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## Politeness Strategies in Directive Questions: A Case Study of Jimmy Fallon on The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon

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Sakut Anshori<sup>1</sup>, Arbain<sup>2</sup>, Abd. Rahman Zain<sup>3</sup>

Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup, Bengkulu, Indonesia<sup>1</sup>, Universitas Widya Gama Mahakam, Samarinda, Indonesia<sup>2</sup>, Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia<sup>3</sup>

[sakutanshori@iaincurup.ac.id](mailto:sakutanshori@iaincurup.ac.id)<sup>1</sup>, [baintigers@gmail.com](mailto:baintigers@gmail.com)<sup>2</sup>, [zainarablack@gmail.com](mailto:zainarablack@gmail.com)<sup>3</sup>

Correspondence author Email: [zainarablack@gmail.com](mailto:zainarablack@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

This study examines politeness strategies in directive utterances formed as questions by Jimmy Fallon, host of The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon. Utilizing Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle, the research identifies and describes how politeness strategies are employed in interactions between Fallon and his guests. A qualitative descriptive approach is adopted, with data sourced from transcripts of 10 selected videos of The Tonight Show, chosen based on criteria such as popularity, guest prominence, and topic relevance. The analysis focuses on Leech's six politeness maxims: Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy. Findings reveal that Fallon consistently employs politeness strategies, particularly the Tact and Approbation Maxims. The Tact Maxim is manifested through polite language structures, including modal auxiliaries, indirect requests, and hedging devices, aimed at reducing the interlocutor's communicative burden. The Approbation Maxim is reflected in explicit and implicit praise, as well as genuine interest in guests' stories, enhancing their image and fostering interpersonal rapport. Additionally, the Agreement and Sympathy Maxims are utilized to maximize alignment and demonstrate empathy. The study concludes that Fallon's use of politeness strategies not only mitigates potential threats to the guests' "face" but also cultivates a positive, engaging, and entertaining communication environment. These findings contribute to pragmatic research in popular media, particularly in understanding politeness dynamics in entertainment talk shows. The practical implication underscores the significance of politeness strategies in public communication to foster effective, respectful, and enjoyable interactions.

**Keywords:** politeness strategies; directive questions; Leech's politeness principle; The Tonight Show; entertainment talk show

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## 1. Introduction

In verbal communication, politeness plays a crucial role in fostering harmonious interactions, particularly in entertainment media contexts such as talk shows. As a form of public discourse, talk shows not only serve as a platform for information dissemination but also reflect social norms and communication strategies employed by hosts in engaging with guests



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and audiences (Aini et al., 2022a). In this capacity, talk show hosts are responsible for managing conversational dynamics to ensure an engaging and effective discussion. This entails the ability to elicit in-depth information while maintaining ethical communication standards, thereby fostering an interaction that respects both the position and perspectives of the guests (Aini et al., 2023).

However, striking a balance between information exploration and communication ethics is not without challenges. Tensions in talk shows may arise due to confrontational or impolite questioning, which can lead guests to adopt a defensive stance, thereby hindering the flow of discussion (Li & Tang, 2022). In some cases, guests may not be given adequate opportunities to respond, potentially creating an uncomfortable communicative atmosphere (Trissya, 2023). Impoliteness in talk shows is not exclusively attributed to the host; rather, it may also stem from the guests' behaviors or responses, influencing audience perceptions of the discussion dynamics (Khotimah et al., 2023; Adrian & Satria, 2024).

In this context, the application of politeness strategies is essential to ensuring that discussions remain productive without compromising the clarity of information or the comfort of participants. As the primary facilitator, the talk show host is not only expected to extract information effectively but also to demonstrate verbal politeness towards interlocutors (Wildan et al., 2024). Consequently, the implementation of politeness strategies in directive speech acts, particularly in the form of questions, serves as a key mechanism for maintaining the balance between information-seeking and respect for the guest (Aini et al., 2022b). Searle (1976) classifies questions as a type of directive speech act that elicits a response from the listener—not in the form of physical action, but rather a linguistic response (Ronan, 2022). Leech (2014: 152) further argues that questions provide interlocutors with greater freedom in responding, thereby rendering them more polite than direct commands.

Research on politeness strategies in directive speech acts has been conducted across various contexts; however, existing studies primarily focus on political talk shows (Wahyuni & Ramadhan, 2020; Syah, 2021; Arief et al., 2022; Haryanto et al., 2024). These studies



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indicate that political talk show hosts tend to employ bald-on-record strategies to convey speech in a direct and explicit manner when extracting information from guests, who are often politicians. Meanwhile, reality talk shows frequently adopt negative politeness strategies, characterized by the use of hedge questions to maintain social distance and respect the negative face of the interlocutor (Ruansyah & Rukmini, 2018; Suyono & Andriyanti, 2021). Although these studies have provided valuable insights, research on politeness strategies in entertainment talk shows remains limited, particularly those hosted by comedians.

