miranda’s utterance “Is there some reason that my coffee isn’t here?” appears to be a request for information but pragmatically functions as a rebuke of her assistant. This gap shows how important it is to interpret context in order to understand communication in the workplace.

The results also show that power relations play an important role in determining the relationship between semantic meaning and pragmatic intention. The speakers have a higher institutional status and they tend to use indirect linguistic forms to perform acts of authority, while the subordinates adopt mitigation strategies to avoid threatening the face of the superior. Thus, pragmatic meaning cannot be deduced from linguistic structure alone, but needs to be interpreted in terms of social context, participants’ roles and workplace hierarchy.

These results add to previous research on politeness strategies in movies. The previous study conducted by Isabella et al. (2022) and Melati and Sabaruddin (2022) was about the identification and classification of politeness strategies based on Brown and Levinson’s framework. Although those studies successfully described the occurrence of politeness strategies, they paid little attention to the interaction between semantic meaning and pragmatic intention. The present study contributes to the literature by showing that politeness strategies are not only linguistic categories, but also mechanisms through which power, authority and professional relationships in the workplace are negotiated.

The study also makes a theoretical contribution to the integration of semantics and pragmatics in politeness research. The results suggest that to understand politeness, we need to consider not only what speakers literally say but also what they actually mean to convey in specific social contexts. The distinction between semantic meaning and

pragmatic intention emerges as a vital component of workplace talk, particularly in contexts with prominent hierarchical structures.

The results tend to show that the politeness strategies in *The Devil Wears Prada* are not just tools for politeness maintenance. They are communicative resources through which speakers negotiate social relations, perform professional identities, and exercise institutional power. This implies that to have a better understanding of workplace communication, it is necessary to investigate politeness strategies from both pragmatic and semantic perspectives.

Discussion

Positive Politeness Strategy

Positive politeness showed up in 20 utterances 41.67% of the total making it the most dominant strategy in the film. What this tells us is that the characters weren't just navigating power; they were also actively trying to keep relationships warm and functional. Compliments, words of encouragement, expressions of agreement, and small gestures of appreciation all served the same underlying purpose: closing the social gap and building a sense of connection.

Take Andrea's line, "Wow, that's very nice of you." On the surface, it's a simple thank-you. But in context, it's doing relational work she's building rapport with Nigel, letting him know his actions are seen and valued. That's the core of positive politeness: making the other person feel acknowledged.

Irv Ravitz's congratulation to Andy "A million girls would kill for that job" works similarly. It's over-the-top, sure, but that's the point. The hyperbole amplifies the praise and makes Andy's achievement feel genuinely significant. She's not just told "good job"; she's told her success is something others can only dream of.

Even small exchanges carry this logic. When Lily says Andy's bag is "pretty" and Nate agrees with "That too," the dynamic is the same: two people rallying around a shared appreciation for something connected to Andy. Agreement, in this framework, is its own form of face-work.

Some examples are more nuanced. Nigel's "Wake up, sweetheart" is technically a directive, but the word "sweetheart" completely changes its texture. What could have felt like a reprimand lands more like something a mentor might say firm, but affectionate. Similarly, Nate's "Easy there, tiger" uses humor and a playful nickname to soften what is essentially advice to calm down. The nickname signals intimacy; it tells Andy this is coming from someone in her corner.

Miranda, interestingly, isn't absent from this category either. Her "Okay, I'll look at it" agreeing to review a subordinate's work functions as a subtle form of professional validation. And her moments with her daughter ("I know, baby. Mommy's working very hard") reveal a completely different register: intimate, reassuring, built on terms of endearment that strip away the power dynamic entirely.

Across all twenty instances, the pattern holds. Whether through compliments, promises, enthusiastic agreement, or affectionate address terms, these utterances all do the same thing they reach toward the other person and say, you matter here. In a film so preoccupied with hierarchy and ambition, that's not a small thing.

Negative Politeness Strategy

Negative politeness appeared in 19 utterances (39.58%), making it nearly as common as positive politeness and in many ways, its natural counterpart. Where positive politeness works by pulling people closer, negative politeness is about navigating

distance. It shows up most clearly in moments of unequal power, where characters have to get things done without overstepping or exposing themselves too much.

Emily's "Excuse me, where do you think you're going?" looks like a question but functions as a command. She's not curious about Andy's destination she's stopping her in her tracks. By framing it interrogatively, she maintains a veneer of indirectness while the authority behind it is unmistakable.

Andy's own language shifts considerably when she's on the receiving end of Miranda's demands. Her request to get a flight for her boss "I was hoping that you could maybe get a flight..." is loaded with hedges: hoping, could, maybe. Every one of those words is a cushion. She knows the ask is enormous, and the language reflects that awareness. She's trying to leave the other person room to say no without it feeling like a confrontation.

Miranda, by contrast, has mastered the indirect command. "We have some pieces from Banana... We need more, don't we?" sounds like she's thinking out loud or consulting the room. She isn't. The tag question just makes the directive harder to push back against it creates the illusion of dialogue while really closing off any other option. The same goes for "Does anybody else have anything I can possibly use?" the word "possibly" signals skepticism and pressure all at once.

The gap between literal and pragmatic meaning is probably sharpest in Miranda's "Is there some reason that my coffee isn't here?" Nobody in that room thinks she's genuinely curious. It's a reprimand wrapped in the grammatical shape of a question and everyone knows it.

Subordinates handle these dynamics with their own toolkit. When Emily says "I'm so sorry. I actually did confirm..." she's doing two things simultaneously: apologizing to manage the fallout and quietly defending herself. Andy's "You want the unpublished manuscript?" is even more sophisticated she's expressing disbelief at an impossible request without ever directly refusing it. The question form gives her just enough cover to react without openly challenging her boss.

