



The Specificity Of Politeness Strategies In The Context Of Religious Texts

Otaboyeva Mazmuna Rakhimovna¹, Nargiza Alieva Nodirovna², Hatamqulova Shohista Saidahmedovna³, Kudratova Shakhnoza Kadirovna⁴, Nuriddinova Movludaxon Shuxratjon qizi⁵, Xasanova Madina Anvarjon qizi⁶, Shoxobiddinov Sirojiddin Isomiddin o'g'li⁷, Khatamova Ziyoda Gulyamovna⁸

Abstract: This article analyzes the linguistic and pragmatic features of politeness strategies within the framework of religious discourse. The article examines positive and negative politeness strategies, Face Threatening Acts (FTA), and the manifestation of pragmatic factors such as social distance, power, and ranking of imposition in religious discourse. In addition, directive speech acts, illocutionary force, and normative-pragmatic features are analyzed through examples taken from hadith texts. The findings demonstrate that politeness strategies in religious texts are predominantly expressed through normative and bald on-record forms, while in certain cases elements of positive politeness serve to strengthen religious solidarity and collective identity. The article contributes both theoretically and practically to the fields of religious pragmatics and discourse analysis.

¹ PhD, Associate Professor, Kokand State University, Uzbekistan, Email: mazmuna.rahimovna@gmail.com, ORCID: 0009-0004-5445-3782

² Associate Professor, Kokand State University, Uzbekistan, Email: aliyevanargiza411@gmail.com, ORCID: 0009-0001-6827-736X

³ Senior Teacher, Kokand State University, Uzbekistan, Email: hatamqulovashoxista@gmail.com, ORCID: 0009-0006-0381-2952

⁴ Teacher, Kokand State University, Uzbekistan

⁵ Teacher, Kokand State University, Uzbekistan, Email: mnuriddinova1992@mail.ru, ORCID: 0009-0005-9665-1557

⁶ Teacher and PhD Researcher, Kokand State University, Uzbekistan

⁷ Teacher, Kokand State University, Uzbekistan, Email: sirojiddin.isomiddinovich0@gmail.com

⁸ Senior Teacher and Lecturer, Kokand State University, Uzbekistan

Keywords: religious discourse, pragmatics, politeness strategies, Brown and Levinson theory, Face Threatening Acts (FTA), positive politeness, negative politeness, directive speech acts, illocutionary force, hadith analysis, pragmatic analysis, communicative strategies, social distance, religious communication, normative discourse.

Introduction

In the sociolinguistic analysis of discourse—that is, a text produced within the process of real communication—it is essential to take into account the social institutions existing within society. Such institutions include the educational system, healthcare, the military sphere, judicial and legal bodies, the political arena, trade and commerce, as well as sports. In addition, particular attention should be paid to religious structures that unite clergy and believers on the basis of shared faith and rituals.

The analysis of religious discourse makes it possible to reveal the profound characteristics of language and religion, while also playing a significant role in the linguistic study of institutional discourse structures and in the development of classifications of discourse types. In linguistic scholarship, religious-preaching discourse (or, according to other approaches, the church-religious functional style) has been substantiated as a distinct category within the functional-stylistic paradigm of the modern Russian literary language.

From the perspectives of linguistics and pragmatics, religious discourse is regarded as a complex and multilayered phenomenon that encompasses not only the transmission of information, but also the formation of social, spiritual, and psychological relationships. Religious speech possesses distinctive functions which may conventionally be divided into two principal groups: general (linguistic) functions and specific (pragmatic) functions. While the general functions are associated with the universal properties of language, the specific functions determine the unique pragmatic nature of religious discourse.

In general, the expression of texts through the linguistic and pragmatic functions of religious discourse plays a significant role in the spiritual atmosphere of society. Religious discourse constitutes a powerful discursive system that shapes human consciousness, reinforces moral values, and ensures social solidarity, while simultaneously functioning as a means of communication and information transmission. A deeper understanding of the interrelationship between language and religion makes it possible to devote particular attention to the linguistic and pragmatic study of religious discourse, as well as to the scholarly substantiation of the role of religious speech in contemporary developed society.

