

Hidden meanings and subtle speech: Off-record politeness strategies in Disney's Tangled movie

Larissa Kirana Syarie¹, Uswatun Hasanah¹, Dirham Abdul Azhim¹, Lusi Lian Piantari¹

¹Universitas Al Azhar, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: larissa.syarie@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Communication plays an essential role in everyday social interaction, particularly in maintaining harmonious relationships and protecting individuals' social image or "face." One-way speakers achieve this through the use of politeness strategies, especially off-record strategies, which allow messages to be conveyed indirectly. This study examines how off-record politeness strategies are used in Disney's animated movie *Tangled* through a discourse analysis approach. The analysis focuses on how characters employ indirect speech to manage relationships, reduce conflict, and influence others while preserving social harmony. Using a qualitative method, the study observes and interprets language use in its natural context, emphasizing meaning, identity, and social interaction rather than grammatical structure alone. The findings show that off-record strategies, such as hints, humor, irony, and metaphor, are frequently used by the characters to protect both the speaker's and the listener's face. These strategies enable the characters to achieve their communicative goals without causing confrontation. Overall, the study highlights the importance of off-record politeness strategies in fostering respectful and effective communication, not only in fictional narratives but also in real-life social interactions. Understanding these strategies can help individuals communicate more thoughtfully and maintain positive interpersonal relationships.

1. Introduction

Communication in social interaction is not always built through direct expression; instead, speakers often rely on implicit meaning to protect dignity, manage emotions, and preserve social relationships. This phenomenon aligns with Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness, which defines off-record strategies as indirect utterances that allow speakers to convey intentions without stating them explicitly. These strategies create interpretive space for listeners, reduce imposition, and minimize face-threatening acts, thus maintaining harmonious interaction. Within this framework, indirectness becomes a strategic linguistic choice that enables speakers to criticize, refuse, negotiate, or persuade while maintaining relational equilibrium.

This study analyzes off-record politeness strategies in Disney's *Tangled* through discourse analysis, which views language not merely as structure, but as social action embedded in identity, power, and interactional context (Johnstone & Andrus, 2024). By examining character utterances, this research investigates how indirect speech protects face, navigates unequal authority, and expresses intention without direct confrontation. The film presents diverse communication patterns—ranging from protective manipulation to humorous mitigation—that provide valuable insight into how politeness operates as a negotiation of meaning, rather than a surface-level politeness marker.

Although politeness studies in film discourse have been explored previously, significant gaps remain. Kusumah and Haryudin (2019) identified off-record strategies in *Ratatouille*, yet focused primarily on classification rather than



interactional function. Similarly, Permadi et al. (2022) examined politeness in Aladdin but lacked transcript validation and contextual explanation, limiting analytical depth. These studies demonstrate that research has not sufficiently addressed how off-record strategies shape power relations, emotional positioning, and relational dynamics—particularly in hierarchical interactions. Therefore, a deeper examination of off-record strategies as social practices rather than linguistic labels is still needed.

The central question of this study is: How are off-record strategies used to protect the face of characters in the movie Tangled based on discourse analysis? The film Tangled was chosen not only for its engaging character dynamics but also for its rich representation of interpersonal communication. The movie portrays various instances of indirect language that reflect both personal relationships and broader cultural values related to politeness, hierarchy, and emotional expression. As a critically acclaimed and widely popular movie, Tangled provides valuable insight into how politeness strategies operate in contexts of social negotiation and power balance.

Through this analysis, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how off-record politeness strategies function as tools for face protection in fictional narratives, providing insights into their relevance and application in real-life communication.

The study was conducted by Kusumah, R. Y. & Haryudin, A. (2019) in their paper “An Analysis of Animation Movie ‘Ratatouille’ that Reflects the Politeness of Off-Record Strategies” examines the use of off-record strategies in the animated film Ratatouille, focusing on how these strategies are used to maintain politeness and avoid direct confrontation. Their research identified various forms of off-record strategies but did not explore in detail how these strategies function in social interactions and relationships between characters.

