



Religious Politeness in Subtitling: A Brown and Levinson Analysis of Kiai's Utterances in *Sang Kiai*

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ABSTRACT

This research analyzes the realization of politeness strategies in the Indonesian – English subtitles of *Sang Kiai* movie, focusing on how authority and power relations between Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari and his *santri* at Tebu Ireng Islamic boarding school, are represented in translation. Using a descriptive design with an ethnographic approach, the study analyzes 49 utterances drawn from the interactions between Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari and his *santri* in the source and target texts using Brown and Levinson's politeness framework. The findings reveal that there are three recurrent patterns: (1) preservation of politeness strategy, (2) shift in politeness strategy, and (3) preservation of strategy with sub-strategic shift. The dominant pattern is preservation of politeness strategy, particularly in the use of bald on record and positive politeness, which reflects the institutional authority of Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari. The study shows that the subtitling largely maintains the power asymmetry inherent in *pesantren* discourse, suggesting that authority works as a key basis in the realization and translation of politeness strategies.

Keywords: audiovisual translation, culture, politeness, pragmatics, subtitling

Introduction

Politeness governs a fundamental aspect in everyday conversation as it shapes how people manage social relationship, express social value, and negotiate authority within interaction. One of the most prominent figures in the discussion of politeness is Brown & Levinson (1987) who brought the concept of “face-threatening acts” or FTA as a central analytical tool for explaining polite behavior. Their model theorizes politeness as a set of strategic choices employed by speakers to mitigate potential threats to the hearer’s positive and negative face. Their theory evolves the assertion that politeness principles are universal across cultures and has therefore been widely adopted in pragmatic research for several decades. However, this universality claim has been critically challenged by a number of scholars, particularly on the grounds that FTA theory is overly normative and insufficiently sensitive to culture-specific communicative practices (Yueguo, 1990; Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003).

a. Background and Objectives

In particular, Leech, in his continuous works on politeness criticizes the concept of ‘face’ for its predominantly conceptualized as an individual property, whereas in many societies face is relational and socially embedded (Leech, 2014). These debates suggest that though the concept of ‘face’ is analytically useful, it is more appropriately interpreted in relation to broader sociocultural context rather than solely as an individual strategy. The concept of ‘face’ and ‘politeness’ must be interpreted under the lens of sociocultural context, in which judgement of whether an utterance should be considered as ‘polite’ or ‘impolite’ are constructed within culturally-embedded norms in a particular speech community.

These debates highlight the need to interpret ‘face’ and politeness strategies in relation to the sociocultural context in which they are embedded. It means that while Brown and Levinson’s model remain analytically influential for recognizing and categorizing politeness strategies, its application requires contextual sensitivity, especially in culturally and religiously marked interactions.

Beyond everyday conversation, politeness becomes very prominent within the context of institutional and religious discourse, where conversations are embedded in moral

evaluation, hierarchical relations, and culturally sanctions norms respect (Nur & Zakaria, 2016; Wibisono et al. (2022) Ayyina & El, 2025). Specifically in the context of Indonesia, a country with a Muslim-majority population, politeness assumes a distinctive character of *kiai*. In Indonesian Muslim culture, *kiai* is known as a highly-respected religious authority. The conversation involving *kiai* in the context of *pesantren*, or Islamic boarding schools, can be a rich site for examining culturally-embedded forms of politeness. In such contexts, politeness is not only a strategy to mitigate face-threats but a means of enacting religious authority and communal ethics.

Previous studies on communication within Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) have constantly emphasized the central role of politeness in structuring interactions between *kiai* and *santri*. Research on politeness strategies employed in *pesantren* contexts shows that *santri*'s speech is strongly shaped by hierarchical relations and moral expectations, where deference, humility, and obedience are linguistically encoded through indirectness, mitigation, and respectful address forms (Nur & Zakaria, 2016). Similarly, Wibisono et al. (2022) highlight the use of honorifics in *pesantren* which is not only functioned as linguistic markers but also as institutionalized symbols of religious authority and moral legitimacy, reinforcing the asymmetrical relationship between *kiai* and *santri*. Furthermore, Ayyina & El (2025), in their recent research focusing on analyzing female *santri*'s language use, reveal that politeness is attained through both verbal and non-verbal strategies aligned with communal ethics, such as humility, sympathy, and agreement, as theorized within Leech's politeness maxims.