Within the process of communication, the category of politeness is regarded as an important sociolinguistic and pragmatic phenomenon in interpersonal relations. In particular, within religious communication, politeness serves not only as a norm of speech etiquette, but also as a linguistic expression of moral, spiritual, and faith-based values. In the deeper analysis of this phenomenon, socio-linguistic scenarios and the theory of communicative roles provide an important methodological foundation.

Literature Review

In the communicative processes of society, interactions among participants are regulated on the basis of expectations associated with specific social roles. Such expectations rely upon moral and speech norms established by society. If an individual fails to demonstrate behavior and speech patterns appropriate to their social role, they may be negatively evaluated by the community or subjected to certain social restrictions. This aspect becomes even more evident within religious communication, since politeness and etiquette are regarded as fundamental indicators of adherence to religious moral principles.

According to the sociolinguistic approach, communicative processes within society manifest themselves differently depending on individuals' social background, social status, professional activity, and official position. Within the framework of religious discourse, however, additional factors such as a person's level of faith, religious knowledge, and spiritual condition also acquire significant importance. Therefore, elements of politeness in religious communication perform a distinct pragmatic function: they ensure that speech is constructed on the principles of gentleness, humility, and respect.

Written religious communication—such as appeals addressed to a religious adviser, imam, or legal advocate—demonstrates the systematic and coherent expression of politeness through linguistic means. Such texts widely employ forms of address, honorific expressions, and constructions conveying requests and gratitude. Through these devices, the social status of the communicative participants and the social distance between them are reflected.

In modern linguistics, pragmatics is regarded as an important field of study concerned with how linguistic units are employed in real communicative processes, their relationship to speech participants, and the meanings that emerge depending on the communicative situation. Pragmatics (from the Greek *pragma* — “action”) constitutes a component of semiotics and investigates those aspects of sign systems that are closely connected with human activity. This approach makes it possible to interpret language not as an immutable and static system, but rather as a dynamic phenomenon actively manifested within social, cultural, and religious contexts.

At present, pragmatics is interpreted as the process through which language users express their attitudes by means of particular words, semantic structures, and speech strategies, while simultaneously understanding the intentions and positions of their interlocutors. In this process, not only the content of speech, but also its communicative purpose, intended audience, cultural background, and social experience acquire considerable importance.

Research Methodology

Religious texts, in particular, possess a substantial semantic and communicative load from a pragmatic perspective. For this reason, their interpretation and understanding cannot be limited to simple semantic analysis, but instead require a broader contextual and pragmatic approach.

The effectiveness of communication is closely connected with adherence to certain ethical norms and principles of interpersonal conduct. Throughout the development of human civilization, different peoples have created numerous proverbs and wise sayings concerning speech culture, verbal etiquette, and communicative responsibility, thereby forming a rich scholarly and literary heritage in this sphere. Among the masterpieces of Eastern national culture are such works as *Qutadg' u Bilig*, *Qobusnoma*, and *Hibbat ul-haqoyiq*. Likewise, the intellectual legacy of thinkers such as Kaykovus, Yusuf Xos Hojib, Ahmad Yassaviy, Ahmad Yugnakiy, Alisher Navoiy, and So'fi Olloyor provides a profound philosophical and ethical interpretation of communicative etiquette and the responsibility of speech.

In particular, the advice concerning speech culture presented in *Qobusnoma* by Kaykovus has retained its significance even in the contemporary period. The work emphasizes that a speaker should express their thoughts wisely and thoughtfully, taking into consideration both the existing situation and the characteristics of the audience. It is particularly stressed that speech should be fluent in content, simple in form, and free from causing discomfort or annoyance to listeners. Otherwise, even an argument supported by strong evidence may fail to receive a positive response from the audience.

