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Negotiating Honor Through Indirectness: Off-Record Politeness Strategies in Sasak Elopement Rites

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the off-record politeness strategies employed by the Pembayun Adat leaders during the Sasak elopement ceremony of the Sorong Serah ritual (Merariq). Using qualitative ethnography research. The study's data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and sixteen-hour audio-visual recordings of fifteen Sorong Serah ceremonies conducted in Lombok Timur, Indonesia. The data analysis employs Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness models, revealing four strategies: hinting, associative clues, overstating, and metaphorical. These strategies enable Pembayun to manage face-threatening acts (FTAs) used in critique, requests, and negotiations with minimal risk of confrontation. The results show that Pembayun politeness in this context is not merely a matter of linguistic preferences, but also a performance in cultural expectations of morality and ceremony. The study suggests a need to theorize a more culturally situated approach to politeness that captures the nexus between communication's ethical and symbolic aspects in ritual contexts. By situating politeness in lived practices, this study contributes to cross-cultural pragmatics and ethnographic linguistics, providing relevant applications for intercultural communication, ritual language analysis, and culturally responsive dialogue strategies. It advances politeness theory by emphasizing the need for culturally specific models that account for moral symbolism, high-context communication, and collectivist norms.

I. INTRODUCTION

Marriage rituals in Southeast Asian societies, particularly in Indonesia, have long been recognized as important sociolinguistic practices that preserve cultural narratives, reinforce communal bonds, and promote the use of indigenous languages (Sukarno, 2015; Xiang, 2011). Such ceremonies are usually coordinated through rich verbal interactions, often facilitated by cultural specialists who use communicative and symbolic functions. Marriage in the Sasak of Lombok, Indonesia, is deeply embedded within traditional ritual structures. At the core of this process is the *merariq* tradition, a culturally sanctioned type of elopement that appears to be the polar opposite of its often-stigmatized interpretation in Western paradigms (Riyanto et al., 2023; Wei et al., 2017). *Merariq*

is a term for the consensual elopement that occurs when a man and woman agree beforehand to go through a culturally appropriate marriage process. This tradition is viewed not as a rebellious or deviant act but as an expression of independence, emotional commitment, and communal agreement (Yaqin & Shanmuganathan, 2020). Central to this process is the *Pembayun*, an Adat (customary Law) leader who orchestrates the interactions between the bride and groom's families. The *Pembayun* is a custodian of language and culture, enacting ritual speech at vital moments, such as *sejati, selabar,* and *Sorong Serah* rituals (Dhana, 2000).

These rituals outline the stages of the *Merariq* process and become a site of complex verbal negotiation. For example, *Selabar* includes discussions on dowries and ceremonial duties,

whereas *Sorong Serah* involves the formal exchange of symbolic objects that signify familial agreement. These negotiations are performed in\ a politeness-based dialect interspersed with Sasak respect-based norms, which are displayed through honorifics, metaphors, and indirect cues, reflecting Sasak collectivism and moral behavioral cues. As noted by Yaqin et al. (2022), such discourse is more than performative; it serves as an instrument for preserving cultural identity and social harmony.

Although *Merariq* is culturally central to Sasak society, relatively little linguistic research has been conducted in this area. Previous research on the Sasak language has focused on dialectology, morphosyntax, and language variation (Austin & Nothofer, 2012; Austin, 2014; Burhanuddin et al., 2025; Mahsun, 2007; Mahyuni, 2007). Although these linguistic dimensions provide a solid basis, they do not encompass the pragmatic and socio-cultural dimensions of communication; hence, they overlook the complexities of ritual interactions. More recently, some scholars in Indonesian sociolinguistics have begun to consider politeness and face work in local languages, such as Javanese (Mahmud, 2019), Sundanese (Sukarno, 2018), and Minangkabau (Oktavianus & Revita, 2013). However, these studies typically extrapolate findings across ethnolinguistic groups or are situated outside ritual contexts, such as classrooms or casual conversations. In contrast to this research, which explores politeness as a concept in less emotionally charged contexts, this study situates politeness within high-stakes ritualistic discourse, where failure to observe politeness norms risks interpersonal or intergroup discord.