The aforementioned studies cooperatively suggest that politeness in *kiai* communication is deeply rooted in religious norms, cultural traditions, and institutional hierarchies. Nevertheless, current research predominantly examines politeness within monolingual Indonesian interactions and does not concentrate how such culturally embedded politeness strategies are negotiated in cross-cultural context. The possible shifts occur in conveying politeness strategies across cultures in religious community context can be an appealing field of studies which is rarely explored.

Considering this issue, the discussion on politeness strategy involving *kiai* in *pesantren* communication becomes particularly compelling when examined through the lens of translation studies, particularly in Indonesian-English subtitling. With a growing production of Indonesian films broadcasted through international streaming platforms, Indonesian movies portraying *pesantren* life are now accessible to international audiences. Within this translational context, rendering *kiai* utterances poses significant challenges for subtitle producers, as they must negotiate between linguistic accuracy and communicative effectiveness. From a functionalist perspective, particularly Skopos theory (Vermeer, 1989; Schäffner, 2010; Reiss & Vermeer, 2014), subtitling is guided by the intended purpose of the target text, which in this case is to ensure comprehensibility and narrative coherence for global viewers while retaining essential cultural meanings. Maintaining culturally embedded politeness expressions may hamper viewers' understanding of unfamiliar cultural norms and interactional practices, whereas excessive cultural adaptation jeopardizes reducing or reshaping the interpersonal meanings that shape *kiai* relations and the wider *pesantren* narrative. Specifically in audiovisual translation, such decisions are further constrained by technical factors such as spatial and temporal limitations (Cintas & Remael, 2007), which often necessitate pragmatic reduction or reformulation. Therefore, it becomes methodically relevant to analyze how subtitle makers functionally navigate and mitigate politeness strategies in conversations involving *kiai* and how these choices reflect the Skopos of the translation as well as the functional priorities of subtitling as a communicative practice.

The aforementioned previous studies show that research in politeness involving the communication of *kiai* have been explored in monolingual *pesantren* context. However, little research has explored how such culturally-embedded politeness strategies are negotiated in Indonesian-English subtitles. Departing from this gap, this research is guided by the following research question: How does the realization of politeness in the *kiai*'s utterances change in the English subtitles of *Sang Kiai* when analyzed through Brown & Levinson's politeness strategies?

This study adopts Brown and Levinson's politeness theory as its primary analytical framework to examine the rendering of religious politeness in subtitling, focusing on *Kiai*'s

utterances in *Sang Kiai*. By situating Brown and Levinson's model within the socio-religious context of *kiai* communication, this research seeks to demonstrate how face management and politeness strategies are linguistically realized and translated across cultures. Besides, it also attempts to explain how subtitling mediates authority, deference, and moral positioning for target audiences.

Sang Kiai movie was selected as the source of the data since it provides rich and contextually grounded instances of religious discourse. This movie, which is produced in 2013, talks about the life of KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, the founder of Nahdhatul Ulama (NU), whose presence remains prominent to this day. NU is recognized as one of the most influential Islamic organizations in Indonesia with contributions that have significantly shaped Indonesia's identity through moderation, education, and nation-building. KH. Hasyim Asy'ari himself is also widely acclaimed as one of Indonesia's most influential national religious figures. As such, the film offers a particularly relevant corpus for examining the realization and shift of religious politeness in subtitling context.

This study contributes both theoretically and empirically for the development of pragmatics and translations. Theoretically, it encompasses the application of Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies to the area of religious audiovisual translation, demonstrating its significance for analyzing authority-based and value-loaded discourse. Empirically, it offers a focused analysis of Indonesian Islamic politeness as represented in movie dialogues and its English translation, an area that remains underrepresented in existing scholarship.

b. Literature Review

Politeness as Pragmatics and Cultural Phenomenon

Early pragmatic approaches define politeness as strategies to manage face-threatening acts in interpersonal communication (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This perspective shapes politeness as a linguistic form as well as a functional mechanism through which speakers manage the social relational goals within particular contexts.