Additionally, previous studies have examined politeness strategies in directive speech acts (Prayitno et al., 2021; AlShurafa et al., 2022), yet they have not focused on specific sub-strategies. Prior research on talk show interactions has emphasized the use of politeness strategies in directive speech acts to mitigate the imposition on the interlocutor (Adelinda & Juita, 2021; Aini et al., 2022a; Aini et al., 2023); however, these studies have not explored other aspects of directive speech, particularly questions posed by hosts that may convey appreciation, agreement, or sympathy. For instance, questions delivered with humor or compliments can foster a more amicable relationship with the guest while maintaining politeness.

To address this gap, this study examines the politeness strategies in Jimmy Fallon's questions as the host of *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*. Known for his humorous and interactive communication style, Fallon employs varied politeness strategies that minimize imposition, foster an enjoyable atmosphere, build rapport, and demonstrate respect for guests.

Using Leech's (1983) politeness principles as its theoretical framework, this study analyzes six maxims: Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy. These maxims reveal how Fallon structures his questions to maintain politeness. For instance, the Tact Maxim is reflected in his avoidance of overly direct or intrusive questions, while the Approbation Maxim appears in his frequent expressions of appreciation toward guests.

This study contributes to the understanding of politeness dynamics in entertainment talk shows, particularly those hosted by comedians. Additionally, it expands the literature on



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politeness strategies in questioning, an area that remains underexplored, while offering insights into their role in shaping audience perceptions of talk show interactions.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze question utterances reflecting politeness strategies in *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*. This method is suitable for exploring contextual meanings in verbal interactions without hypothesis testing, as in quantitative research. Moleong (2018) emphasizes that qualitative research prioritizes inductive analysis and descriptive inquiry, focusing on processes rather than outcomes. Santosa (2021) further states that a descriptive approach structures linguistic analysis based on empirical phenomena. Therefore, this approach is deemed appropriate for uncovering question patterns that reflect politeness strategies in the context of entertainment.

This study analyzes question utterances using Leech's (1983) politeness principles—Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy Maxims—which maintain social harmony in communication. These principles align with the dialogic nature of entertainment media, where speakers prioritize interlocutors' interests and avoid conversational dominance. Their application enables the host and guests to uphold politeness, foster engagement, and leave a positive impression on the audience.

### 2.2 Data Collection Techniques

This study employs documentation as the data collection method, which involves analyzing written and audiovisual sources (Bowen, 2009). Primary data are drawn from *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* videos on YouTube, selected based on three criteria: (1) high view counts to reflect audience appeal, (2) guest appearances of well-known public figures to capture diverse conversational dynamics, and (3) topic relevance to current Hollywood issues. Ten videos meeting these criteria were selected for analysis.



Transcripts were obtained through direct downloads or manual transcription, then verified against the original recordings for accuracy. Each host's question was documented with its conversational context to facilitate analysis using Leech's (1983) politeness principles. To ensure validity, two independent pragmatics experts reviewed the data, and their feedback was refined through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) before finalizing the dataset for analysis.

### 2.3 Data Analysis Techniques

This study follows the four-stage data analysis model by Miles et al. (2014) to examine question utterances reflecting politeness strategies in a talk show setting. The first stage, data collection, involves selecting *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* YouTube channel as the research object due to its popularity, diverse guest lineup, and relevance to Hollywood culture. The second stage, data reduction and display, filters out irrelevant data, retaining only question utterances aligned with the research objectives. These utterances are classified based on Leech's (1983) politeness principles and presented in tables and descriptive narratives for pattern identification. Purposive sampling ensures variations in conversational contexts.

The third stage, data analysis and interpretation, identifies recurring linguistic patterns and examines their social implications within the talk show discourse. The final stage, conclusion drawing, synthesizes key findings, offering theoretical and practical insights into politeness strategies in media discourse while acknowledging study limitations for future research directions.

### 3. Findings

This study applies Leech's (1983) politeness principles to analyze the politeness strategies in Jimmy Fallon's questions to guests on *The Tonight Show*. The analysis focuses on six maxims: Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy. However, no instances of the Generosity Maxim and Modesty Maxim were identified in the dataset. The table below presents the findings along with their analysis, highlighting the maxims observed in Fallon's questioning style.