Additionally, despite the centrality of politeness strategies in the negotiation of potentially face-threatening acts (FTAs), such as criticism, refusal, or bargaining, the politeness strategies employed by *Pembayun* are even less well-studied. The limited research on Sasak politeness constitutes a notable research gap, especially considering the crucial role of language in managing the ideological and interpersonal aspects of *Merariq* (Yaqin et al., 2023). It would be essential to fill this gap to expand the domain of politeness theory and contribute to understanding linguistic practices in ritual situations.

The present study adopts Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which is a model that has had one of the most significant impacts on the field of linguistic pragmatics. The theory suggests that people navigate social interactions using tact and strategies to maintain 'face,' or the public self-image that everyone wishes to present and uphold. Brown and Levinson distinguish between the positive face (wanting to be liked and accepted) and the negative face (desiring to be unimpeded and autonomous). Under this model, speakers negotiate face-threatening acts in one of five ordered ways: (1) bald on-record (without redress), (2) positive politeness, (3) negative politeness, (4) off-record (indirect), or (5) avoidance of the act altogether. In the case of Sasak, where indirectness is a preferred mode of preserving harmony and face, making off-record strategies will be more relevant than others for communication.

Nevertheless, this model has received criticism for its assumptions centered on Anglo society and limited cultural scope (Haugh & Kádár, 2017; Matsumoto, 1988). This new model should be adopted in cultures where relational and contextual factors prevail over individual autonomy (Nejad et al., 2022). This study adopted a culturally sensitive approach, drawing on Brown and Levinson work and incorporating discourse-based approaches (Kádár & Mills, 2011) that highlight shared knowledge, ritual norms, and moral values.

This study aims to answer the following research question: How do Sasak Adat leaders (*Pembayun*) employ off-record politeness strategies to mitigate face-threatening acts that arise in ritual interactions during the *Merariq* ceremonies? Based on the research question, the objectives of this study are: (1) identifying and classifying the types of off-record politeness strategies contributed by *Pembayun* in the stages of *Merariq* rituals, (2) analyzing how these strategies function in facilitating social harmony, avoiding conflict, and face-threatening acts. As such, the study aims to contribute to theoretical models of politeness theory by advancing culturally situated understandings of indirectness and politeness in indigenous communicative practices.

II. METHODS

Research Design

This study employs qualitative ethnographic design to investigate the use of off-record politeness

strategies by *Pembayun* (Adat leaders) in Sasak society during *Merariq* rituals. Ethnographic work is necessary for exploring the sociolinguistic, pragmatic, symbolic, and social meanings of ritual language use. This study applies Hymes's (1964) ethnography of communication framework by observing, analyzing, and interpreting ceremonial discourse through naturalistic participant observation and immersion in real-life communicative acts within the Sasak community.

Focusing on real-life ceremonial interactions ensures authenticity and ecological validity, enabling the study to document the verbal strategies practiced in ritual performances. This approach captures the nuance of politeness strategies embedded in culturally significant speech acts, allowing a more in-depth exploration of how meaning, respect, and social order are negotiated within ritual contexts.

Data Collection

The primary data for this study were gathered through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and audiovisual recordings of fifteen *Merariq* ceremonies conducted in Lombok Timur, Indonesia. The research sites were selected due to the continued practice and preservation of traditional Sasak marriage rituals in regions such as Sakra and Sakra Barat. Approximately 16 hours of recorded interactions were obtained, capturing ceremonial speech exchanges between the male representatives of the bride and groom's families.

Six participants from *Pembayun* were selected via purposive sampling to ensure they possessed deep cultural knowledge and had direct involvement in ritual negotiations. They were identified based on their authoritative roles in multiple ceremonies and community recognition as cultural experts. Each *Pembayun* represented either the groom's *Pembayun Penyerah* (PPh), *Pembayun Pisolo* (PPo), or the bride's family *Pembayun Penampi* (PPi), serving as the primary speakers during the ritual phases in Table 1.

The chosen ceremony represents diverse cases of *Merariq* involving varying dowry negotiations and levels of interpersonal tension. Each ritual was recorded in full, capturing the *Sorong Serah* ceremony, where politeness strategies were expected to be most visible. The average duration of each recording ranged between 50 and 70 minutes. All informant of this study gave their informed consent, and their identities were kept confidential to protect their privacy. Community elders provided their verbal approval for the ethical procedures, which adhered to the general standards of ethnographic research.