However, a number of scholars has underlined that politeness cannot be defined as a universal interactional phenomenon. Politeness is deeply rooted in culturally specific value

systems, beliefs structures, and institutional practices (Yueguo, 1990; Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003). This new perspective proposes that what counts as polite expressions in one cultural setting may be interpreted as impolite in another. This cultural basis becomes obvious in some contexts, such as religious discourse, educational institutions, and traditional communities, where politeness is closely tied to moral authority, hierarchy, and shared ideological assumptions.

Leech (2014) further explored this view by outlining politeness as an evaluative social phenomenon rather than a strategic one. The model is called as General Strategy of Politeness which is composed to address the limitations of previous theories on politeness, including the FTA based politeness Brown & Levinson (1987) and his own maxims (Leech, 1983). In his account, politeness concerns the way speakers assign positive or negative value to participants, actions, and social relations in discourse. This evaluative framework allows politeness to extend beyond the immediate speaker–hearer pair to include third parties. Therefore, politeness works not only to protect someone’s face, but also to maintain socially valued norms and collective expectations.

The acknowledgement of culture in the concept of politeness brings an important effect in translation. When an utterance is conveyed to other language, it means that the original cultural and pragmatic meanings might be preserved or maintained. Furthermore, the social values encoded in the politeness strategy might also be maintained, weakened, or strengthened. These kinds of shifts are especially true for forms of politeness that rely on culturally specific resources, such as honorifics, religious expressions, or indirect moral instruction. Understanding politeness pragmatic as well as cultural practices therefore serves a necessary foundation for examining how politeness is represented, maintained, or transformed across languages and modes of communication, including audiovisual translation.

Brown & Levinson’s Model of Politeness Strategies

Brown and Levinson’s model of politeness remain one of the most significant frameworks in pragmatic studies, particularly for investigating how speakers manage interpersonal relations through language. The main concept of the theory is the notion of

'face', defined as the public self-image that every individual seeks to maintain in social interaction (Brown & Levinson, 1987)). They classify two terms: positive face and negative face. Positive face is recognized as the desire to be approved of and appreciated. Meanwhile, negative face is known as the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. Politeness strategies are understood as rational linguistic choices employed to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs), which potentially damage either the speaker's or the hearer's face. Based on this FTA theory, Brown and Levinson categorize politeness strategies into four main types: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record.

Despite ongoing debates surrounding its universality claim, Brown and Levinson's model continues to offer strong analytical value due to its systematic categorization of strategies and sub-strategies. Scholars have noted that the framework is particularly effective in examining interactions characterized by power asymmetry, institutional authority, and culturally regulated norms, such as religious discourse and educational settings. In translation and subtitling studies, the model has been widely applied to explore how politeness strategies are preserved, shifted, or reduced when utterances are transferred across languages and cultures. Rather than viewing the model as culturally neutral, recent studies tend to apply it with contextual sensitivity, treating politeness strategies as socially embedded practices that must be interpreted in relation to local values, beliefs, and communicative conventions. This contextualized application allows Brown and Levinson's theory to remain relevant for analyzing culturally specific politeness phenomena in mediated texts such as films.

Politeness in Translation

It is true that pragmatics plays an important role in facilitating effective cross-cultural activities (Smith, 2024). As a form of cross-cultural activity, translation ideally must be able to gain the pragmatic equivalence between the source and target language. In addressing this issue, Baker (2018) emphasizes that translators must anticipate how target readers will interpret a translated text, particularly when those readers have no direct access to the source text. From this perspective, maintaining pragmatic equivalence remains an important translational goal. However, Tretyakova (2016) underlines that translation as a sociocultural practice inevitably fails to gain absolute equivalence in the source and target texts due to its

differences in cross-cultural politeness standards. Consequently, pragmatic meaning in translation should be understood as a negotiated outcome, shaped by the interaction between the translated text and the target readers' cultural contexts.

In film subtitling, the negotiation of pragmatic meaning becomes even more complex due to the spatial and temporal constraints (Cintas & Remael, 2007). Subtitles are produced under strict limitations of space and time which often require reduction and reformulation (Guillot, 2020). As a result, pragmatic features related to politeness, such as: honorifics, religious expressions, or indirectness; may be constricted, neutralized, or recontextualized in the target text. Tretyakova (2016) argues that politeness in translation cannot be treated as a merely linguistic phenomenon, but must be recognized as a sociocultural practice formed by audience expectations and cultural values. In this sense, subtitling operates not only as linguistic transfer, but as intercultural mediation, where translators purposefully balance pragmatic equivalence with technical feasibility. Therefore, politeness in subtitles is often rendered in a functionally adaptive manner rather than through strict formal equivalence. Through this practice, certain pragmatic values are allowed to be maintained while others are probably weakened or strengthened.

