Journal of English Language and Education
ISSN 2597- 6850 (Online), 2502-4132 (Print)
Journal Homepage: https://jele.or.id/index.php/jele/index

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Article

An Analysis of Politeness Strategies in Feminist Utterances in *"Barbie"* 2023 Movie

https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v11i6.3361

Jesika Br Sitio, Rizka Amalia, Gifa Auzira Alivia, Hikmah Alya, Rahmadsyah Rangkuti[abcde]

[12345] English Literature Department, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Sumatera Utara
Corresponding Author: jesikabr120@students.usu.ac.id

A B S T R A C T

This study seeks to identify politeness strategies in feminist utterances in Barbie (2023) and explore how they reflect, reinforce, or resist gendered power relations. Based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory, the study investigates four strategies: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. Data were collected through film observation and transcript analysis, using a descriptive qualitative design and document analysis. 42 of the 1,114 utterances were identified as feminist because they address gender inequality, women's agency, gender stereotypes, and patriarchal norms. Of these, 40 used politeness strategies. The most common was bald on-record (20 utterances), followed by positive politeness (8), off-record (6), and negative politeness (5); one was a combination of positive politeness and bald on-record. The results indicate that these strategies express criticism of gender inequality, solidarity, mitigated demands for equality, and indirect criticism through irony and rhetorical questions.

Keywords: *Politeness Strategies, Feminism, Brown And Levinson, Barbie (2023), Pragmatics.*

Article History:
Received 06th October 2026
Accepted 29th October 2026
Published 07th November 2026

INTRODUCTION

Language plays an important role in human social life because people use it to communicate, express ideas, share feelings, and interact with others. In linguistics, language is established as a system of structured spoken and written texts that have meaning in a specific social context (Rahmawati et al., 2024). Language thus cannot be detached from the social context in which it is used. The intersection between language and social life has become a matter of considerable concern within sociolinguistics. This is the field that investigates how language is used and framed in society (Ehrlich & Milani, 2021). The assumption of sociolinguistics is that language is strongly related to the social context of its use. Adli & Guy (2022) emphasizes the significance of investigating sociolinguistic variation in various cultural contexts instead of narrowing the scope of sociolinguistic investigation to specific Western or English-speaking societies. Moreover, sociolinguistic studies have shown that language can be used to construct and negotiate social meanings in everyday interaction. Social meaning refers to the social information that language forms may carry about their users and has become an important area of study in sociolinguistics (Beltrama, 2021). This connection between language and situation also gives rise to pragmatics, which studies how meaning is understood in particular contexts.

Sociolinguistics and pragmatics are closely related fields of study to investigate how language works in social interaction. Sociolinguistics is concerned with the relationship between language and social factors, while pragmatics is concerned with how language is used and interpreted in particular social and communicative contexts (Ghasani, 2021). In making intentions, speakers take into account factors such as their relationship with the listener, social distance and situation in social interaction (Van Bergen & Hogeweg, 2021). Therefore,

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understanding language in its social context lays the basis for comprehending the pragmatic phenomena, especially politeness. Politeness is the manner in which the speakers manage social relations and minimize the possible threats to the participants' face in communication (Gotzner & Mazzarella, 2021). This idea is echoed in Brown & Levinson (1987) politeness theory, which explains how speakers use a number of strategies to save face and deal with face-threatening acts in interaction.

As a pragmatic framework, politeness theory has been widely applied in the analysis of literary works, including plays, short stories, and novels. Among the many theories on politeness, Brown & Levinson theory (1987) is used most often in examining literary texts such as plays, short stories, and novels . According to Brown & Levinson (1987), politeness is a universal phenomenon used to mitigate threats to the "face" of speakers and listeners, and thus to maintain social harmony. Face is the image people project to others. Face is the "public self-image" that speakers in a society claim for themselves. It has two related aspects, called the "positive" and "negative" faces. A positive face is the need to be liked, accepted and valued by others, and a negative face is the need to be independent, have freedom of action and not to be offended. Yule (1996) supports the theory by explaining that politeness is useful in reducing the threat of face-threatening acts as it enables the speaker to protect the listener's feelings in a variety of ways. According to Mills (2003) the theory is effective even in collectivist culture where people are more concerned with group harmony than individual needs. This demonstrates that the theory remains a strong instrument to analyse how language is used to prevent conflict and create good relationships.

They categorized politeness strategies into four broad categories to serve the face needs of both the speaker and listener (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Rajik (2025) says these strategies are used as tools to soften or manage messages when face-threatening acts cannot be avoided. Brown & Levinson (1987) similarly argues that such strategies are used to maintain the face of the hearer when face-threatening acts are unavoidable. Rajik (2025) further categorizes the four types, which mainly differ in their level of directness: bald on-record strategies are direct communication without politeness markers; positive politeness strategies are designed to affirm and support the listener's desire for approval and acceptance; negative politeness strategies emphasize respect for the listener's autonomy and freedom from constraint; and off-record strategies are indirect, creating ambiguity to avoid direct commitment to a face-threatening statement. Politeness has also been studied with regards to gender, especially in feminist sociolinguistics, and its role in the preservation of social harmony at large.