Furthermore, taking into account the consent and psychological state of interlocutors during the communicative process is regarded as an important factor in ensuring effective and constructive communication.

One of the scholars of Harvard University, H. Grice, proposed generally recognized communicative principles of interaction in 1967. According to Grice's conception, any effective communication depends upon the principle of cooperation. The full realization of the cooperative principle requires communicative participants to observe four fundamental conversational maxims. As defined by Grice, these maxims are directly related to the manner and method through which information is conveyed. They are categorized as the principles of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner.

According to Geoffrey Leech, the principle of politeness is manifested through the practical realization of six fundamental and self-evident rules. These are expressed as follows:

1. **The Tact Maxim** — minimizing the "cost" or inconvenience imposed upon the interlocutor while, conversely, seeking to maximize their benefit.
2. **The Generosity Maxim** — restricting personal benefit and demonstrating willingness to assume necessary "costs" or responsibilities oneself.
3. **The Approbation Maxim** — refraining from criticizing, disparaging, or speaking ill of others, while emphasizing their positive qualities.
4. **The Modesty Maxim** — minimizing self-praise and avoiding excessive display of one's own virtues.
5. **The Agreement Maxim** — avoiding disputes and conflicts, and striving instead for consensus and harmony.
6. **The Sympathy Maxim** — maintaining a warm attitude toward others and demonstrating kindness and goodwill.

According to the theory developed by Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, politeness represents a complex system of strategies designed to mitigate speech acts that threaten an individual's "face" (social dignity and public self-image). They do not provide a single rigid definition of the concept of politeness; rather, they explain it through a framework consisting of two contrasting dimensions: negative politeness and positive politeness.

The theory of politeness was first introduced by Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson in 1987. Although their views were later subjected to criticism by various scholars, this model continues to serve as an important theoretical foundation in pragmatic research.

The authors divided their study into two principal sections. The first section examines the essence of politeness theory, its central concepts, definitions, and the mechanisms of interaction involved in language use. The second section contains examples illustrating the application of politeness strategies in three socially and culturally distinct languages: English language, Tamil language, and Tzeltal language.

In the theoretical section, Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson develop their model on the basis of the concept of the "natural language speaker." According to their view, such a speaker possesses two fundamental characteristics: rationality (the ability to make reasonable decisions) and face (the need for social dignity and self-esteem). It is precisely these two factors that constitute the foundation of politeness strategies.

In Brown and Levinson's theory, the *Model Person (MP)* is an individual who can use language effectively and possesses two key qualities: rationality and face. Rationality means the ability to set goals, evaluate situations, and consciously choose suitable speech strategies to achieve communicative aims while maintaining face needs. "Face" refers to a person's social image, dignity, and reputation in the eyes of others. Brown and Levinson distinguish two types of face:

Positive Face — the desire to be appreciated, recognized, and approved of by others.

Negative Face — the desire to maintain freedom of action and make independent decisions without interference.

The authors regard face-related needs as universal, that is, characteristic of all cultures. At the same time, however, they emphasize that the manifestation of these needs depends upon cultural norms and values. It is precisely this claim of universality that was later criticized by numerous researchers.

According to the theory of Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, certain speech acts occurring in interpersonal communication may threaten the interlocutor's "face" (social self-image). Within their conception, the system of politeness is interpreted primarily as a complex pragmatic mechanism aimed at mitigating such *Face Threatening Acts*

(FTAs). FTAs refer to speech acts that may place the interlocutor in an uncomfortable position, damage their reputation, or negatively affect their social status.

Results And Discussion

Politeness and impoliteness are viewed as dialectically interconnected phenomena and are interpreted as two opposing aspects of a single communicative system. Actions such as criticism, disagreement, interruption, coercion, requests, or demands are considered examples of face-threatening acts.