Table 1: Distribution of Politeness Strategies in Talk shows

No	TALKSHOW	Total Data of Politeness Strategies			
		Tact	Approbation	Agreement	Sympathy
1.	Angelina Jolie	9	5	1	2
2.	Tom Holland	2	8	2	2
3.	Rose	5	11	-	-
4.	Jenna Ortega	6	6	2	-
5.	Olivia Rodrigo	4	5		1
6.	Sabrina Carpenter	2	3	-	-
7.	Conan O'brien	3	1	1	-
8.	David Gilmour	5	6	-	-
9.	Channing Tatum	6	2	1	-
10.	Emma Stone	2	5	-	-
<b>TOTAL DATA</b>		<b>54</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>4</b>
		<b>115</b>			

### A. Question to Minimize Cost to Interlocutors (Tact Maxim)

The principle of Tact Maxim, as outlined in Leech's (1983) politeness theory, emphasizes the speaker's efforts to minimize communication costs or burdens on the interlocutor. This is reflected in the use of polite, non-imposing language structures that provide the interlocutor with space to respond comfortably.

#### 1) *Modal Auxiliary Structures*

Code: TS 3 – D17

Context: Jimmy inquires about the inspiration behind the song “APT” sung by Rose

Utterance: “**Can** you explain where the idea came from for APT?”

The modal auxiliary “can” conveys politeness by allowing the interlocutor to choose whether to respond, making the request casual and non-imposing. This approach reduces face threat and aligns with Tact Maxim, ensuring a comfortable interaction.

#### 2) *Indirect Request Formations (Conditional Clause)*

Code: TS 1 – D8

Context: Jimmy asks permission to discuss rumors about Angelina Jolie’s other careers



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Utterance: “**I was wondering if I could ask you** if these rumors are true of other careers that you might have had?”

The speaker employs “I was wondering” and “if I could ask you” to express caution and politeness, aligning with Tact Maxim by offering the interlocutor the choice to respond. This indirect approach conveys that the speaker respects the interlocutor’s privacy and comfort, thus maintaining a harmonious interpersonal relationship. As noted by Ackermann (2023), such strategies are effective in minimizing face-threatening acts.

3) *Hedging Devices*

Code: TS 8 – D6

Context: Jimmy asks Jenna Ortega to rate an iconic film

Utterance: “I was **just wondering maybe** if I can go over a couple of them and you could tell me if they're true or not?”

The speaker employs hedging devices like *just wondering* and *maybe* to soften the request, reducing its force and aligning with Tact Maxim. This strategy minimizes pressure, mitigates face threats, and preserves a positive social impression by giving the interlocutor full control over their response.

**B. Question to Maximize Praise to Interlocutors (Approbation Maxim)**

The principle of Approbation Maxim in Leech's (1983) politeness theory emphasizes the speaker's efforts to maximize praise or appreciation toward the interlocutor while minimizing criticism or disapproval. This is reflected in the use of questions that acknowledge, appreciate, or express interest in the interlocutor.

1) *Explicitly Showing Appreciation or Recognition of the Interlocutor*

Code: TS 8 – D8

Context: Jimmy asks David Gilmour while offering recognition

Utterance: “Before you were a **famous musician**, you were a model?”



This question both seeks information and acknowledges the interlocutor's status. By calling David a *famous musician*, Jimmy recognizes his achievements, aligning with the Approbation Maxim to maximize praise, foster a positive impression, and strengthen interpersonal relationships.

2) *Implicitly Showing Appreciation or Recognition of the Interlocutor*

Code: TS 3 – D3

Context: Jimmy asks about Rose's childhood dreams

Utterance: "When you were a kid, did you ever dream that you'd be this big of a star?"

This question subtly acknowledges Rose's achievements without explicit praise, implying her extraordinary stardom. By asking if she ever dreamed of such success, Jimmy indirectly recognizes her accomplishments, aligning with the Approbation Maxim by maximizing praise in a tactful, non-intrusive manner.

3) *Showing Interest in the Topic Being Discussed or the Interlocutor's Story*

Code: TS 9 – D10

Context: Jimmy asks how Channing Tatum felt working on a film with his fiancée

Utterance: "What was it like working with your fiancée while they're directing a film?"

This question conveys interest in the interlocutor's experience without direct praise but implicitly acknowledges its significance. By focusing on a meaningful topic for Channing Tatum, Jimmy demonstrates respect and appreciation, aligning with the Approbation Maxim to foster a positive and engaging interaction.

### **C. Question to Seek Agreement (Agreement Maxim)**

The principle of Agreement Maxim in Leech's (1983) politeness theory emphasizes the speaker's efforts to maximize agreement and minimize disagreement in communication interactions.

1) *Ensuring Agreement on Plans*

Code: TS 2 – D8



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Context: Jimmy asks Tom Holland for confirmation about Jimmy Fallon's child being a fan of the actor in *Spider-Man 4*.

Utterance: "Can we confirm this tonight?"