Feminism and politeness theory address different objects, but both are concerned with how power operates in interaction. Feminism is concerned with gender equality, unequal power relations, and women's agency, and feminist linguistics examines how these issues are enacted and contested in language (Mills & Mullany, 2011). Brown & Levinson (1987) politeness theory, in contrast, explains how speakers manage face and interpersonal relationships when they perform face-threatening acts. The two frameworks meet at three points. First, power is built into the politeness model itself, Brown & Levinson (1987) argue that the seriousness of a face-threatening act depends on the relative power and social distance between speaker and hearer and on the rank of imposition, so the choice of strategy is never socially neutral. Second, feminist linguistics has long treated politeness as a gendered practice. Lakoff (1975) linked women's speech to politeness and hesitancy, Brown (1980) examined how and why women are more polite on the basis of evidence from a Mayan community, and Holmes (1995) analysed compliments, apologies, and hedges as politeness devices in women's and men's talk. Mills (2003) later challenged the assumption that women are inherently more polite, arguing that women can appear more polite because they draw on stereotypes of femininity, while in many contexts they are as impolite as men. Third, feminist utterances are typically face-threatening, when a speaker criticises gender inequality, refuses a gendered expectation, or demands recognition, she may threaten the hearer's face, and the strategy she chooses shows how she balances confrontation, solidarity, and self-protection.

Brown and Levinson's theory explains face management and interpersonal interaction, and none of its four strategies is feminist in itself. A bald on-record utterance is not

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automatically feminist, and an indirect utterance does not necessarily support gender equality. This study therefore distinguishes the linguistic form of an utterance, as reflected in its politeness strategy from its feminist meaning, which whether its content and context criticise gender inequality, reject gendered expectations, or assert female agency. The four strategies are used as an analytical lens because they range from fully direct to fully indirect (Rajik, 2025), which allows the analysis to show how directness and mitigation are used when feminist ideas are voiced, rather than treating any strategy as a marker of feminism.

Early feminist sociolinguistics, led by Lakoff (1975), showed that linguistic politeness is closely related to gender inequality. Research found that women often use polite forms, hesitations, and tag questions more than men (Holmes, 1995). When Brown and Levinson's framework was brought into language and gender studies, scholars noticed that women are often socialized to value politeness, emotional connection, and group harmony (Mills, 2003). Over time feminist works on theory moved beyond just pointing out differences in how men and women speak. It began to look at the power dynamics behind these communication styles (Mills & Mullany, 2011). From this perspective, politeness is not about being nice. It can be a mechanism of rule enforcement and a reflection of unequal power relations. Politeness, however, can also help people to construct their identities, express their independence, and resist traditional expectations (Zhang et al., 2024). Greta Gerwig's Barbie (2023) is a work which takes up feminist ideas. Barbie interrogates patriarchy, gender performance and empowerment in a consumer culture world. The live-action Barbie film shows characters resisting control and supporting one another through politeness (de Castell & Jenson, 2024). The way people talk in the movie is not simply about manners, it uses positive politeness to create a society where compliments and love are expressed by everyone. This establishes a system of unity and connection (Byrnes et al., 2025; Li, 2025). The introduction of the patriarchal "*Kendom*" forces the Barbies into negative politeness. They are made to serve drinks, hand over talking time, and back authority (de Castell & Jenson, 2024). The Barbies cleverly use forms of female submission, false admiration, playful obedience and exaggerated attentiveness to distract the Kens in their effort to regain power. They feign compliance with the rules while covertly seeking to reclaim their authority (de Castell & Jenson, 2024).

Film is one of the sites where ideas about gender are produced and contested, and research on popular media provides both empirical and theoretical support for examining feminist discourse in it. At the level of representation, women remain a minority on screen: in the 100 top-grossing films of 2017, only 31.8% of the 4,454 speaking characters were female (Smith et al., 2018). At the level of ideology, scholars of postfeminist argue that popular media take up feminist vocabulary such as empowerment, choice, and individualism, yet often combine it with conventional ideals of femininity and with consumer culture (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004). *Barbie* (2023) has been discussed in exactly these terms. Preda (2024) asked whether the film turns feminist ideology into a commodity within global capitalism or engages meaningfully with feminist concerns, and Yakali (2024) examined it through a critique of postfeminist.