Brown and Levinson identify several strategic ways of performing FTAs:

1. Expressing the threat directly and without mitigation (*bald on-record*);
2. Softening the act through positive politeness strategies;
3. Reducing the threat through negative politeness strategies;
4. Expressing the act indirectly, that is, in an *off-record* manner;
5. Avoiding the performance of the FTA altogether.

The *on-record* strategy refers to the explicit and direct expression of meaning, whereas the *off-record* strategy serves to reduce the level of threat through indirectness, ambiguity, and implicature. When an openly expressed FTA is accompanied by redressive (mitigating) devices, it falls within the domain of politeness.

Positive politeness strategies are directed toward the interlocutor's positive face — namely, the desire to be recognized and approved of by others. Bruce Fraser defines positive face as an individual's enduring need for social appreciation. Brown and Levinson identify fifteen types of positive politeness strategies, arguing that these strategies strengthen solidarity with the interlocutor, emphasize commonality, and reduce social distance. Such strategies include paying attention to the interlocutor's interests, expressing sympathy, using in-group identity markers, emphasizing agreement, avoiding disagreement, employing humor, expressing optimism, providing reasons, and making promises.

Some of the principal positive politeness strategies are as follows:

1. Paying attention to the hearer's interests, needs, and desires;
2. Intensifying expressions of interest, approval, and sympathy toward the hearer;
3. Enhancing the hearer's involvement and interest;
4. Using in-group identity markers (such as slang or shared jargon);
5. Seeking agreement;
6. Avoiding disagreement;
7. Presupposing, raising, or asserting common ground;
8. Using humor;
9. Asserting or presupposing the speaker's knowledge of and concern for the hearer's wants;
10. Offering or promising;
11. Being optimistic;
12. Including both speaker and hearer in the activity;
13. Giving reasons (or asking for reasons);
14. Assuming or asserting reciprocity and mutual cooperation;
15. Giving gifts to the hearer (including material gifts, sympathy, understanding, and cooperation).

Dispute and open disagreement threaten positive face because, in such situations, the interlocutor's opinion is rejected or evaluated as incorrect. For this reason, the authors propose strategies aimed at mitigating opposition and conflict. Geoffrey Leech likewise identifies the maximization of agreement and the minimization of disagreement as important criteria of politeness. The concept of *common ground* is interpreted by Robert Stalnaker as the set of shared knowledge and assumptions existing between interlocutors.

Negative politeness strategies, by contrast, are directed toward an individual's negative face — namely, respect for personal independence, freedom of action, and private territory. Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson consider negative politeness to be characteristic of situations involving social distance and asymmetry of power. In such contexts, the speaker seeks to interfere as little as possible with the interlocutor's personal domain.

The principal strategies of negative politeness include indirectness, hedging, pessimistic assumptions, minimization of imposition, showing respect, apologizing, impersonalization, expressing FTAs through general rules, nominalization, and acknowledging indebtedness. For example, by apologizing, the speaker recognizes the inconvenience caused and thereby mitigates the threat. However, Armin Meier argues that apologies themselves may, in certain situations, constitute face-threatening acts, and therefore discusses their strategic status.

Brown and Levinson propose the following ten strategies of negative politeness:

1. Be conventionally indirect;
2. Use questions and hedging devices;
3. Be pessimistic (i.e., assume that the hearer may be unwilling or unable to comply);
4. Minimize the imposition;
5. Give deference;
6. Apologize;
7. Impersonalize both the speaker (S) and the hearer (H);
8. State the FTA as a general rule;
9. Use nominalization (transforming verbs into nouns to introduce indirectness and abstraction);
10. Acknowledge indebtedness or avoid placing the hearer in debt.

In the process of selecting a politeness strategy, the "weightiness" of the FTA is evaluated. Brown and Levinson determine this degree on the basis of three social factors:

P (Power) — the power difference between communicants;

D (Distance) — the degree of social distance;

R (Ranking of imposition) — the degree of imposition involved in the act.