Further research conducted by Permadi, D. Y., Mulyati, T., & Hasibin, Nur. (2022) in a paper titled “A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY ON POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN THE MOVIE ‘ALADDIN’” examined various types of politeness strategies found in the animated film Aladdin. This study focuses on identifying the findings of each politeness strategy used, but they do not provide transcripts of each character's speech, which undermines the reliability of the research results. In addition, the lack of exploration of the strategies used in social interactions and relationships between characters is also a weakness of this paper.

This gap is theoretically relevant because, as Goffman (1967) emphasizes, facework is inseparable from the social structure that governs it; linguistic choices reflect broader negotiations of identity and legitimacy. Locher and Watts (2005) further support this argument by stating that politeness is not a static formula but a relational process negotiated moment by moment. Accordingly, indirectness is not merely euphemism or politeness embellishment—it is a strategic tool for managing power, vulnerability, and social risk. In Tangled, Mother Gothel's subtle coercion, Rapunzel's hesitant negotiation of autonomy, and Flynn's humorous mitigation illustrate that off-record strategies perform psychological and narrative labor.

The limitations of both papers have been elaborated in our own paper, through a more in-depth exploration of the functionality of these strategies in social interactions and relationships between characters. Moreover, this study employs discourse analysis as its framework, a method which examines not only the uses of language strategies but also the function of these strategies within the context of social interaction and face-saving between characters in the film Tangled. The current study employs discourse analysis to provide a more profound understanding of how off-record strategies maintain social harmony and navigate power dynamics between characters.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate the use of off-record politeness strategies in the film Tangled. The qualitative approach was selected for its capacity to describe language phenomena in depth and to capture meaning-making processes within authentic communicative contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Pragmatics provides the linguistic foundation of this study, as it examines how language users construct meaning through contextual interpretation (Bouk, 2016), while Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory offers the analytical framework for identifying face-saving strategies within dialogue.

Discourse analysis was applied as the primary analytical lens to examine how characters employ indirectness, implied meaning, and contextual cues as part of the off-record strategy (Gee, 2014; Schiffrin, Tannen, & Hamilton, 2001). This approach is appropriate because it allows for the interpretation of both linguistic and non-linguistic elements—including tone, gesture, and situational context—that contribute to the construction of politeness in interaction (Leech, 1983).

The data were collected from the official screenplay of Tangled, complemented by systematic viewing of the film to capture multimodal elements such as intonation, facial expressions, and body language. Dialogue containing indirect speech and implied meaning was identified and documented, from which thirty representative utterances were selected



according to their relevance to Brown and Levinson's (1987) off-record politeness framework. These utterances were categorized into eight operational strategy types—sarcasm, hint, metaphor, humor, irony, hyperbole, overstatement, and rhetorical question—derived from Brown and Levinson (1987) and refined using Leech's (1983) pragmatic distinctions. The resulting categories served as the coding guideline for analysis.

To ensure trustworthiness, three researchers independently coded all data using the unified analytical criteria. The coding results were then cross-verified to assess inter-coder agreement, and any discrepancies were resolved through re-examination of contextual evidence and reference to the established framework. This procedure aligns with discourse-analytic principles asserting that analytical credibility is strengthened through iterative comparison and contextual validation (Gee, 2014; Schiffri et al., 2001). Documentation of coding matrices and revision notes was maintained to support methodological transparency in accordance with Creswell's (2017) standards of qualitative rigor.

3. Result

The analysis identified eight categories of off-record politeness strategies used by the characters in *Tangled*: sarcasm, hint, metaphor, humor, irony, hyperbole, overstatement, and rhetorical questions. These categories demonstrate the characters' preference for indirect expression as a means of protecting their own and others' face needs. Rather than stating intentions directly, the speakers rely on implication, suggestion, and ambiguity to convey meaning. This strategy allows emotional expression, disagreement, warnings, and negotiation to occur without creating confrontation.