Methods

This research uses a descriptive qualitative design with an ethnographic approach based on Spradley (2007). The data were collected from *Sang Kiai* (2013) movie. The data are the utterances of KH. Hasyim Asy'ari which were selected due to his role as a religious authority figure in *pesantren*, whose utterances reflect culturally embedded forms of politeness. The data were collected through document analysis. The researcher watched the movie while transcribing the Kiai's Indonesian utterances as well as their translation in English.

The data analysis technique follows Spradley's (2007) ethnographic stages, including: domain, taxonomy, componential, and drawing cultural values; which is adapted to the study of politeness in translation. In the domain analysis, all utterances produced by KH. Hasyim Asy'ari when having conversation with his *santri* were identified and categorized as the primary domain of analysis. In taxonomy analysis phase, the types of politeness in the source

and target languages were classified using Brown & Levinson's (1987) strategy of politeness. Each utterance was analyzed in terms of the politeness strategies, allowing systematic comparison between the Indonesian dialogue and its English subtitle. Then, componential analysis was carried out to identify whether there were alterations in the realization of politeness between the ST and TT. This stage focused on examining changes in the types of politeness or the pragmatic force of politeness, in line with Brown & Levinson's view of politeness as scalar and context-dependent. Finally, cultural value drawing was undertaken to interpret the findings within a broader socio-cultural and theoretical context. The results were correlated with relevant theories of politeness and translation, as well as previous studies on pragmatic equivalence and audiovisual translation, in order to explain how religious and cultural values influence the rendering of politeness in subtitles.

Result and Discussion

1. The Realization of Politeness Strategies in the Source and Target Texts

Based on the analysis of 49 utterances involving interactions between Kiai and his *santri*, three recurring categories were identified in the realization of politeness strategies across the source text (ST) and the target text (TT). Table 1 below shows the distribution of the three categories followed by explanation of each category.

Table 1.

The Realization of Politeness in the ST and TT

No	Findings	Amounts
1	Preservation of Politeness Strategy	33
2	Shift in Politeness Strategy	7
3	Sub-strategic Shift within Politeness Strategy	9

The dominant pattern is the preservation of politeness strategy, accounting for 33 utterances, in which the same type of politeness strategy is maintained in translation. A smaller number of cases, with 7 utterances, exhibit a shift in politeness strategy, where the strategy employed in the ST is rendered as a different strategy in the TT. The remaining 9 utterances fall under sub-strategic shift within politeness strategy, indicating that while the overall politeness strategy is preserved, its realization changes at the level of sub-strategies. These patterns demonstrate that subtitling in *Sang Kiai* largely maintains the intended

politeness orientation, though strategic adjustments occur to accommodate linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic constraints in the target language.

a. Preservation of Politeness Strategy

Despite inevitable linguistic adjustments in translation, this category refers to cases in which the same type of politeness strategy, as conceptualized by Brown & Levinson (1987), is consistently realized in both the source text (ST) and the target text (TT). Based on the data analysis, preservation of politeness strategy appears as the most frequent category, showing the subtitler's tendency to preserve the original pragmatic force of Kiai's utterances. One of the examples is shown on the data below:

Context

Kiai questions his *santri* about those who did not attend the congregational Dzuhur prayer.

Source Text

Kiai : *Solihin, tadi kamu catat siapa siapa saja yang tidak sholat Dzuhur berjamaah?*
Solihin : *Kamid, Kiai. Biasa ketiduran katanya.*

Target Text

Kiai : Solihin, did you note down the names of those who did not pray?
Solihin : It was Kamid, Yai. He said he overslept.

Both the ST and the TT use a positive politeness strategy through the application of an in-group identity marker, by mentioning the *santri's* name, *Solihin*, explicitly. By directly mentioning the *santri* by name, Kiai Hasyim signals personal closeness and emphasizes the sense of familiarity portraying *kiai-santri* close relationship. Besides, although the utterance performs as a command issued by a speaker with higher institutional authority, the use of this in-group marker functions to soften the direct force of the instruction, making it appear less imposing and more relationally attuned.