According to the formula proposed by the authors:

$$W_x = D(S,H) + P(S,H) + R_x \quad W_x = D(S,H) + P(S,H) + R_x$$

where W_x denotes the degree of threat posed by a particular FTA; D represents social distance; P indicates power difference; and R_x refers to the ranking of imposition.

Geoffrey Leech reinterprets these factors in terms of social distance, authority, and benefit–cost considerations. In general, individuals occupying a lower position within a power asymmetry tend to employ a greater number of politeness strategies, whereas in situations characterized by power superiority, the degree of politeness may decrease. Thus, factors such as social distance, power difference, and degree of imposition constitute the principal pragmatic determinants governing face-saving mechanisms and the selection of politeness strategies in the process of communication.

In religious communication, the phenomenon of politeness is not limited merely to the external manifestation of etiquette and manners, but is also inseparably connected with the individual's inner spiritual position. Values such as compassion, mercy, and patience are especially acknowledged and highly esteemed in religious discourse. At the same time, from a pragmatic perspective, politeness may in certain cases become intertwined with weakness, fear, or the influence of social pressure. Such situations create the necessity, within religious discourse, to distinguish between “sincere compassion” and “artificial or obligatory politeness.”

Genuine politeness in religious communication is interpreted as consciously chosen behavior grounded in devotion and selflessness. It encompasses doing good without expectation of reward, adhering to the principles of justice, and maintaining a sense of responsibility. From the perspective of religious pragmatics, such politeness is realized not through speech acts of command or prohibition, but rather through communicative strategies that encourage and inspire. For example, in religious exhortations, moral ideas are often conveyed through gentle intonation, metaphorical imagery, and symbolic expressions.

In general, the phenomenon of politeness constitutes an important linguistic and pragmatic category in religious communication. It reflects an individual's social status, moral values, and religious beliefs. Within the framework of religious discourse, politeness not only regulates the communicative process, but also functions as one of the principal factors ensuring spiritual maturity, social harmony, and moral stability within society. The linguistic study of this phenomenon contributes to revealing the deeper pragmatic mechanisms of religious communication.

In the present scholarly research, hadiths occupying an important place in the Islamic world are analyzed in accordance with the theory proposed by Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson discussed above. For the analysis, hadiths taken from Hadis.uz are utilized.

Hadith:

“Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim.”

(Transmitted by Abu Hanifa in his *Musnad* from Anas ibn Malik, and by Al-Tabarani from Abdullah ibn Masud.)

Commentary:

In Islam, striving to know what one does not know is regarded as a great obligation for every Muslim man and woman. Whoever neglects this duty will face severe punishment on the Day of Judgment.

This hadith — “Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim” — functions as a normative-directive speech act within Islamic discourse. The lexical unit *farz* (“obligatory”) expresses normative obligation and possesses strong illocutionary force. From the perspective of *Face Threatening Acts* (FTAs), this statement threatens the addressee's negative face (freedom of action), since it imposes an obligation. The form *farzdir* (“is obligatory”) restricts the possibility of choice.

According to the formula proposed by Brown and Levinson:

$$W_x = D + P + R \quad W_x = D + P + R$$

P (Power) — high: religious authority is involved (the narration is attributed to the Prophet ﷺ);

D (Distance) — relatively high: a hierarchical relationship exists between the divine/religious authority and the ordinary believer;

R (Ranking of imposition) — high: the category of *farz* represents the highest degree of religious obligation. Therefore, the weight of the FTA is maximal.

From the perspective of strategy type, this hadith corresponds to a *bald on-record* strategy (open and direct expression). The statement is presented clearly and normatively without mitigation. No hedging devices (expressions of probability or softening markers) are present. This represents the first strategy identified by Brown and Levinson: performing the FTA openly and directly. Such a method is typically employed in contexts characterized by high power asymmetry, particularly within normative religious texts and the articulation of universal moral principles.