Linguistic studies have begun to examine how feminist meanings are carried by film dialogue. Maharani (2026) combined speech act theory with a feminist reading of Jo March's utterances in *Little Women* (2019) and showed that they express autonomy and resistance to nineteenth-century gender norms. Mansoor & Khalid (2024) investigated the linguistic features that construct empowered women in a Pakistani screenplay. Dayap et al. (2026) analysed how Stereotypical Barbie and Gloria in *Barbie* (2023) use Lakoff (1975) women's language features alongside visual resources, and found that hedges and intensifiers were the most frequent features and that the film both aligns with and complicates postfeminist discourse. Politeness theory, for its part, has been generally applied to film dialogue (Angginie et al., 2019; Fridolini et al., 2021; Utari & Budiartha, 2025). Utari & Budiartha (2025) found positive politeness to be the most frequent strategy in the animated film Barbie and the Diamond Castle, and Angginie et al. (2019) examined face-threatening and face-saving acts in Barbie as the Princess and the Pauper. Yustikarani & Pradipta (2025) combined Brown & Levinson (1987) framework with Mills (2003) work on gender and politeness to compare the

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male and female protagonists of Mundruczó (2020) and concluded that gender and power shape the choice of strategy, with the female protagonist using more polite and indirect language.

There is much previous research about politeness strategies and feminism in different contexts. Brown and Levinson's framework was used by Meiratnasari et al. (2019) to study the politeness strategies applied in Indonesian English textbooks. They found four strategies: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. Similarly, Fridolini et al. (2021) explored the politeness strategies in Gerwig's Little Women (2019) and discovered that all four strategies were employed by the characters, with positive politeness being the most prevalent. Other works have also approached feminism in Barbie (2023) from different angles. The film has been analysed sociologically as representing liberal and radical feminism (Ariska, 2024). Li (2025) analysed the feminist representation in Barbie (2023) through the semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce. Saputra & Ernawati (2025) conducted feminist semiotic analysis to examine female independence in the film. Sukadiwan (2026) analysed feminism *in "Barbie (2023)"* in relation to the aesthetics of femininity. These studies show that "*Barbie* (2023)" has been widely examined in relation to feminist representation, but the application of Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies to examine feminism in the film remains a distinct focus of the present study.

Taken together, these studies leave a specific gap. First, research on feminism in *Barbie* (2023) has mostly relied on semiotic, sociological, and aesthetic analyses (Ariska, 2024; Saputra & Ernawati, 2025; Sukadiwan, 2026) or on women's language features combined with visual grammar (Dayap et al., 2026). These studies explain what the film represents and which linguistic features its female characters use, but they do not explain how speakers manage face and interpersonal risk when they voice feminist claims. Second, politeness research on film has selected its data by film, character, or gender rather than by ideological content. The Barbie-related politeness studies that the authors could locate concern animated films for children (Angginie et al., 2019; Utari & Budiartha, 2025), and the studies of *Little Women* (Fridolini et al., 2021) and *Pieces of a Woman* (Yustikarani & Pradipta, 2025) analyse the speech of the characters in general, not utterances that carry feminist content. Consequently, it remains unclear how feminist statements, which often challenge existing power relations and therefore threaten the hearer's face, are realised through bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies in a film that explicitly addresses patriarchy. To the authors' knowledge, no study has examined this question for *Barbie* (2023). The present study addresses this gap by selecting only utterances that express feminist ideas, classifying each one with Brown & Levinson (1987) four strategies, and interpreting how each strategy is used to criticise gender inequality, express solidarity, soften refusals and requests, or imply critique, so that the linguistic form of each utterance can be linked to its feminist meaning.

Therefore, this research offers novelty in two ways. Theoretically, it extends the application of Brown & Levinson (1987) politeness theory beyond textbook discourse and non-feminist films into a contemporary film that directly addresses feminist issues. Thematically, it treats politeness strategies not only as a way to maintain social harmony, but also as a way feminist resistance and patriarchal control are negotiated through dialogue. This research is scoped to dialogue that contains a statement of feminism. It is not limited to one or two characters. Every character who produces this kind of statement is included in the data, regardless of their role in the film. Using Brown & Levinson (1987) four politeness strategies: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record, this research identifies the strategies used in these statements and examines how they reflect, reinforce, or resist gendered power relations in the film. Dialogue that does not contain a statement of feminism is not analysed, and non-verbal elements and cinematographic features are also outside the scope of this research. Accordingly, this study addresses two research questions: (1) Which of Brown & Levinson (1987) politeness strategies are used in the feminist utterances in *Barbie* (2023)? and (2) How do these strategies function in expressing resistance, solidarity, and the negotiation of power in these utterances?