Context

Kiai questions his *santri* about those who did not attend the congregational Dzuhur prayer.

Source Text

Kiai : Solihin, tadi kamu catat siapa siapa saja yang tidak sholat Dzuhur berjamaah?

Solihin : Kamid, Kiai. Biasa ketiduran katanya.

Kiai : Apa hukumannya orang yang tidak ikut sholat jamaah?

Target Text

Kiai : Solihin, did you note down the names of those who did not pray?

Solihin : It was Kamid, Yai. He said he overslept.

Kiai : What's the punishment for those who missed the group prayer?

The example above continues the preceding exchange in which Kiai Hasyim asks about the punishment for those who missed the Dzuhur prayer. Both the ST and the TT consistently utilize a bald on record strategy, showing Kiai Hasyim's institutional authority to speak about the serious case related to the discipline of worshipping. The nonappearance of mitigation underscores the seriousness of the topic and the authority of Kiai Hasyim's capacity to question the *santri* when a violation occurs. This finding indicates that the subtitle maintains the asymmetrical power relation between *kiai* and *santri*, particularly in contexts involving rules and punishment.

The above finding related to the preservation of politeness strategy observed in this study supports the argument that certain pragmatic features are more resistant to change in subtitling, particularly when the structure is simple and the pragmatic feature is salient. As seen in the data above, the use of an in-group identity marker, in the form of the name of someone, is retained showing the preservation of positive politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This result indicates that the subtitler prioritizes to maintain the interpersonal meaning, even within the limited spatial and temporal constraints as served in subtitling. Indeed, the finding is consistent with Pinto (2010), saying that although subtitling frequently involves reduction due to the spatial as well as temporal limitations, not all pragmatic elements are equally vulnerable. The finding shows that personal names tend to be preserved as they are brief, clear, functional, and do not interrupt the viewers' cognitive load (Pinto, 2010; Nwike & Eze, 2024). In this case, the preservation observed in the data is not incidental but reflects a systematic tendency to retain a high-impact pragmatic features.

Context

Kiai responds to Harun's suspicion regarding Masyumi's alleged support for the Japanese.

Source Text

Harun : Tapi rakyat menganggapnya berbeda, Yai. Rakyat melihat bahwa Masyumi berpihak pada Jepang.

Kiai : Astaghfirullahaladzim.

Target Text

Harun : But the people are seeing it differently. They think Masyumi is supporting the Japanese.

Kiai : Oh my God.

Akin to the previous examples, both ST and TT above shows the preservation of positive politeness through the use of an in-group identity marker. The Arabic religious exclamation *Astaghfirullahaladzim* in the ST and "Oh my God" in the TT function as affective markers that frame the response within shared moral and religious values. Though the subtitle uses the English translation instead of preserving the Arabic expression, both of them function the same as shared expression understood by the language users of each language. However, though both the politeness strategy and sub strategy remain the same, there is difference in the pragmatic force. The original expression *Astaghfirullahaladzim* has stronger force as it is widely used in Muslim context rather than the general exclamation "Oh my God". Overall, these examples prove that preservation of politeness strategy occurs when the subtitler retains the original balance of authority, solidarity, and pragmatic intent embedded in Kiai Hasyim's utterances. However, the translation results in a reduction of pragmatic force, as the original expression carries stronger religious and cultural resonance than its English translation. This supports previous findings stating that although politeness strategies can be preserved in subtitling, the pragmatic force and the cultural nuance are often weakened due to the adjustment for broader audience accessibility (Pinto, 2010).

b. Shift in Politeness Strategy

In this category, the shift occurs across politeness strategy, meaning that the type of politeness used in the ST was changed into another type in the TT. The majority of this case occur in the shift from positive politeness into bald on record, indicating a reduction of interpersonal mitigation in the subtitling process.

Context

Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari was arrested by the Japanese Army. He asked his *santri* to take care of the *pesantren* while he was away.

Source Text

Kiai : *Jaga pesantren, ya.*

Target Text

Kiai : Take care of the school.