Analytical Procedure

Data analysis involved multiple steps, beginning with verbatim transcription of ritual discourse from the recorded interactions. The transcripts were examined using open coding and thematic analysis to identify recurring politeness strategies, particularly those that are off-record, such as metaphors, indirect hints, rhetorical questions, and associative cues. These were analyzed in the broader cultural and ritual context in which they occurred. The analytical framework drew upon Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness model, particularly the concept of face-threatening acts (FTAs) and redressive strategies. The coding process aimed to classify utterances according to how *Pembayuns* mitigated threats to face through indirect communication. Where applicable, extracts from the transcriptions were triangulated with interview data to verify intended meanings and socio-cultural significance. This combination allowed for a robust and emic understanding of politeness as practiced in the ritual discourse. The entire data analysis process adopted the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman (1994). This model consists of four parts that work together in a cycle: collecting data, reducing data, displaying data, and drawing conclusions. As shown in Figure 1, these components work together to continually improve and enhance the understanding of the data throughout the research process.

Table 1. Demographic Overview of Key Informants

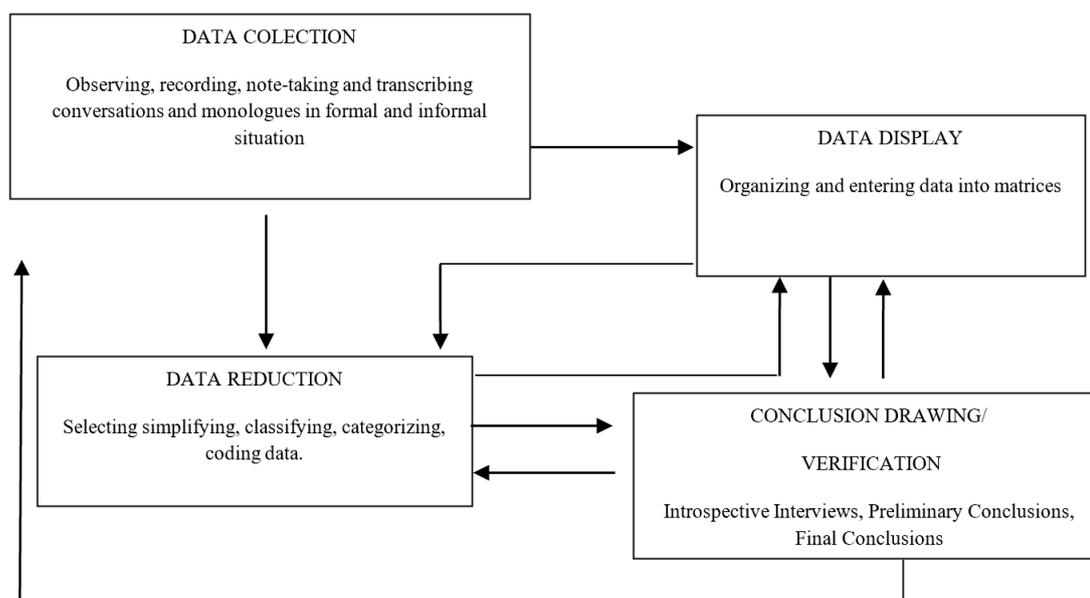| Data Set	Groom's Family (PPh / PPo)	Bride's Family (PPi)
1–4	Male, 53 (PPh); Male, 50 (PPo)	Male, 60 (PPi)
5–8	Male, 53 (PPh); Male, 40 (PPh)	Male, 60 (PPi); Male, 45 (PPi)
9–12	Male, 53 (PPh); Male, 50 (PPh)	Male, 60 (PPi); Male, 45 (PPi); Male, 60 (PPi)

Fig. 1. Adopted the interactive model, Miles and Huberman (1994)

RESULTS

The data analysis identified four types of off-record politeness strategies: giving hints, associative clues, overstating, and using metaphors. PPo, PPh, and PPi used these strategies during the *Merariq* ceremonies. In this context, the *Pembayun* were not exempt from performing face-threatening acts (FTAs) toward their interlocutors (recipients) and mitigated these acts through off-record politeness strategies.