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METHOD

The research design of this study was descriptive qualitative research. Arikunto (2010) stated that qualitative research was conducted to describe the current status of a phenomenon that existed at the time of the study. One of the characteristics of this research is there is no control of treatment as it was around in experimental research. According to Ary et al. (2010), content or document analysis is a research method applied to written or visual materials for the purpose of identifying specified characteristics of the materials. The materials analyzed can be text book, newspaper, web pages, speeches, television programs, advertisements, musical compositions, or any of a host of other types of documents.

The author chose the *Barbie* (2023) movie as an object of this research. The movie was selected because previous studies have extensively discussed feminist issues and representations in the film.. Therefore, this study focuses on feminist utterances to examine how the choice of politeness strategies can shape the way feminist ideas are communicated and understood in interaction. The data were collected by watching the *Barbie* (2023) movie and referring to its transcript available on Script Slug (https://www.scriptslug.com/script/barbie-2023?page=3), to identify relevant utterances. The data collection process began by identifying utterances that contained feminist statements or reflected feminist ideas in the movie. In this study, an utterance refers to a sentence spoken by a character that contains a feminist statement or reflects a feminist idea. After the relevant utterances were identified, they were selected as the main data for analysis. The selected utterances were then analyzed using Brown & Levinson (1987) theory of politeness strategies, which consists of bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. The analysis was carried out by identifying the politeness strategies used in each utterance that contained elements of feminism and looking at how these strategies were used in the context of dialogue. The results of the study were then interpreted to explain how politeness strategies are used in utterances that contain feminist ideas, especially in relation to gender, power, and rejection of gender expectations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the theory of politeness strategies proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987), the findings show that the characters in Barbie (2023) apply four types of politeness strategies, named bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record. From a total of 1,114 utterances in the movie transcript, the researcher recognized 42 utterances that contain feminism. Among these 42 utterances, 40 utterances were found to employ politeness strategies. The 40 utterances consist of 20 utterances using Bald on Record, 8 using Positive Politeness, 5 using Negative Politeness, 6 using Off Record, and 1 utterance using mixed of positive politeness and bald on record.

Bald on Record

According to Brown & Levinson (1987), bald on record strategy is a direct way of saying things, without any minimization to the imposition, in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way. There are 20 Bald on Record found in the Barbie (2023) movie. Three of those are:

Barbie Margot: ''Are There Any Women In Charge?!''

The utterance embraces the feminist approach as Barbie raises a question on the lack of women in the position of power at Mattel. Before this speech, Barbie finds out that the CEO, CFO, COO, and president of the Barbie division are all men. Therefore her question speaks to the unequal representation of women in leadership posts. This utterance, therefore, can be seen as an expression of feminism because it criticizes gender inequality in leadership and calls for more visibility and participation of women in power. In terms of politeness strategies, the utterance can be categorized as bald on record because Barbie does not employ any softening

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strategies or indirect language to ask her question directly. The capital letters and the exclamation mark further underline the directness and urgency of her question.

Sasha: "Oh, come off it, everybody hates women. Women hate women and men hate women. It's the thing we can all agree on."

The utterance is a manifestation of feminist anxiety about the widespread nature of misogyny and gender inequality. This statement indicates that negative attitudes toward women are present in different social groups, including women. The repetition of *"women hate women"* and *"men hate women"* emphasizes the speaker's critique of the social conditions that normalize the devaluation of women. From a feminist point of view, the utterance can therefore be understood as an explicit rejection of misogynist attitudes and as an expression of consciousness in relation to the unequal social position of women. According to Brown & Levinson (1987) Politeness Theory, this utterance is an example of a bald on record strategy. The speaker criticizes directly and explicitly without using mitigation markers to lessen any possible face-threatening act to the hearer's face. The phrase *"Oh, come off it"* right away also adds to the confrontational and direct nature of the statement. The speaker is not scared of any disagreement or of disturbing the harmony but instead is ready to speak out openly. The use of this language by Bald on Record thus supports the feminist reading, as it shows how directness of language can be a means to claim female agency and resist gendered expectations around women's communication.

Barbie Margot: "Why would she be sad? We fixed everything so that all women in the real world are happy and powerful!"

The utterance is an expression of the theme of female empowerment and the social expectation that women should be happy and empowered after addressing the gender inequality. The phrase *"all women"* treats women's experiences as if they can be understood by one condition. *"We fixed everything"* implies that the speaker believes that gender-related problems have already been solved. From a feminist perspective, this statement can be interpreted as emphasizing the complexity of women's experiences and the limitations of the assumption that empowerment in itself automatically cancels women's struggles. As such, the statement reflects an important feminist concern that women's experiences are diverse and cannot necessarily be reduced to one definition of happiness or empowerment. This utterance can be categorized as Bald on Record, according to Brown & Levinson (1987) Politeness Theory, because the speaker makes her assumption directly and without any linguistic mitigation. The question *"Why would she be sad?" is immediately succeeded by the flat "We fixed everything,"* leaving little room for doubt or qualification. The speaker's confidence in her argument is increased by the emphatic claim *"all women in the real world are happy and powerful."* Therefore, the Bald on Record's use of direct language reflects how an unquestioned belief about women's empowerment is expressed, while the feminist perspective reveals the limitations of that belief by highlighting the complexity of women's experiences.