The data above shows that Kiai Hasyim employs a positive politeness strategy by using the particle *ya* as a sign of seeking agreement effort. The utterance on the source text shows that though Kiai Hasyim delivers command to his *santri*, he still maintain the positive face of the interlocutor by softening the instructions. However, the particle *ya* is omitted in the target text. This omission results in the shifting of the politeness strategy into a bald on record, making the command more direct and authoritative. This kind of shift can be elaborated through subtitling constraints, where elements perceived as pragmatically redundant are often omitted to maintain the temporal and spatial factors. As proposed by Cintas & Remael (2007), subtitling often involves condensation strategy leading to the reduction of interpersonal markers that are not significant for proportional meaning.

Context

Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari asked Yusuf to teach me how to use gun to face the Dutch army.

Source Text

Yusuf : *Ada apa, Bapak?*

Kiai : *Ajari Bapak menembak.*

Target Text

Yusuf : What is it, Father?

Kiai : Teach me how to shoot.

The above example also shows the shifts from a positive politeness into a bald on record strategy. The shift occurs due to the omission of the word *Bapak* (father) which uses an in-group identity marker. This shows the familial relationship between Kiai Hasyim and Yusuf, who is not only his *santri* but also his son. As a consequence, the translated utterance seems more direct and less relational. Besides, the intimate father and son relationship between Kiai Hasyim and Yusuf becomes less noticeable in the TT. This finding is relevant with Hatim & Mason (1997) who emphasize that translation often entails reconfiguration of interpersonal meaning, particularly when relational markers are culturally specific to render.

Context

Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari asked one of his *santri* to deliver letter to Shumubu to solve the misunderstanding happened between NU and Shumubu.

Source Text

Kiai : Sampaikan salam saya kepada Husein dan Wiroharjono. Ini bukan masalah dalam tubuh NU. Ini tugas Shumubu sebagai departemen agama. Shumubu jangan seperti cuci tangan.

Santri : Kalau begitu kami permisi, Kiai.

Target Text

Kiai : Please send my regards to Husein and Wiroharjono. This isn't our problem. This is Shumubu's job as the Department of Religious Affairs. Shumubu cannot just leave everything to us.

Santri : I'll take your leave, Kiai.

The third example demonstrates the opposite shift. The ST uses a bald on record directive *Sampaikan salam saya...*, reflecting urgency and authority, while the TT introduces "Please," thereby shifting into a more mitigated politeness strategy. This phenomenon can be explained through the functional orientation of subtitling, where translators adjust utterances to ensure acceptability and readability for the target audience. As shown in the study on

Paramita & Sampurna (2025), subtitles often transform direct or culturally specific expressions into more universally acceptable forms, prioritizing comprehensibility for global viewers. This reflects the Skopos-driven tendency to balance meaning with audience expectations.

Context

Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari was imprisoned. Wachid Hasyim, who is his son as well as his *santri*, visited him and talked about having a cooperative action with the Japanese army.

Source Text

Wachid: Apakah sikap itu tidak akan menimbulkan perdebatan, Pak?

Kiai : Bukankah selama ini, kamu menyukai perdebatan?

Target Text

Wachid: That attitude will create controversy among us, Father.

Kiai : I thought you like controversies.

In the example above, Kiai Hasyim uses an off-record strategy by employing rhetorical question. This indirectness makes Kiai Hasyim to challenge Wachid's worry without obvious confrontation. Therefore, this strategy shows the mitigating potential face threat. However, there is a shift from an off-record strategy into a bald on record, making the rhetorical question into a declarative statement. This shift causes Kiai's utterance more explicit and direct. Therefore, the translation strengthens the pragmatic force of the utterance while diminishing the indirectness aspect of the off-record strategy in the ST. Such shifts are consistent with the nature of subtitling as a mode shift from speech to writing, where implicit meanings and inferential cues are often made more explicit to ensure immediate comprehension Pavlović (2002).

c. Sub-strategic Shift within Politeness Strategy

The last category of politeness realization is the shifts on the sub-strategic category within the same politeness strategy. Most of this category occur as the shift of Arabic expression into a more descriptive expression.

Context

Khamid received agricultural produce from the parents of new *santri*. The produce was given as a substitute for tuition fees. There was a man who did not have any agricultural produce but still wanted his son to enroll in the *pesantren*. Khamid reminded them that without anything to offer, they would not be able to study there. However, the Kiai admonished Khamid, reminding him that it is Allah who provides help.

Source Text

Khamid: Berikutnya.

Parent : Aduh maaf, Dik. Kami tidak punya hasil bumi untuk nyantri di sini.