The phrase "Can we confirm" seeks validation and mutual understanding, minimizing disagreement and aligning with the Agreement Maxim. By using a question instead of a direct command, Jimmy Fallon fosters a respectful, collaborative atmosphere while avoiding face-threatening acts.

#### 2) *Asking for Approval on an Opinion*

Code: TS 2 – D9

Context: Jimmy asks the audience about the "rizz master" comment.

Utterance: "Do you agree, Is Tom Holland the ultimate rizz master?"

The phrase "Do you agree" invites audience participation while respecting their autonomy. Although it seeks agreement on Tom Holland as *the ultimate rizz master*, it allows for differing views, aligning with the Agreement Maxim and fostering an open, non-imposing interaction.

#### **D. Question to Show Sympathy (Sympathy Maxim)**

The principle of Sympathy Maxim in Leech's (1983) politeness theory emphasizes the speaker's efforts to show sympathy or empathy for the interlocutor's feelings or situation. This is done by minimizing antipathy and maximizing sympathy in communication interactions.

Code: TS 1 – D13

Context: Jimmy asks Angelina Jolie about her feelings of nervousness, particularly when singing.

Utterance: "I know how nervous you feel on talk shows, but do you get nervous singing?"

This utterance applies the Sympathy Maxim by acknowledging Angelina Jolie's nervousness, fostering empathy and support. The follow-up question maintains this context,



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expressing both interest and care, thereby maximizing sympathy and minimizing antipathy in the interaction.

#### 4. Discussion

The use of directive speech acts in *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, particularly in the form of questions, reflects strategic politeness through the Tact and Approbation Maxims. This approach fosters an engaging and harmonious interaction, aligning with cultural norms and audience expectations in entertainment. By minimizing imposition and allowing guests to express themselves freely, Fallon exemplifies the Tact Maxim, reinforcing the role of language simplicity in effective communication (Gurova, 2020).

Beyond reducing imposition, the Approbation Maxim enhances interaction by incorporating both explicit and implicit praise. This strategy not only elevates guests' public image but also strengthens interpersonal relationships (Wildan et al., 2024). Sifianou (2019) further emphasizes that politeness reflects moral values, contributing to communicative harmony. Through respectful and engaging language, Fallon cultivates a warm atmosphere, appealing to a global audience with diverse politeness norms.

The impact of these strategies extends to audience perception. As Ardila (2019) argues, a speaker's communication style shapes how they are received. By maintaining politeness through question-based interaction, Fallon projects professionalism and respect, enhancing the show's appeal as both entertainment and a model of effective communication. His ability to balance professionalism with informality fosters meaningful engagement with guests and viewers alike.

The application of politeness strategies in *The Tonight Show* underscores the significance of pragmatic principles in media discourse, particularly in multicultural settings. As Ackermann (2023) notes, communicative harmony is essential for building positive social relationships. By framing the analysis within Leech's (1983) politeness theory, this study highlights how talk shows serve as platforms for interactive, cross-cultural communication, offering insights into the role of language in shaping audience engagement.



## 5. Conclusion

This study examines the politeness strategies employed in Jimmy Fallon's questions as the host of *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, using Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle as an analytical framework. The findings reveal that Fallon systematically applies the Tact, Approbation, Agreement, and Sympathy Maxims to foster a respectful, engaging, and entertaining communication environment.

First, the Tact Maxim is evident in Fallon's use of polite linguistic structures, such as modal auxiliaries, indirect requests, and hedging, which reduce imposition and create a relaxed conversational atmosphere. Second, the Approbation Maxim is reflected in explicit and implicit praise, as well as demonstrated interest in guests' experiences, enhancing their public image and strengthening interpersonal rapport. Third, the Agreement Maxim is employed through questions seeking confirmation or approval, minimizing potential disagreement and fostering a cooperative exchange. Finally, the Sympathy Maxim is manifested in expressions of empathy and concern, reinforcing emotional connection and support during interactions.

Overall, the study highlights how Fallon's politeness strategies not only mitigate threats to guests' "face" but also contribute to a dynamic and engaging talk-show environment that aligns with cultural norms and audience expectations. These findings underscore the broader role of politeness in media discourse, particularly in entertainment settings where maintaining a balance between professionalism and informality is essential.

However, this study is limited to the talk-show context. Future research could explore politeness strategies in diverse communicative settings, systematically analyzing social variables such as power, status, and relational distance. Additionally, a comparative study of politeness strategies across different cultural and demographic contexts would further enrich our understanding of how politeness operates in natural interactions.

### DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used AI-assisted tools, including ChatGPT, Grammarly, and QuillBot, to support language editing and improve grammatical



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accuracy. The authors carefully reviewed and edited the output generated by these tools and take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript

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