Positive Politeness

According to Brown & Levinson (1987), positive politeness is used to meet the positive face needs of the interlocutor, such as the desire to be respected, liked, and recognized as part of the group. This strategy aims to create closeness and familiarity between the speaker and the listener. There are 8 positive politeness found in the Barbie (2023) movie. Three of the those are:

Ken (Ryan Gosling): ''We just explained the impeccable immaculate seamless garment of logic that is Patriarchy and she crumbled.''

The utterance reflects the theme of patriarchal ideology and male dominance through Ken's proud description of how he and the other Kens successfully introduced Patriarchy to the Barbies. The phrase *"the impeccable immaculate seamless garment of logic that is Patriarchy"* describes Patriarchy as a perfect logical system and *"she crumbled"* implies that the Barbie was unable to resist or challenge the ideology presented to her. The statement can be read in a

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feminist way as an example of how patriarchal ideology can be naturalized as rational and unquestionable so as to retain male dominance. Ken's boastful attitude also reflects the unequal power relationship between men and women, as the success of imposing Patriarchy is treated as a shared achievement among the Kens. Therefore, the utterance highlights a feminist concern with the normalization of patriarchal ideas and their influence on women's position and agency. This utterance can be categorized as Positive Politeness, according to Brown & Levinson (1987) Politeness Theory, particularly through the strategy of claiming common ground and creating in-group solidarity. For example, the use of the pronoun *"we"* includes Ken and the other Kens in the same group and presents their deeds as a collective achievement. Ken's statement is not a criticism or a challenge to the other Kens but a reinforcement of their shared success and identity. The bragging that they have successfully explained Patriarchy solidifies their common understanding and solidarity. Therefore, the use of Positive Politeness through in-group identification reflects how Ken establishes solidarity with the other Kens while simultaneously expressing a patriarchal ideology that, from a feminist perspective, reinforces male dominance over women.

Barbie Margot: ''Men look at me like I'm an object, girls hate me, everyone thinks I'm crazy and I keep getting arrested.''

The utterance reflects the theme of women's objectification, social judgment, and gender-based inequality, which are important concerns in feminism. When the statement *"men look at me like I'm an object"* is made, it is an example of the objectification of women and it exemplifies how women might be treated on the basis of how they look and not on their personhood or individuality. The phrases *"girls hate me"* and *"everyone thinks I'm crazy"* also reflect Barbie's experience of social rejection and negative judgement. The phrase "I keep getting arrested" shows the difficulties and consequences she faces in her situation. From a feminist perspective, the utterance can be interpreted as expressing the social pressures experienced by women when they are judged, objectified, or treated according to gendered expectations. Barbie speaks openly about what she has experienced, thus emphasizing the social restrictions and the unequal treatment that her role as a woman implies. This utterance can be categorized as Positive Politeness, according to Brown & Levinson (1987) Politeness Theory, particularly through the strategy of seeking agreement and creating common ground. Barbie openly shares her personal experiences with the listener rather than simply making a direct demand. By explaining that *"men look at me like I'm an object"* and that *"everyone thinks I'm crazy,"* she invites the listener to understand and acknowledge her situation. Her revelation creates an interpersonal bond as it enables the listener to see the difficulties she is going through. Therefore, the use of Positive Politeness supports Barbie's attempt to gain understanding and solidarity, while from a feminist perspective, her statement gives voice to experiences of objectification, social judgment, and the unequal expectations placed on women.

Barbie Margot: ''By giving voice to the cognitive dissonance required to be a woman under the patriarchy, you robbed it of its power.''

The utterance embraces the feminist approach as Barbie acknowledges Gloria's ability to challenge the patriarchal system through her speech. The *phrase "to be a woman under the patriarchy"* explicitly refers to the difficulties and contradictions experienced by women within a patriarchal system. By stating that Gloria *"robbed it of its power,"* Barbie recognizes that Gloria's speech has weakened the influence of patriarchal ideology. The utterance, therefore, can be seen as an expression of feminism because it highlights women's experiences under patriarchy and acknowledges Gloria's contribution to challenging its power. In terms of politeness strategies, the utterance can be categorized as positive politeness, particularly through giving or attending to the hearer's wants and showing appreciation toward the hearer. Barbie acknowledges Gloria's insight and presents her speech as something powerful enough to challenge patriarchy. By recognizing Gloria's contribution, Barbie establishes a

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sense of support and solidarity with her. Therefore, the utterance combines a feminist message with positive politeness by appreciating Gloria's role in challenging patriarchal ideology.