At the same time, the text contains certain elements of positive politeness, although explicit positive politeness markers are limited. For example, the phrase “every Muslim” functions as a shared in-group identifier emphasizing collective religious identity. This corresponds to the fourth positive politeness strategy — the use of in-group identity markers — which strengthens solidarity and common religious affiliation. The directive is therefore not individual but collective in character.

By contrast, negative politeness strategies — such as indirectness, hedging, apologizing, or minimizing imposition — are virtually absent from the text.

Hadith:

“Seek knowledge even if you must go to China, for seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim.”

(Transmitted by Al-Bayhaqi from Anas ibn Malik.)

Commentary:

The meaning intended in this narration is that knowledge should be sought wherever it may be found, regardless of the distance of the journey or the fact that the people of that land may follow a different religion. From the perspective of speech act theory, this hadith represents a directive speech act. The expression “go and seek” appears in the imperative form, while the lexical unit “obligatory” (*farzdir*) conveys normative obligation. The illocutionary force is therefore very strong, since the action of seeking knowledge is established as a religious duty. From the perspective of *Face Threatening Act* (FTA) analysis, the hadith threatens the addressee’s negative face because it restricts freedom of action, requires the believer to disregard distance and hardship, and imposes a religious obligation.

According to the Brown–Levinson formula for weightiness:

$$W_x = D + P + RW_x = D + P + RW_x = D + P + R$$

P (Power) — extremely high, since the authority derives from religious power (the narration is attributed to the Prophet ﷺ);

D (Distance) — considerable, due to the hierarchical distinction between the sacred source and the ordinary believer;

R (Ranking of imposition) — high, because the command involves travel, effort, and crossing social as well as religious boundaries. Since the category of *farz* (“obligation”) is invoked, the FTA reaches a maximal level of weightiness.

In terms of strategy type, the hadith corresponds primarily to a *bald on-record* strategy within positive politeness. The imperative form “go and seek” is expressed openly and directly, without any hedging or indirectness. This represents the first strategy identified by Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson: performing the FTA directly and explicitly.

At the same time, certain aspects of positive politeness can also be observed in the hadith:

Fourth strategy — Use of in-group identity markers:

The phrase “every Muslim” emphasizes collective religious identity and solidarity.

Twelfth strategy — Including both speaker and hearer in a common activity:

The act of seeking knowledge is presented as a shared religious responsibility.

Tenth strategy — Offering or promising (implicit):

The pursuit of knowledge carries a positive implicature associated with spiritual reward, virtue, and personal elevation.

Conclusion

By contrast, negative politeness strategies — such as indirectness, hedging, or minimization of imposition — are virtually absent. Normative religious discourse relies primarily on authority and obligation; therefore, establishing the norm takes precedence over preserving the interlocutor’s negative face.

According to the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson, both hadiths discussed above constitute directive speech acts. They compel the addressee toward a specific action — namely, the pursuit of knowledge. The lexical unit *farzdir* (“is obligatory”) maximizes the illocutionary force and gives the statements a normative and quasi-legal character.

From the perspective of *Face Threatening Acts* (FTAs), both hadiths threaten the addressee’s negative face because they restrict freedom of action and impose obligations. According to the Brown–Levinson formula:

$$W_x = D + P + RW_x = D + P + RW_x = D + P + R$$

where:

- **P (Power)** — high, due to religious authority;
- **D (Distance)** — hierarchical distance exists between the sacred authority and the believer;
- **R (Ranking of imposition)** — high, because of the obligatory nature of the act and the demand for travel and effort.

In both hadiths, the dominant strategy is *bald on-record* (open and direct expression), manifested through imperative forms (“seek”) and normative judgments (“is obligatory”), as well as through the absence of hedging and indirectness.

Although minimal elements of positive politeness are present in both narrations, negative politeness strategies — such as indirectness, hedging, or minimization of imposition — are not observed.

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