The distribution of these strategies shows that the characters frequently avoid direct statements when responding to criticism, negotiating personal desires, and expressing insecurity. Sarcasm and humor tend to appear in moments of interpersonal tension, functioning as a playful shield that softens potential conflict. Meanwhile, hints and rhetorical questions appear in scenes where the characters struggle to express fear, doubt, or personal boundaries. These findings indicate that off-record politeness in the film is used not only for social politeness, but also as a narrative tool to reveal emotional states and relational dynamics.

Table 1. Utterances of Off-Record from The Characters

No.	Types of Off-Record Strategy	Communicative Function in the Film
1	Sarcastic	Expressing disagreement or resistance indirectly to avoid open conflict.
2	Hint	Suggesting an implied request, warning, or expectation without stating it directly.
3	Metaphor	Conveying emotions or judgments symbolically to mask direct intention.
4	Humor	Softening tension and maintaining positive face in uncomfortable situations.
5	Irony	Highlighting contradictions to criticize or reject ideas subtly.
6	Hyperbole	Exaggerating emotional reactions to avoid direct confrontation.
7	Overstatement	Amplifying an idea to imply dissatisfaction or doubt.
8	Rhetorical Question	Challenging or resisting expectations without openly refusing.

In this research, the novel analyzed contains numerous instances of personification, as Gibran frequently employs figurative comparisons in his works. The *Broken Wings* illustrates many instances of personification within both the original text and its translation. However, it is essential to note that not every instance of personification in the source language is translated as such in the target language; some are interpreted as other figures of speech, like metaphor and simile, despite originating as personifications. A total of 89 instances of personification were identified in the novel. The researcher then classified each data point according to its translation form. Based on this classification, personification can essentially be translated into figurative or non-figurative forms. In this novel, however, the data reveal that personification was consistently translated into figurative forms: (1) 81 instances where personification in the source language is directly translated into personification in the target language; (2) 5 instances where personification in the source text becomes metaphor in the target text; and (3) 3 instances where it shifts to simile in the target language.



The findings in *Tangled* show that all eight categories of off-record politeness contribute to the construction of meaning, power, and emotional negotiation. Each category functions differently depending on speaker intention, social hierarchy, and narrative context. Below, each strategy is elaborated based on representative data and theoretical connections.

1. Sarcasm

Sarcasm in *Tangled* primarily appears in utterances by Mother Gothel and serves to critique, blame, or correct behavior without open confrontation. Statements such as “*Rapunzel, I’m not getting any younger down here*” and “*Oh, great. Now I’m the bad guy*” function as indirect reprimands. Instead of issuing explicit commands, Gothel uses sarcasm to delegitimize Rapunzel’s emotions while protecting her own authoritative face. This aligns with Culpeper’s (2011) notion of *mock politeness*, in which polite surface forms conceal hostility. Sarcasm thus becomes a linguistic tool for emotional manipulation and power retention.

2. Hint

Hints allow characters to influence decisions without directly instructing others. Gothel’s line “*On your own, you won’t survive*” is not a prohibition, but an implied threat that constructs dependency. Here, the hint functions coercively. Meanwhile, Flynn’s “*Maybe it’s time to start living a little*” empowers Rapunzel by implying possibility rather than restriction. These contrasting uses reveal that hints are not inherently positive or negative; their pragmatic value depends on intention, relational authority, and audience positioning. Hints therefore reveal the moral and psychological direction of each character.

3. Metaphor

Metaphors in the film work to disguise control behind emotional language. When Gothel calls Rapunzel “*fragile as a flower*” or refers to her independence as “*leaving the nest*”, the metaphors do not simply describe—they categorize Rapunzel’s identity. Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) theory of conceptual metaphor helps explain how these utterances frame Rapunzel’s worldview: fragility naturalizes dependence, and “nest” implies that departure is premature or dangerous. Metaphor therefore sustains the power imbalance by constructing Rapunzel’s self-concept through poetic yet restrictive imagery.