Negative Politeness

According to Brown & Levinson (1987), negative politeness is a politeness strategy that avoids imposing one's will on others. This is done to respect their personal space and freedom. Negative politeness usually includes indirectness, politeness, and formality. There are 5 negative politenesses found in the Barbie (2023) movie. Three of the those are:

Barbie: "No thank you. I don't think it should go back to just the way it was. No Barbie or Ken should be living in the shadows."

The utterance shows feminist ideas through Barbie's refusal to return to her previous state, when Barbie and Ken had not yet been on an equal footing. This shows her view that both Barbie and Ken should have the same opportunity and recognition. In conveying this rejection, Barbie uses a negative politeness strategy. According to Brown & Levinson (1987), negative politeness is used to reduce the threat to the hearer's negative face, especially when the speaker needs to perform a face-threatening act such as refusing or disagreeing. The phrase "*No thank you*" indicates a rejection that is still conveyed politely, while "*I don't think*" makes the disapproval sound more subtle and less direct. The use of negative politeness strategies allows Barbie to convey her feminist views without sounding offensive or too confrontational. By softening her rejection, Barbie was still able to maintain her politeness towards her opponents, while showing her attitude towards gender equality. Therefore, this strategy helps Barbie convey the idea of equality in a more subtle way, but remains clear in showing her rejection of inequality.

Ken Kingsley: "Madame President, please could the Kens get one Supreme Court justice?"

This utterance shows a feminist-related idea through Ken's request for the Kens to have a share of institutional power. By asking for a Supreme Court justice, Ken expresses the idea that the Kens should also have representation and access to positions of power, which reflects a claim for gender equality. In conveying this request, Ken uses a negative politeness strategy. According to Brown & Levinson (1987), negative politeness is used to minimize the imposition placed on the hearer and to respect the hearer's negative face. This can be seen in the use of the honorific address "*Madame President*", the polite marker "*please*", and the modal "*could*". These expressions make the request less direct and reduce the pressure placed on the President to fulfill it. Ken's use of negative politeness allows him to voice his desire for equal representation without issuing a direct command. Ken is challenging the current distribution of institutional power, but the request is more respectful and less confrontational in the polite form. Thus, negative politeness enables Ken to make his claim of equality in a socially acceptable way and to state his demand for representation explicitly.

Gloria: "What about 'Ordinary Barbie'?" " She's not extraordinary! ... it's OK to just want to be a mom or to want to be president or a mom who is president or not a mom who is also not president."

This statement reflects a feminist idea in that Gloria sees that a woman does not have to be "extraordinary" to have value. She says women should be free to pursue different paths in life, whether they want to be a mother, a president, both or neither. This implies that women should not be expected to meet certain standards to be considered worthy. In expressing this idea, Gloria employs a negative politeness strategy. Brown and Levinson say that negative politeness is used to reduce the imposition of the speaker on the hearer and to show respect for the hearer's freedom of choice. This is seen in "What about 'Ordinary Barbie'?," in which she puts forward her suggestion as a question, not a statement. In this way, Gloria softens her suggestion and makes it less like a direct challenge to the CEO. The employment of negative politeness permits Gloria to challenge the pre-existing assumptions about women, but in a respectful and less aggressive manner. Although she is challenging the idea that women need to be extraordinary to have value, the indirect form gives her space to express this feminist

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view in a more careful and socially acceptable way. Thus, the strategy helps her communicate the idea of women's freedom and equality while maintaining politeness in the interaction.

Off-Record

Off-record is the most indirect politeness strategy in Brown & Levinson (1987) theory, this strategy is used for the speaker to convey a message ambiguously so that no single interpretation can be attributed to them, leaving the listener to guess the intended meaning. There are six off-record in Barbie movie (2023), the three of them are:

Barbie: "Jeez, you would think a construction site at lunchtime would be the perfect place for a little woman-power. But this one was so... male."

The utterance is an indication of feminist frustration regarding the exclusion of women from male-dominated public spaces. This statement indicates that gendered spaces continue to be shaped by an implicit expectation that certain fields, such as construction work, remain "*male*" fields, even in mundane, everyday settings. The trailing, unfinished phrase "*so... male*" emphasizes the speaker's critique of an environment she experiences as hostile or exclusionary toward women, without naming the specific behavior that formed this impression. From a feminist perspective, the utterance can therefore be understood as a subtle rejection of male-dominated fields and as an expression of consciousness in relation to the marginalization of women within them.