Hinting Politeness: Indirect Criticism and Suggestion as an Off-Record Politeness Strategy

Identifying one of the most dominant off-record politeness strategies used by Sasak *Pembayun* is giving hints, as seen in the analysis of ritual interactions in *merariq* ceremonies. The strategy is often used indirectly to send criticisms, advice, or rejection (especially during the *Sorong Serah* part of the ritual). *Sorong Serah* is the last and highest ceremonial stage, which is conducted as a formal means of customary Law after the *Merariq* process. The exchange generally occurs in the bride's front yard, where representatives from both families meet and negotiate and resolve any outstanding issues symbolically. PPi refers to the bride's family, and PPo refers to the groom's family. It is a politeness strategy that preserves face by providing an implicit message instead of an explicit one and allowing the recipient to interpret the speaker's more delicate intention without confrontation.

Extract 1: SSDP

09	PPi	:	*Ngantos tanhane ubaye-ubaye jam tiga ampure, dawek, nunasan, nggih magrib mangkin, nggih dawek yenwonten sisip siwah dewek titiang sami dewek matur agung-agung sinampure* *We waited until 3 o'clock, but now it is Maghrib. If there was any mistake, I represent everyone here and sincerely apologize.*
10	PPo	:	*Ampure, ye narak sisip siwah kireng nelangkung atur piatur dewek titiang, tiang tunas gung agung sinampure.* *My apologies if I was at fault earlier. I sincerely apologize.*

In Extract 1, PPi makes an implicit critique of the lateness of PPo's arrival, without a more direct critique of PPi himself, by simply noting the passage of time and creating the impression of critique within the apology. The judgment comes through indirectly, as PPi says it is already going to Maghrib (prayer performed just after sunset) and that it apologizes, all of which suggests a nag but not a resounding criticism. PPo apologizes sincerely in response, and it is clear that PPi has communicated what PPo needed to hear most.

This exchange illustrates how PPi deliberately avoids expressing his disappointment explicitly. Instead of issuing a direct complaint, he conveys his message through indirect cues, leaving it to PPo to interpret and respond appropriately. Such an approach enables PPi to maintain politeness and social harmony by shielding PPo's face from

the threat of overt criticism. Using this off-record strategy reinforces cultural expectations around tact and respect, especially in ceremonial contexts where preserving relational dignity is paramount. The off-record nature of the criticism thus avoids confrontation and facilitates smooth interpersonal dynamics during the ritual.

Extract 2: SSDRPM

30	PPh	:	*Jam due wah te sak berangkat, bareh* *We will leave at two o'clock.*
31	PPo	:	*Sampun siap tiang pasang sapuk niki* *I am already ready with my sapuk (traditional headscarf).*

Extract 2 the interaction between PPh and PPo regarding the agreement to conduct the *Sorong Serah* ceremony. The dialogue occurs at the groom's house while preparing *arte berane,* or ritualistic gifts to be sent to the bride's house. It includes an off-record request, which implies that PPh should already be at the bride's home before 2:00 PM, asthe ceremonial team will leave by that time. Rather than directly telling PPo to come early, PPh says, "We will leave at two o'clock," allowing PPo to infer the intended meaning.

PPo responds humorously by saying he has already donned the traditional headscarf (*sapuk*), signaling his readiness and understanding of the implied message. This exchange illustrates how off-record hinting successfully maintains politeness while ensuring coordination. *Pembayun* also uses the strategy of giving hints when offering suggestions. Typically, this strategy is employed when the speaker wishes to perform a face-threatening act (FTA) while avoiding the negative impact or undesirable consequences that could follow, as further seen in extract 3.

Extract 3. SSDS

02	PPh	:	*Lamun arak kurang, arte berane ance aji krame, biase jak bagian te sanget ketat Adat ne, jari selapuk sak eak te jauk harus lengkap, adek te sak dek tesuruk tulak* *If the ceremonial offerings and traditional symbols lack something, the strict rules in that region require everything to be complete, or they might ask us to return.*

Rather than issuing a direct order, PPh frames his warning as a general observation about customary expectations. Extract 3 reflects PPh's suggestion to the delegation to prepare ceremonial offerings for the *Sorong Serah* event. He does so by merely giving a hint, leaving the interpretation

and necessary action to the recipients. PPh avoids issuing a direct command, instead employing the off-record strategy by emphasizing the importance of thoroughness, implying that incomplete offerings may not be acceptable. This phrasing conveys the intended meaning while giving the impression that no pressure is involved.