Even more institutional uses of the strategy appear in the hotel staff's "May I assist you?" textbook negative politeness, built around giving the hearer maximum freedom of choice. The editors pitching ideas to Miranda use "we" to diffuse personal accountability, and hedge their proposals with phrases like "I was thinking" to leave Miranda room to redirect or reject without it becoming a confrontation.

What ties all nineteen utterances together is the same underlying concern: managing imposition. Whether someone is making a request, explaining a failure, offering help, or absorbing a reprimand, the language is shaped by an awareness of hierarchy and a need to move through it carefully. The semantic surface questions, offers, clarifications frequently masks something more loaded underneath: demands, criticism, pressure, self-protection.

Bald-on-Record Strategy

Bald-on-record strategies appeared in only 5 utterances 10.42% of the data but their impact is disproportionate to their frequency. Almost every instance comes from Miranda Priestly, and that's not a coincidence. This is the strategy you use when you don't need to soften anything, when your position alone does the work that politeness would otherwise do.

What makes bald-on-record distinctive is how little distance there is between what's said and what's meant. Miranda's "My girls leave for their grandmother's at 4 so the book better be here by 3" is exactly what it sounds like: a deadline, a demand, and an

implicit threat all in one sentence. There's no hedge, no "if you could," no softening of any kind. The phrase "better be here" doesn't leave room for negotiation. It simply states what will happen and what's expected.

The same logic runs through her "I need the Harry Potter book" delivered mid-interruption, while Andy was still trying to explain herself from the night before. Miranda doesn't entertain the explanation. She redirects immediately to what she wants. The message is clear: context doesn't matter, your feelings don't factor in, here's the task.

"Details of your incompetence do not interest me" is perhaps the most unsparing line in the dataset. It doesn't just shut down Andy's defense it pre-emptively labels everything Andy might say as irrelevant. There's no face-saving offered, no acknowledgment that mistakes happen. It's a direct, unmitigated dismissal of both the explanation and the person giving it.

"Don't even bother coming back" goes a step further. It's not just a directive it's a termination, delivered without warning or room for response. And then there's "That's all," which in its brevity is almost more cutting than anything explicit. Two words that end a conversation, signal that nothing further is welcome, and make clear who controls the interaction.

Taken together, these five utterances paint a consistent picture: bald-on-record communication is the language of unchallenged authority. It works precisely because Miranda's position makes mitigation unnecessary. She isn't being rude in the conventional sense she's simply operating in a register where interpersonal cushioning is optional, and she's chosen to skip it entirely.

Off-Record Strategy

Off-record strategies were the rarest in the dataset, appearing only 4 times (8.33%), but they're arguably the most interesting to analyze. This is where the gap between what's said and what's meant is widest and where the hearer has to do the most interpretive work.

Miranda's "Florals? For spring? Groundbreaking." is the clearest example. On paper, it reads as praise. In context, it's devastating. The sarcasm is doing everything: the rhetorical questions, the flat delivery implied by the punctuation, the word "groundbreaking" applied to something so predictable it barely registers. Miranda never says "this is boring and unoriginal" she doesn't have to. The indirectness is the point. It lets her communicate contempt while technically saying something neutral.

"Did you fall down and smack your little head on the pavement?" works similarly. As a literal question, it makes no sense nobody's actually wondering about a physical fall. As sarcasm, it's a pointed way of saying: what you just suggested is so unreasonable it could only come from someone not thinking clearly. The rhetorical form gives Miranda deniability while the meaning comes through loud and clear.

Nigel's "Corn chowder. That's an interesting choice" is more understated but operates the same way. "Interesting" in this context isn't a compliment it's a raised eyebrow. He doesn't say "that's a bad choice" or offer any direct opinion. He simply frames the observation in a way that invites Andy to wonder what he really thinks. The criticism is implied, not stated, and that implication is doing all the work.

The driver's "I'm sure Nate will understand" is the most indirect of the four. On the surface, it sounds reassuring. Underneath, it's a quiet observation that things at home might not be fine and that Andy might want to pay attention to that. It's advice without being advice, concern without being concern. The speaker leaves the interpretation entirely to Andy.

What all four instances share is a kind of strategic ambiguity. By not saying exactly what they mean, these speakers communicate something potentially face-threatening criticism, disbelief, concern while maintaining plausible deniability. The hearer is left to infer, which places the burden of interpretation on them rather than the speaker. In a workplace as charged as the one depicted in the film, that kind of indirectness isn't just stylistic it's functional.

CONCLUSION

The Devil Wears Prada movie was used to see how people are polite at work. The study looked at what people mean when they talk and how they want others to understand them. It found that people use ways to be polite like being nice or being direct. Being nice was used the most, which shows that people want to get along with each other in a tough work place. What is really important is that what people say does not always mean what they mean. Sometimes people ask questions. They really want you to do something.. They give compliments but they are really being mean. This shows that we need to understand what people really mean when they talk, not just what they say.

This study helps us understand how people talk at work in a way. It looks at how people use language to be polite and how that is affected by who's in charge. It also shows how people use language to get power or to be friends with each other. So it helps us understand how language works in the work place. There are some problems with the study. It only looked at one movie so it might not be true for all work places.. The people who did the study had to decide what people meant when they talked, which can be subjective. They also only looked at a few things people said so it might not be true for everything people say at work.

In the future we can do studies that look at more things people say at work. We can look at movies or TV shows or even real work place conversations. We can also compare how people are polite in kinds of jobs or in different cultures. This will help us understand more about how people talk at work and how they use language to get what they want. The Devil Wears Prada study is the start and we can learn a lot more about politeness and language, at work.

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