According to Brown & Levinson (1987) Politeness Theory, this utterance is an example of an off-record strategy. The speaker criticizes the construction site indirectly, relying on irony and understatement rather than stating explicitly what was wrong with it. The phrase "*so... male*" is left deliberately incomplete, allowing the listener to guess the intended criticism rather than having it stated directly. The speaker is not confronting a specific person or claim outright but instead voices her frustration in a way that remains ambiguous and deniable. The use of this language by off-record strategy, in this way, supports the feminist reading, as it shows how indirectness can still function as a means of expressing resistance to gendered spaces, even when the speaker avoids obvious confrontation.

Mattel CEO: "Always be empowering girls! Always! What do we really sell? We sell dreams! Imagination! And sparkle!"

The utterance is a feminist critique of the way corporate culture uses the language of empowerment for commercial purposes. This statement implies that phrases like "empowering girls" have become detached from any genuine commitment to gender equality and have now become marketing rhetoric within a profit-driven system. The repetition of 'Always' and the increasing list, 'dreams! Imagination! And sparkle!' highlight the speaker's parody of the way that feminist language can be reduced to a marketing pitch, depoliticized. From a feminist perspective, the utterance can therefore be understood as a satirical exposure of corporate co-optation, revealing the gap between the appearance of empowerment and its actual commercial function.

The utterance is an example of an off-record strategy in the sense of the Politeness Theory of Brown & Levinson (1987). The CEO doesn't say that the company's real purpose is profit, not empowerment, but instead raises the rhetorical question "*What do we really sell?*" and answers it himself, leading the listener to the implied conclusion without committing himself to the admission on record. The rhetorical question allows the speaker to reveal the company's true priorities, but in such a way that they can plausibly deny it, because the answer is expressed as enthusiasm, not confession. The off-record strategy use of this language, in this way, supports the feminist reading, as it shows how indirectness can serve to conceal but also to reveal the contradiction between empowerment rhetoric and corporate self-interest, allowing the critique to emerge through implication rather than direct statement.

Ken (Ryan Gosling): "Why didn't Barbie tell me about Patriarchy? Which, according to my understanding, is where men and horses run everything!"

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The statement is a mark of feminist critique of the misunderstanding or downplaying of the gender-power structures like patriarchy, even by those who benefit from them. This statement suggests that Ken has a very limited understanding of patriarchy as a systemic oppression and instead comically misinterprets it literally as *"where men and horses run everything."* This absurd, exaggerated definition exposes the speaker's underlying complaint of being left uninformed, while also showing how patriarchy can be misrecognized, reduced to a simplistic power fantasy rather than a critical concept. Thus, from a feminist perspective, the utterance can be interpreted as an ironic unveiling of male ignorance concerning the very systems of power that benefit them, and as a call for genuine consciousness rather than a shallow assimilation of the notion. According to Brown & Levinson (1987) Politeness Theory, this utterance is an example of an off-record strategy. Ken does not directly accuse Barbie of hiding information from him, instead he presents the rhetorical question "*Why didn't Barbie tell me about Patriarchy?*", which implies a complaint and places responsibility on her without confronting her explicitly. The addition of his flawed definition further distances the utterance from a direct accusation, framing it instead as a obliviousness rather than a pointed criticism. This use of a rhetorical question allows Ken to voice his complaint while avoiding direct confrontation, preserving plausible deniability about whether he is genuinely blaming Barbie or simply expressing confusion. The use of this language by off-record strategy, in this way, supports the feminist reading, as it shows how indirectness can reveal the gap between male entitlement to power and actual understanding of the systems that sustain it, letting the critique of superficial engagement with patriarchy surface through implication rather than direct statement.

Discussion

The results findings that Barbie (2023) contains 42 feminist utterances. However, only 40 of these utterances manifested politeness strategies that could be identified based on Brown & Levinson (1987) theory. The other two utterances did not show any of the four politeness strategies analyzed in this study. In the 40 utterances, bald-on-record was the most frequently used strategy, appearing in 20 utterances, followed by positive politeness (8 utterances), off-record (6 utterances), negative politeness (5 utterances) and one utterance combining positive politeness and bald-on-record strategies. The distribution indicates that feminist ideas are mostly transmitted by means of direct speech in the movie. Other politeness strategies are used for expressing ideas indirectly, for maintaining social relations and making statements socially acceptable. Therefore, politeness in Barbie is not merely a matter of social relations, but it is also a way of expressing resistance and negotiating power.

Directness as a Marker of Feminist Assertion

The frequency of bald on-record strategies demonstrates how direct speech can be a form of feminist resistance. Barbie Margot's question, *"ARE THERE ANY WOMEN IN CHARGE?!"* and Sasha's blunt statement about misogyny show the character's choosing confrontation over face-saving. Women can use politeness or impoliteness to show their independence and resist traditional expectations. It also contrasts with Lakoff (1975) observation that women's speech is often assumed to be more indirect and careful. In Barbie, though, directness is a tool the female characters use to project confidence and resist patriarchy.

