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POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN NBC'S "LITTLE BIG SHOTS" PROGRAM

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Abstract
This study explores politeness strategies in intergenerational media interactions, a conversational exchange between the host Steve Harvey and three-year-old James, the youngest mayor of Dorset, Minnesota, on NBC's *Little Big Shots* TV program. The study is based on Brown-Levinson's politeness theory (1987). Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the research examined how politeness strategies are employed in a media environment involving a child participant and shows the delicate balance among entertainment goals, institutional discourse, and face preservation. The results uncover sophisticated applications of the four strategies of politeness, namely bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies that make communication across age differences effective while upholding audience engagement and participant comfort. The findings offer insights into how subtle communicative tactics are used to play social roles, uphold institutional esteem, and foster authentic adult-child interactions in television programming.

Keywords: NBC's *Little Big Shots* talk show, politeness strategies

Introduction
Maintaining balance among communications, entertainment, and conversations with children on television is a complex game, clearly illustrated in NBC's *Little Big Shots*, where adult hosts manage interaction with young participants before a live audience while maintaining face and viewer interest (Thornborrow, 2015). This study addresses how politeness strategies are employed in the show "Is This the World's Youngest Mayor?". Brown-Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies prove operational in face-to-face communication and televised discourse where public face management is important (Culpeper, 2005). In social media contexts involving children, institutional discourse demands a careful trade-off between entertainment objectives and face preservation (O'Keeffe, 2006).

Previous studies have examined Brown-Levinson's politeness strategies in various contexts. Yaqoob (2024) found that context and audience influence politeness strategy choice, with professional emails using positive politeness while

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social media leans toward negative politeness. Khan, Aadil, and Aurangzaib (2022) revealed that hosts and guests in Pakistani Morning shows employ positive politeness frequently to maintain close relationships, with power ranks affecting strategy choice. Salim (2022) determined that positive politeness was the dominant strategy used by Premier League managers in post-match press conferences. While studies have examined politeness strategies in media contexts like Oprah's talk show interviews (Kusanaghi, 2023) and "Little Women" movie dialogue (Fridolini, 2021), this research uniquely addresses politeness strategies in child-adult interactions on *Little Big Shots*, specifically focusing on the episode featuring 3-year-old James from Minnesota and host Steve Harvey.

Unlike previous research, which has predominantly focused on adult interactions, this study explores the dynamics of politeness strategies involving young children in media, extending our understanding of effective politeness strategies in mediated discourse. Television's extensive influence on young viewers creates unique communicative challenges in maintaining the balance between communication and entertainment (Tolson, 2006; Heritage, 2005). This research is situated within media discourse analysis, examining communication dynamics in televised interactions (Ekström, 2009; Stivers & Sidnell, 2005). Brown-Levinson's theory remains relevant for television discourse where public face management is critical (Culpeper, 2005), particularly in media involving children where institutional discourse demands careful balance between entertainment and face preservation (O'Keeffe, 2006; Peters, 1999).

Studies of politeness strategies have been extensive in pragmatics and sociolinguistics (Leech, 1983; Fraser, 1990). Mills (2003) defines politeness as behaviour respecting social boundaries, while Holmes (1995) emphasizes its dual purpose of showing positive regard while maintaining appropriate distance (Watts, 2003; Ide, 1998). These align with Brown-Levinson's theory, which centred on the concept of 'face' in public self-image (Goffman, 1967; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Brown-Levinson's (1987) four politeness strategies, bald-on-record (BOR), positive politeness (PP), negative politeness (NP), and off-record strategy (ORS), are employed variably in different social settings. BOR involves direct communication, often used in close relationships. PP acknowledges the listener's need for recognition and acceptance. NP aims to minimize imposition and uphold social boundaries. ORS allows speakers to perform face-threatening actions indirectly through hints, metaphors, and rhetorical questions (Eelen, 2001; Yanti, 2017). These strategies guide speakers in navigating social situations while fostering harmonious relationships (Leech, 1983; Watts, 2003).

Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to analyse politeness strategies utilized by Steve Harvey during his interactions with child participants on NBC's *Little Big Shots* (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Silverman, 2006). The specific episode as the object of analysis featured a three-year-old James from Minnesota interacting with an adult host, Steve Harvey. There was a unique dynamic between an adult host and a remarkably young participant, where there is a complexity of balancing between entertainment value and face-preservation in

broadcast media. It is in such interactional dynamics that politeness strategies are examined within institutional discourse involving children (Maxwell, 2012; Patton, 2002). Data from the televised episode, textual and visual in nature, were collected by way of observation and systematic documentation, adhering to Bowen's (2009) framework for document analysis without any direct intervention (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Creswell, 2013). The steps in brief were as follows. First, all verbal interactions were transcribed completely. Next, the data were systematically coded based on Brown-Levinson's (1987) politeness strategy framework covering four main categories. Finally, the patterns in strategy deployment were thoroughly interpreted to reveal how politeness strategies function in the context (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The categories and classifications were regularly reviewed and refined to ensure consistent alignment with the study's objectives (Punch, 2013; Krueger & Casey, 2014).