The delegation of *Pembayun* interprets the utterance as a gentle reminder and takes the necessary actions based on PPh's implied message. In this context, the off-record strategy is deemed successful when there is a positive alignment between the speaker's intention and the listener's interpretation. Based on the research results, off-record strategies are more effective than on-record approaches among the *Pembayun*. In several instances observed during *Merariq* ceremonies, direct suggestions were occasionally misinterpreted, resulting in unintended or mismatched responses.

Speakers may choose the off-record strategy when they believe that the illocutionary act expressed in a non-coercive manner can potentially threaten the recipient's positive face. Extract 4 illustrates the point in a conversation between PPh and PPi, who are also close friends.

Extract 4: SRDK

45	PPh	:	*Kolok ceraken rombong no lek to* *Place the ceremonial bowl over there.*
46	PPi	:	*Lamun ne ceraken rombong biase lek julu taok ne tekolok* *Usually, the ceremonial bowl is placed at the front.*

This exchange highlights how PPi deflects PPh's instruction by referencing tradition. The utterance in Extract 4 shows PPh suggesting to one of the delegations the placement of the ceremonial bowl (*ceraken rombong*), which is part of the offerings to the bride's family. PPi rejects the suggestion of using an off-record strategy. He does not explicitly state his refusal but emphasizes that the item is "usually placed at the front," implying that PPh's suggestion deviates from customary practice. From the contextual cues, PPh understands that his proposal may not be suitable according to tradition. Extract 4 demonstrates that even between close interlocutors such as PPh and PPi, off-record politeness strategies are employed to preserve face and mitigate the threat of direct refusal. Furthermore, off-record politeness is evident in the rejection of specific proposals during

bride-price negotiations, as illustrated in Extract 5.

Extract 5: SRDK

| 04 | PPh | : | *Sepulu doang sik ne siep marak sak aturan keluarge mame*
Only ten, as per the request from the groom's family. |
| 05 | PPi | : | *Dek te bau beli sebie bawang, lamun tek itung ajian-ajian nani*
Looking at current prices, that is not enough to buy chili and onions. |

In Extract 5, PPh proposes reducing the bride's price to ten units, a suggestion made on behalf of the groom's family. PPi, who represents the bride's family, meets this offer with a firm yet indirect rejection. PPi replies with a culturally resonant analogy: "That is not enough to buy chili and onions if you look at current prices." This off-record response implies that the proposed amount is insufficient without directly confronting the offer.

The strategy fosters harmony and consensus, aligning with the broader communicative ethos of Sasak ritual discourse. By employing quotidian economic expressions, PPi communicates not merely the rejection but one couched in the familiar and non-aggressive. The solution preserves the other party's dignity. It strikes a balance between being formal enough to respect everyone's dignity and informal enough to accommodate everyone's needs. During *Merariq*, numerous indirect refusals are selected to minimize the possibility of conflict and preserve the cultural values of respect and politeness. PPi's metaphor registers dissent while protecting mutual dignity, then draws from their common stock of social norms and ceremonial expectations.

These extracts above show that Sasak *Merariq* rituals badly need hinting as a strategy of off-record politeness. It empowers speakers to share criticism, make suggestions, and manage disagreements without endangering relational harmony or social order. In high-context or collectivist cultures (like Sasák society), hinting maintains the careful equilibrium between deference and assertiveness expected in ceremonial discourse. Cultural scripts and communal knowledge that facilitate the understanding of messages, even when implicit, support the strategic use of hinting in these exchanges. Hinting thus serves as a face-saving measure to reinforce community norms and facilitate respectful negotiation. This observation confirms the applicability of Brown and Levinson's politeness model to ritual situations while illustrating the necessity to consider culture-specific modes of indirectness in the linguistic approach (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Associative Clues as an Off-Record Politeness Strategy

Sasak ritual discourse employs associative clues as an off-record politeness strategy. The strategy enables speakers to direct listeners to a desired interpretation without explicitly stating it, instead drawing on relevant prior knowledge from shared culture and context. Such techniques are employed regularly in *Merariq*, especially during the ceremonial negotiations known as *Sorong Serah*, which ultimately solidify traditional agreements made following elopement. Politeness stems from nuanced language that focuses on cultural harmony and understanding, a shared interpretation of conduct, rather than issuing blunt instructions or resorting to aggression.