Positive Politeness as a Double-Edged Strategy

The second most common strategy is positive politeness but it has different purposes. The Barbies and Gloria use it to build up solidarity and support shared female experiences; the Kens use it to build up solidarity between themselves and support patriarchal ideas. One example is how Ken uses *"we"* when he talks about *"Patriarchy"*. Thus, positive politeness is not an inherent source of empowerment or oppression, it is a matter of the speaker and the notion being supported. This finding is also different from Fridolini et al. (2021) who found

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positive politeness as the most frequent strategy found in Little Women. In Barbie bald on-record strategies are more dominant in feminist statements.

Negative Politeness as Strategic Softening

Negative politeness is the least frequent strategy and appears when characters make requests or challenge authority. Barbie's refusal to return to the previous condition of Barbieland and Ken Kingsley's request for a Supreme Court seat are examples. In both cases the characters do not ask for things directly, but use softer language. This supports Brown & Levinson (1987) idea that negative politeness helps to protect the hearer's freedom of action. The findings also indicate that requests for access to power are often couched more cautiously, as they can threaten existing authority.

Off-Record Strategies and Criticism

The off-record strategies mainly appear when the movie criticizes systems and ideas. Mattel CEO's question *"What do we really sell?"* is open to questions about the commercialization of feminism, while Ken's parody of the explanation of patriarchy shows that he does not understand what the concept means. The movie can critique these ideas through rhetorical questions and irony, without making direct accusations. This supports Yakali (2024) discussion of Barbie as a post-feminist text that both critiques and benefits from feminist branding.

Overall, the findings indicate the potential for studying feminist discourse through the lens of Brown & Levinson (1987) politeness theory. The politeness strategies in Barbie go beyond social harmony. They may be employed to express resistance, to develop solidarity or to reproduce existing relations of power. Bald on-record strategies mainly promote direct feminist resistance while negative politeness illustrates how the characters mitigate their language when facing authority. This also supports Li (2025) argument that feminist linguistics is not simply about the differences between men's and women's speech but the power relations behind it. This study focuses only on dialogue containing explicit feminist statements, while non-verbal and cinematographic elements are not included. Since Barbie relies heavily on visual and performative elements, these aspects may also contribute to its feminist meaning. Future research could examine how visual elements, performance, and politeness strategies work together, or compare Barbie with other contemporary feminist films to determine whether the dominance of bald on-record strategies is specific to this film or part of a wider pattern.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings show that feminist ideas in Barbie (2023) are mainly expressed through politeness strategies. Of the 1,114 utterances in the movie transcript, 42 contained feminist ideas, and 40 employed politeness strategies. Based on Brown & Levinson (1987) framework, bald on-record was the most frequent strategy (20 utterances), followed by positive politeness (8), off-record (6), and negative politeness (5). One utterance combined positive politeness and bald on-record strategies. These results indicate that feminist ideas are predominantly conveyed through direct statements, particularly when resisting gender inequality and patriarchal norms. Positive politeness can establish solidarity but may also reinforce patriarchal values, depending on the speaker's intentions. Negative politeness enables disagreement and requests without imposing demands, while off-record strategies convey criticism through irony, rhetorical questions, and implied meanings. Overall, politeness strategies serve not only to maintain social relationships but also to express and negotiate power. Thus, politeness can facilitate resistance or reinforce existing gender hierarchies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Dr. Muhammad Yusuf, S.Pd., M.A., Head of English Literature Study Program and Dr. Dian Marisha Puteri, S.S., M.Si., Secretary of English

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Literature Study Program who have given guidance, support and encouragement during the process of finishing this research. The authors would also like to express their deepest gratitude to their parents for their unending love, prayers, support and encouragement that have been an important part in the completion of this study. Finally, the authors would like to thank all the people who have directly or indirectly contributed to the completion of this research.

DECLARATION

Author Contributions: Jesika Br Sitio coordinated the research, identified relevant utterances, conducted the analysis, and drafted the manuscript. Rizka Amalia and Gifa Auzira Alivia assisted with data classification and interpretation. Hikmah Alya contributed to the examination of politeness strategies and manuscript preparation. Rahmadsyah Rangkuti provided theoretical guidance, academic supervision, and critical feedback. All authors approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no competing interests related to this study or its publication.

Funding: This research was conducted without external financial support or institutional grants.

Ethical Approval: This study analyzed dialogue from the publicly released film *Barbie* (2023) and did not involve human participants. Ethical approval was therefore not required.

Informed Consent: Not applicable, as the research relied exclusively on film dialogue and documentary analysis.

Use of Generative AI: Generative AI was used, where applicable, to assist with language editing and improving manuscript readability. Data identification, theoretical analysis, interpretation, and conclusions were the authors' responsibility.

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