Khamid: Waduh, Pak.. Pak.. Ya nggak bisa. Kalau anak bapak nyantri di sini, mangan opo Pak? Heh? mangan opo?

Kiai :Wawlahhu ghoirurroziqin. Allah itu sebaik-baiknya pemberi rizki

Khamid: Nggih, Yai.

Target Text

Khamid: Next.

Parent : I'm really sorry, but we don't have anything to give.

Khamid: That's unfortunate. If we accept your son here, what would he eat?

Kiai : Allah is the best providers. Allah is kind and generous.

Khamid: Yes, Sir

Focusing on Kiai Hasyim's utterance, both the ST and the TT realize an off-record politeness strategy. In the ST, *Wawlahhu ghoirurroziqin. Allah itu sebaik-baiknya pemberi rizki* conveys the Kiai Hasyim's reprimand indirectly by invoking a religious principle rather than explicitly correcting Khamid's attitudes. By attaching provision to Allah, Kiai Hasyim lets Khamid to infer the intended meaning that rejecting the *santri's* parent on material grounds is an impolite manner. This indirectness minimizes face threat while at the same time asserting moral authority grounded in shared religious values. The TT, "Allah is the best providers. Allah is kind and generous," preserves this off-record strategy. Although the wording is simplified, the utterance still relies on religious assertion to imply guidance rather than issuing an explicit reprimand. This finding is aligned with Paramita & Sampurna (2025) who state that clarity and

accessibility are often prioritized in subtitling, leading to the reformulation of culturally dense expression into a more universal expression.

Context

Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari asked Yusuf to teach me how to use gun to face the Dutch army.

Source Text

Yusuf : Nembak buat apa, Pak?

Kiai : Belanda akhirnya akan sampai ke sini. Lebih baik Bapak mati melawan daripada ditawan Belanda. Setidaknya sebelum Bapak mati, masih bisa menembak satu dua Belanda yang berani datang kemari.

Target Text

Yusuf : For what, Father?

Kiai : the Dutch will finally reach here. I'd rather die fighting than be held captive. At least. Before I die, I can shoot one or two Dutch soldiers who dare to come here.

In the ST, Kiai Hasyim's utterance realizes a positive politeness strategy through a combination of giving reasons, *Lebih baik Bapak mati melawan daripada ditawan Belanda*, and the use of an in-group identity marker, namely the self-referential term *Bapak*. By referring to himself as *Bapak* (father), the Kiai foregrounds the familial bond between himself and Yusuf, who is both his son and *santri*. In the TT, the utterance is rendered without the in-group identity marker, relying solely on giving reasons to justify the action. The omission of *Bapak* removes the explicit familial framing, resulting in a more impersonal explanation focused on strategic necessity rather than relational closeness. Social significant expression, such as the self-referential as stated in the data above, is often excluded in subtitling due to the technical limitations. As the results, it is usually weakened the viewer's understanding of character dynamics and social identity (Nwike & Eze, 2024).

Context

Kiai Hasyim gave advise to his *santri* about *jihad*.

Source Text

Kiai : *Innamal a'malu binniat. Segala perbuatan itu tergantung niat. Jihad hendaklah dilaksanakan dengan penuh cinta kasih dan sesuai aturan.*

Target Text

Kiai : ... All your actions depend on your intentions. Jihad must be carried out with love according to rules.

In the ST, Kiai Hasyim's utterance shows a positive politeness primarily through the sub-strategy of using common ground, which is strongly marked by the use of Arabic religious expressions *Innamal a'malu binniat*. By grounding his advice in authoritative religious discourse, Kiai Hasyim aligns himself with the audience and reinforces communal beliefs. In the TT, the omission of the Arabic expressions results in a shift at the sub-strategic level. While the overall positive politeness orientation is retained, the utterance is realized mainly through giving reasons, as the advice is presented in the form of explicit explanations about intention, rules, and moral purpose. Consequently, the TT shifts the politeness realization from asserting common ground to reasoning-based justification, reducing the communal and affective resonance present in the ST. As highlighted in the study of Paramita & Sampurna (2025), indirect and culturally embedded expressions are frequently made more direct in subtitles, as part of a broader process of cultural negotiation between authenticity and readability.