This study used a descriptive qualitative method to examine Steve Harvey's politeness techniques employed in interactions with child participants on NBC's *Little Big Shots* (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Silverman, 2006). Presented as "the world's youngest mayor," the particular episode centred on three-year-old James from Minnesota. The special adult-child dynamics and the balance between entertainment value and face-preservation in broadcast media helped to choose this scenario. The study looked at politeness techniques used in institutional speech with regard to children (Maxwell, 2012; Patton, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Following Bowen's (2009) approach for document analysis without direct intervention, the data collection consisted of observation and documentation of the televised programme (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Creswell, 2013). NBC's official platform helped one acquire the episode. Every spoken interaction, including paralinguistic elements like tone, pauses, and laughter that was recorded. Reliability was confirmed by several studies verifying the transcription (Tracy, 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, recorded as possibly influencing politeness methods were contextual components, including audience emotions and production aspects.

Using Brown-Levinson's (1987) four politeness technique categories, namely, bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies, the analysis followed a methodical approach, dividing transcribed exchanges into meaningful parts and coding them. Particularly emphasised were specific language markers including pragmatic functions and lexical choices (Saldaña, 2015; Gibbs, 2018). Considering elements including power dynamics and institutional restrictions, the researchers applied comparative approaches to find trends across several divisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Through peer debriefing, categories were routinely examined to guarantee fit with study goals (Punch, 2013; Krueger & Casey, 2014). By means of negative case analysis, conflicting events were found, hence improving analytical rigour (Morse et al., 2002; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings and Discussion

Analysing politeness strategies within television entertainment offers a compelling exploration of the management of social interactions, particularly in contexts characterized by significant age differences between the interlocutors. The

television show *Little Big Shots*, featuring Steve Harvey's interview with James, the three-year-old mayor of Dorset, Minnesota, serves as an exemplary case for analysing these dynamics. This interaction uniquely combines several challenging elements: the atypical situation of a child holding a mayoral position, the demands of television entertainment, and the necessity of maintaining appropriate social boundaries while engaging with diverse audiences. Utilizing Brown-Levinson's (1987) theory, the scrutiny focuses on how participants navigate these intricate social requirements while preserving face, the result of which is presented in the following.

Table 1. Politeness strategies by characters

Characters	Types of Politeness Strategies							
	BOR		PP		NP		ORS	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Steve Harvey	1	33%	3	75%	1	33%	2	50%
Mayor James	2	67%	1	25%	2	67%	2	50%
Total	3	100%	4	100%	3	100%	4	100%

Notes:
BOR : bald on record
PP : positive politeness
NP : negative politeness
ORS : off-record strategies

The interaction between Steve Harvey and young Mayor James illustrates a sophisticated adaptation of these four strategies to balance formal recognition of James's role with age-appropriate interaction, while concurrently managing the presence of family members and audience expectations. This analysis elucidates how traditional politeness frameworks adapt to contemporary entertainment needs while fostering positive developmental outcomes for young participants, and at the same time maintaining harmony and demonstrating respect for others (Alfionita, 2023). It also provides insights into the broader implications for child development, media representation, and the evolution of social norms in public discourse.

Bald on record strategies in public entertainment

Bald-on-record strategies are characterized by direct communication, devoid of any attempts to soften or hedge the message. In the realm of public entertainment, these strategies are frequently employed to maintain a lively and engaging atmosphere while ensuring that the audience receives clear and unambiguous messages.

Excerpt 1:
Steve Harvey *Kind of like what the Republicans are doing now***,** (this is a direct, unambiguous comment about the election process).

Mayor James
a. *I check everybody's hands* (a straightforward and direct answer about his duties as mayor).
b. *My brother was a man twice* (a direct statement about his brother's age or role).

Within this context, Steve Harvey's remark, ***"****Kind of like what the Republicans are doing now"* serves as a quintessential example of a bald-on-record strategy. This statement directly addresses a political comparison in a humorous and straightforward manner, intended to capture the audience's attention through its candour. There is no attempt to mitigate or soften the statement, rendering it an unambiguous political observation designed to elicit a reaction from the audience.