4. Humor

Humor operates as a relational buffer, especially through Flynn’s dialogue. When he says, “*Didn’t see that coming. Her hair glows*,” humor reduces the face threat of an unexpected situation. Rather than fear or accusation, humor reframes tension as shared experience. Tannen (1994) argues that humor can re-establish solidarity and reduce social friction; this is evident in scenes where Flynn uses humor to maintain equilibrium. Unlike Gothel’s sarcasm, Flynn’s humor invites participation rather than submission, demonstrating the ethical dimension of indirectness.

5. Irony

Irony communicates dissatisfaction without overt criticism. Flynn’s ironic remark, “*This is exactly according to plan*,” indicates chaos without blaming Rapunzel. Irony thus becomes a protective strategy, allowing disagreement while preventing escalation. In Brown and Levinson’s (1987) terms, irony is an off-record face-saving move that redirects emotional pressure away from interlocutors. It frames conflict as situational rather than personal, which keeps relational damage minimal.

6. Hyperbole

Hyperbole allows characters to express extreme emotional states while concealing the specific cause of the emotion. Rapunzel’s repeated “I can’t believe I did this!” articulates panic and identity conflict without openly challenging Gothel. Hyperbole creates emotional distance between the speaker and the event, allowing fear and excitement to coexist. This reflects Leech’s (1983) observation that exaggeration can protect negative face by avoiding explicit statements of rebellion or blame.

7. Overstatement

Overstatement manipulates perception by presenting information in exaggerated proportions. Gothel’s declaration that “the outside world is a dangerous place, filled with horrible, selfish people” is an example of ideologically motivated overstatement. The exaggeration is not innocent; it constructs an emotional reality that justifies containment. Overstatement thus becomes a persuasive tool that masks coercion within the language of protection, sustaining authoritarian control while avoiding direct imposition.

8. Rhetorical Question

Rhetorical questions communicate intention indirectly by implying rather than demanding answers. Flynn’s line, “Did I ever tell you I’ve got a thing for brunettes?” performs a relational move: it establishes emotional connection without forcing commitment. The rhetorical form protects both speaker and listener, creating a “safe zone” of implication. This



aligns with Brown and Levinson's theory that rhetorical questions reduce face threat by lowering the stakes of response and shifting meaning negotiation to the listener.

The findings reveal that the eight off-record politeness strategies identified in *Tangled* do not merely function as stylistic linguistic choices, but rather operate as communicative mechanisms that shape character interaction, emotional dynamics, and narrative progression. Characters consistently avoid direct and literal statements, particularly in situations where social authority, emotional security, or relational harmony are at stake. This avoidance aligns with Brown and Levinson's (1987) core premise that speakers select indirect forms to minimize face-threatening acts by shifting the interpretive burden to the listener, thereby protecting both positive and negative face.

In this respect, off-record politeness serves as a linguistic equilibrium: it allows the speaker to convey messages, judgment, or persuasive intent, while simultaneously maintaining plausible deniability. Such deniability becomes crucial in hierarchical or emotionally sensitive exchanges throughout the film. The use of indirectness also reflects what Leech (1983) classifies as a politeness-maximizing compromise, where meaning is intentionally obscured to sustain social alignment. Rather than weakening communication, indirectness in this context becomes strategically productive.

A closer look at gender representation further deepens the analysis. Female characters, especially Mother Gothel, employ off-record strategies as an instrument of relational governance. Her communication patterns demonstrate how linguistic politeness can be weaponized, functioning simultaneously as affection and control. Through sarcasm, metaphor, and overstatement, she maintains a persona of care while asserting hierarchical dominance. This reinforces Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) argument that figurative language molds perception and enforces social roles. Rapunzel's early responses mirror this pattern; her indirectness reveals the struggle between obedience and the gradual pursuit of autonomy. Thus, female indirectness in the film is closely tied to emotional negotiation and identity protection.