2. Authority, Power, and the Preservation of Politeness

The analysis shows that the majority of politeness strategies are maintained in the target text. It means that the subtitle preserves the stable configuration of authority and power in the interaction between Kiai Hasyim and his *santri*. Considering this, Brown & Levinson (1987) composes three sociological aspects determining the selection of politeness strategies, including: power, social distance, and rank of imposition. Kiai Hasyim, as depicted in *Sang Kiai* movie, portrays as the leader of the *pesantren* who holds legitimate institutional, moral, and spiritual power within the context. Consequently, he has authority in performing face-threatening-acts, such as commands, admonitions, and evaluative statements; without the needs to soften his utterances. The frequent preservation of bald on record and positive

politeness strategies in the target text (TT) indicates that the subtitler recognizes this authority as pragmatically non-negotiable.

Based on pragmatic perspective, this finding supports Brown & Levinson's (1987) argument that high power asymmetry licenses directness and reduces the risk of face damage. In institutional setting, directness is often intertwined with efficient and appropriate rather than impolite (Nur & Zakaria, 2016; Ayyina & El, 2025). The subtitling therefore highlights the preservation of Kiai Hasyim's authoritative voice, ensuring that his disciplinary and moral guidance remains intelligible and legitimate for the target audience. This preservation also describes that deference systems, in which hierarchical relations normalize asymmetrical linguistic behavior.

Meanwhile, from a translation perspective, the stability of politeness strategy across ST and TT suggests the subtitler tends to preserve the equivalent characterizations of Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari in the ST and TT. These findings are aligned with Pratama (2017) and Ardi et al. (2018) who state that the realization of politeness strategy in narrative works usually constitute with the characterizations mentioned in the story. Furthermore, Hatim & Mason (1997) argue that translators tend to preserve interpersonal hierarchies embedded in discourse, particularly when such hierarchies are central to the text's communicative purpose. Akin to previous statements, Cintas & Remael (2007) highlight that audiovisual translation often favors pragmatic clarity and narrative coherence. In this case, the maintenance of politeness strategy in *Sang Kiai* functions as a form of pragmatic alignment, ensuring that the Kiai's role as a religious leader remains intact despite linguistic and cultural shifts.

However, while the macro-level politeness strategies are preserved, the interpersonal nuance of authority may still experience slight reconfiguration. Watts (2003) and Eelen (2001) caution that politeness is not merely a strategic choice but a socially mediated decision. Consequently, although the TT preserves the same strategy type, the experiential perception of authority may differ due to the loss of culturally embedded markers. However, the consistent preservation of politeness strategy shows that authority relates to a core pragmatic value in the subtitling of religious discourse, supporting the narrative's moral structure and

strengthening the continued relevance of Brown and Levinson's model when applied with contextual sensitivity.

Conclusion

This research has investigated the realization of politeness strategies within the interactions between *kiai* and *santri* in the Indonesian–English subtitles of the film *Sang Kiai*. Drawing upon 49 carefully selected utterances, the results suggest that a significant proportion of politeness strategies are effectively retained in the target text, with particular emphasis on positive politeness strategies and bald on record. This preservation underlines the profound institutional authority held by the Kiai and affirms that power dynamics are instrumental in influencing linguistic conduct within the discourse of *pesantren*.

The frequent use and maintenance of positive politeness strategies, such as the use of in-group identity markers and shared religious values, further emphasize harmony while preserving hierarchical borders. Meanwhile, the maintenance of bald on record strategies can be understood as pragmatically appropriate, since Kiai Hasyim has the higher social status and legitimate authority in *pesantren*. Within this context, directness is not seen as impoliteness but functions as an accepted mode of instruction, discipline, and moral guidance.

Besides, although several data shows shifts in politeness strategy or sub-strategy, these changes were found in a small number compared to the preservation of politeness strategy. From a functional perspective, the subtitles continue to fulfill their communicative purpose by presenting Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari as a firm yet respected religious leader in the Indonesian history. Furthermore, as this research merely focus on the realization of politeness on the ST and TT, further research is expected to consider the spatial and temporal constraints embedded in subtitling.

Overall, this research concludes that politeness in audiovisual translation, especially within *pesantren* context, is closely related to power and institutional roles. Brown and Levinson's politeness theory demonstrates effective model in explaining how authority legitimizes directness and shapes translation choices.

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