Mayor James, despite his youth, employed bald-on-record communication strategies. His assertion, *"I check everybody's hands"* exemplifies a direct articulation of his responsibilities as mayor. The straightforwardness and clarity of this response are characteristic of bald-on-record communication. In this context, his unembellished reply offers an authentic and unfiltered reflection of his viewpoint. Although it may appear comically simplistic given his age, it serves as a quintessential example of bald-on-record communication, as it allows no room for misinterpretation.

When Mayor James stated, *"My brother was a man twice"* he maintained this direct approach. The statement's meaning is clear, with James straightforwardly recounting his brother's age. This also exemplifies the bald-on-record strategy, as it is a factual statement that leaves little to the imagination, a common feature in public discourse.

Positive politeness: Building solidarity in public discourse

Positive politeness strategies are employed to strengthen social connections, generate warmth, and foster solidarity among interlocutors. In public discourse, these strategies frequently involve expressions of appreciation, compliments, or positive sentiments to cultivate a more congenial and supportive environment.

Excerpt 2:

Steve Harvey
a. *You're the bestest man in the world* (complimenting James in a positive and affectionate way).
b. *I love you, you're very respectful* (praising James for his politeness).
c. *I think a lot of people like you too* (expressing admiration for James).

Mayor James *I like people* (a simple, positive statement showing friendliness)

Steve Harvey employed positive politeness techniques extensively in his interaction with Mayor James. His remark, *"You're the bestest man in the world"* exemplifies the use of positive reinforcement to enhance the relationship between the two participants. This compliment transcends mere praise, aiming to establish a profound sense of respect and admiration for the young mayor. Furthermore, when Steve Harvey stated *"I love you, you're very respectful"* he not only conveys

affection but also affirms James' behaviour as appropriate and commendable within the context of their dialogue. This form of positive politeness serves to reinforce James' status as a respected participant in the exchange, notwithstanding his young age. Steve further cultivated positive rapport with his assertion, *"I think a lot of people like you too,"* which acknowledges James' potential popularity, thereby contributing to a sense of mutual appreciation.

Mayor James, despite his relatively young age, employed positive politeness strategies in his communication, exemplified by his straightforward assertion, *"I like people."* This seemingly simple statement, while basic, effectively conveys his openness and affable nature, indicating his enjoyment in interacting with others. Through such expressions, James subtly fosters a positive atmosphere, even with his uncomplicated, childlike manner of expression.

Negative politeness: Maintaining boundaries in cross-generational interaction

Negative politeness strategies are essential for managing social hierarchies and maintaining respect for personal boundaries, particularly in contexts characterized by disparities in age or power. These strategies typically include hedging, apologizing, or employing indirect forms of address to avoid encroaching upon another individual's space or authority.

Excerpt 3:

Steve Harvey	*Can you make a table and calculate?* (giving space and allowing James to engage with the task at hand).
Mayor James	a. *Mr. Harvey* (using the respectful form of address, maintaining boundaries between an adult and a child). b. *My brother is 6* (stating his brother's age in a respectful, factual way, while maintaining a boundary of communication).

In this dialogue, Steve Harvey frequently employed negative politeness to ensure that the interaction with the young mayor remains comfortable and respectful. For instance, when he inquired of James, *"Can you make a table and calculate?* he frames the task in a manner that grants James the autonomy to engage without feeling coerced. The phrasing of the question allows James to respond at his own pace, thereby signalling respect for his capacity to contribute without placing him in an uncomfortable position.

Mayor James effectively utilized negative politeness through his use of the address form *"Mr. Harvey."* This ostensibly simple yet significant gesture maintains the formal boundary between the child and the adult, adhering to social norms that dictate children typically address adults with deference. Although James held the position of mayor in this context, the title *"Mr. Harvey"* signifies an acknowledgment of the generational and social differences between the two, ensuring that the interaction remains respectful and appropriate. Another instance of negative politeness is evident in the manner in which James discusses his brother's age. By stating *"My brother is 6"* without further elaboration, he respected the boundary between necessary information and what could be

considered intrusive or irrelevant. This careful management of the conversation further demonstrates an understanding of the subtle ways in which language can help maintain appropriate interpersonal distances.

Off-record strategies: Navigating complexity in public entertainment

Off-record strategies involve indirect communication techniques that allow for ambiguity, thereby providing speakers with the flexibility to imply a message without explicitly stating it. These strategies are often employed in entertainment contexts to add layers of complexity to discourse, enabling the audience to interpret the message and engage with it in a more interactive manner.

Excerpt 4:

Steve Harvey	a. *Kind of like what the Republicans are doing now* (a subtle, indirect reference to politics and the election process, leaving room for interpretation). b. *I had to do that now that was funny to me* (using humour to indirectly engage with the audience).
Mayor James	a. *I check everybody's hands* (although it's a direct answer, it carries an off-record quality due to the playful, childlike nature of his statement). b. *I like people* (a simple, non-complex, yet off-record remark, indirectly showcasing his innocence and personality).