Male characters, in contrast, rely on off-record politeness to manage interpersonal vulnerability and maintain rapport. Flynn's consistent use of humor, irony, and rhetorical questioning does not attempt to control, but rather to disarm tension, redistribute emotional pressure, and equalize relational footing. This aligns with Tannen (1994), who argues that humor functions as a solidarity-building device that reduces interpersonal risk. Rather than asserting dominance, Flynn's indirectness enables co-presence and emotional accessibility, positioning him as a facilitator rather than a regulator of the interactional space.

Across these varied uses, the analysis indicates that off-record politeness in *Tangled* fulfills three interconnected roles:

1. **Interpersonal Function: Relationship Maintenance and Social Harmony**

Off-record utterances allow disagreements, refusals, or criticisms to be expressed without overt confrontation. This promotes social harmony and protects the speaker's and hearer's face, especially in asymmetrical relationships. When Gothel disguises prohibition as concern, the threat of coercion is softened, making control appear voluntary. When Flynn mitigates emotional tension through humor, both interlocutors retain dignity.

2. **Emotional Function: Regulating Vulnerability and Psychological Distance**

Indirect forms provide emotional cushioning by enabling characters to express fear, guilt, or desire without complete self-exposure. Rapunzel's reliance on hyperbole reveals the internal conflict between internalized obedience and emerging independence. In this sense, off-record strategies measure how much emotional risk a character is willing to disclose. They regulate vulnerability by allowing feelings to be suggested rather than confessed.

3. **Narrative Function: Character Construction and Plot Advancement**

Indirectness not only reflects interpersonal dynamics but also advances the storyline. It becomes a narrative resource that exposes power imbalances and maps character development. Gothel's metaphors symbolically reinforce captivity; Flynn's rhetorical questions signal relational transition; Rapunzel's exaggerated emotional expressions mark the shift from restraint to agency. Thus, off-record politeness functions as an implicit narrative architecture: a mechanism through which character identity evolves before it is openly declared.

Taken together, these findings indicate that off-record politeness in *Tangled* cannot be reduced to politeness for its own sake. It is a system of strategic ambiguity that distributes emotional, social, and narrative labor across dialogue. What appears as gentle or humorous on the surface frequently encodes resistance, desire, fear, or manipulation. In doing so, off-record politeness demonstrates how language constructs power and care simultaneously. The film therefore exemplifies a communication ecology in which politeness is not merely ethical behavior, but a tool of negotiation, survival, and self-definition.



4. Conclusion

This study examined how off-record politeness strategies are employed by characters in *Tangled* to protect face and manage interpersonal relations. Through discourse analysis, the research demonstrates that indirect expressions—such as sarcasm, hints, metaphor, humor, irony, hyperbole, overstatement, and rhetorical questions—enable characters to communicate intentions, emotions, and resistance without direct confrontation. These strategies function as linguistic tools for minimizing face-threatening acts, maintaining social harmony, and negotiating relational boundaries.

The findings reveal that off-record politeness is shaped by character roles and power relations. Mother Gothel frequently relies on sarcasm, hints, and overstatement to exert control and reinforce Rapunzel's dependency, showing how indirectness can be used manipulatively. In contrast, Flynn's use of humor, metaphor, and rhetorical questions reflects a more cooperative and face-supportive interaction, contributing to rapport building rather than domination. Thus, off-record strategies not only preserve face but also construct authority, emotional distance, or solidarity, depending on who uses them and for what purpose.

While this study provides insight into the use of off-record strategies in the mother–daughter and peer dynamics presented in the film, future research may expand the scope by examining a wider range of relational configurations—such as friendships, romantic partnerships, or hierarchical interactions between superiors and subordinates. Exploring different power structures would deepen our understanding of how indirectness adapts to varying social expectations and communicative demands.

In addition, future studies are encouraged to incorporate multimodal analysis. Non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, gaze direction, gesture, body positioning, and tone of voice significantly influence how indirect messages are interpreted. Integrating these elements would offer a more comprehensive account of how off-record politeness operates not only linguistically but also socially and visually. Such extensions would contribute to a broader understanding of face-saving strategies and the role of indirectness in real-world communication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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