In the conversation, Steve Harvey's reference to *"Kind of like what the Republicans are doing now"* serves as an example of an off-record strategy. This remark is not explicitly connected to any specific issue but rather invites audience members to interpret the comparison based on their own knowledge and perspectives. The lack of direct explanation allows Steve to make a political statement while avoiding the potential pitfalls of being overly direct or controversial. Similarly, when Steve Harvey laughed and commented, *"I had to do that now that was funny to me"* he acknowledges his own humour in an off-record manner, providing the audience with the opportunity to interpret the situation as they see fit. His comment is not a direct analysis or response but an indirect means of engaging the audience with his own amusement, indicating that the conversation is intended to be light-hearted and entertaining.

Mayor James engages in off-record strategies, albeit in a more nuanced manner. His assertion *"I check everybody's hands"* while ostensibly a straightforward factual statement, possesses an off-record quality. The statement, with its playful simplicity, allows for interpretation, encouraging the audience to discern humour or meaning akin to a child's perception of leadership. Similarly, his remark, *"I like people"* appears to be a simple declaration that, when considered alongside his youthful innocence, it acquires a deeper, off-record dimension regarding his character and perspective on social interactions.

Cross-generational communication dynamics

The interaction offers insightful examples of how politeness strategies can be adapted for cross-generational communication. The ongoing negotiation between formal roles and age-appropriate behaviour presents unique challenges that are addressed through the strategic use of various politeness forms. A particularly enlightening sequence occurs during the discussion of mayoral duties. James's statement *"I shake everybody's hands"* illustrates his interpretation of mayoral responsibilities from a child's perspective. Harvey's response affirms this understanding while preserving the entertainment value of the moment, demonstrating how cross-generational communication can acknowledge both institutional roles and developmental stages. The inclusion of James's brother in the interaction adds another dimension to the cross-generational dynamics. When the brother shares his experience as a former mayor, the interaction exemplifies how family relationships can support the management of formal roles while maintaining entertainment value. This tripartite interaction illustrates how politeness strategies can be adapted to accommodate multiple relationship types within a single conversation.

Contextual considerations and adaptations

The adaptation of politeness strategies to align with television format requirements while preserving authentic interaction demonstrates a sophisticated level of social awareness among all participants. The atypical scenario of a three-year-old mayor presents distinct challenges in maintaining role-appropriate behaviour while acknowledging age-related limitations. The success of the interaction is largely and necessarily contingent upon Harvey's ability to transition between various politeness strategies. His responses to James's direct statements uphold professional standards while fostering genuine moments of connection. The equilibrium between formally acknowledging James's mayoral role and engaging in age-appropriate interaction illustrates how politeness strategies can be modified to fulfil multiple functions concurrently. The presence of a live audience introduces an additional layer of complexity to the interaction. Harvey's management of audience reactions, while maintaining focused interaction with James, exemplifies how politeness strategies can be adapted to address multiple audiences simultaneously. This balancing act underscores the flexibility of politeness strategies in navigating complex social situations while preserving the face of all participants.

Conclusion

This study of politeness strategies in NBC's *Little Big Shots* provides valuable insights into the unique linguistic dynamics of intergenerational media interactions. By examining the exchange between Steve Harvey and three-year-old James, the research extends the existing literature on politeness theory in the following ways. While previous studies predominantly identified positive politeness as the most frequent strategy in adult interactions, the findings of the study reveal a more balanced distribution of strategies when children are involved. This divergence from established patterns suggests that child-adult media interactions require a

more nuanced application of Brown and Levinson's framework, where hosts must carefully navigate between institutional goals and developmental considerations. The study thus bridges a significant gap in the literature by demonstrating how traditional politeness frameworks adapt to the unique demands of children's television programming.

Most surprisingly, the analysis reveals sophisticated deployment of all four politeness strategies by both the adult host and the child participant, challenging assumptions about children's limited pragmatic competence. The three-year-old mayor demonstrates a remarkable ability to employ bald-on-record statements, maintains appropriate boundaries through negative politeness, expresses solidarity through positive politeness, and even utilizes off-record strategies in contextually appropriate ways. This unexpected finding enriches understanding of children's communicative capabilities in institutional discourse and highlights the bidirectional nature of politeness in intergenerational interactions. By documenting how politeness strategies simultaneously serve entertainment objectives, preserve face, and support authentic communication across significant age differences, this study contributes meaningful insights to linguistic pragmatics, media studies, and child development research. The findings have important implications for professionals working in children's media, suggesting that recognizing and respecting children's pragmatic abilities may enhance both the quality of programming and developmental outcomes for young participants.

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