Extract 6: SRDK

| 51 | PPi | : | *Nunasan tang, ape symbol aji krame niki arak tejauk endah?*
Excuse me, is the aji krame symbol (gold ornament) also brought here? |

In the extract, PPi smartly questions what is not being seen; PPi inquires about the presence of customary goods that should be there (*aji krame*), while during the ceremony, PPi asks where this thing is. PPi's question, without a direct, explicit request, suggests that the item is essential and should be available or visible. The utterance serves as an association cue, indicating that the item should nearby and perhaps even highlighting its exact positioning or visibility. Interpretation of the subtext: The recipient moves the object forward. PPi request was made "without pressure" with a minimized likelihood for threats in the "face" and ceremonial decorum.

With a collective grasp of the customs, society employs these indirect strategies in its interaction-sustaining communication, despite a firm reliance on high-context markers in Sasak communication, such as associative strategies. Shared knowledge is crucial in these forms of cultural and ritual communication, where indirectness can occur, as it enables participants to pick up on nuances that are not explicitly stated. The context and knowledge shared among members of a collectivist society help individuals infer deeper meanings in hints and

associations. In communities with a strong oral tradition, this dependency on common knowledge becomes even more pronounced, producing a dynamic where listeners fill in gaps for vague utterances in rituals with their embedded narratives and socialized knowledge. In these contexts, associative meaning-making is crucial, as it fosters connections between linguistic expressions and their social and cultural consequences. They are indirect by making criticisms or expressing needs, doing so in a way that avoids direct interaction with their interlocutors. This roundabout approach gives face, encourages mutual understanding, and strengthens community ties. Participants draw upon contextual clues and insights about community norms to navigate sexualized spaces, allowing them to communicate in a way that (relatively) avoids offending.

Overstating as an Off-Record Politeness Strategy

Overstating is another off-record politeness strategy; *Pembayun* can overstate their utterances for communicative effect. In that sense, it is essential to note that indirectness is not limited to understatement or exaggeration. Still, it can also serve as a politeness strategy, particularly in situations involving humor, subtle rejection, or mild criticism. Exaggerations in ritual communication soften the force of an utterance, allowing speakers to disagree or make a request in a way that minimizes potential face threats.

Extract 7: SRDP

| 56 | PPi | : | *Lamun lek deriki aji satak ajin aji krame niki*
Here, the value of aji krame is usually two hundred. |
| 57 | PPh | : | *Ampure, tang, sai sak piyak kesepakatan masalah harge niki, bije jarin raden bae aji satus.*
Excuse me, but who agreed to this price? Only those of the Raden lineage would have a value of one hundred. |

In this exchange, which occurs during dowry negotiations in the *Sorong Serah* ceremony, PPi proposes a figure for the ceremonial gold (*aji krame*). PPh responds with an exaggerated statement framed as a rhetorical question: "Only the Raden would price it at one hundred," implying the proposed figure is too high for their social status. This overstatement serves as a subtle criticism and polite rejection, conveyed without

overt confrontation.

PPh's indirect response allows PPi to infer disapproval while maintaining face. The exaggeration, embedded in humor and cultural reference to the Raden nobility, invites reconsideration of the proposal without creating tension. This type of rhetorical exaggeration is common in Sasak ceremonial discourse as it communicates disagreement while preserving social cohesion.

Extract 8: SSDS

| 57 | PPi | : | *Selapuk ne mangkin eak mau selawat, pire keloek ne selawat niki?*
Everyone will receive selawat (gift money), so how many are there? |
| 58 | PPh | : | *Sejute tang dek ne kurang sesenpun*
One million rupiah, not a single cent less. |

In extract 8, during the distribution of *selawat* (a ritual monetary gift), PPi uses the word *selapuk* (everyone), an exaggeration that suggests a large group. This indirect request implies substantial financial requirement. PPh responds with matching hyperbole, promising one million rupiahs without deduction. The exchange is light-hearted but purposeful: PPi avoids directly stating the amount needed, and PPh accepts the implication in kind. The mutual use of exaggeration reflects shared cultural norms, allowing both parties to maintain politeness and humor while meeting the ritual obligation.

Extract 9: SSDBK

| 59 | PPh | : | *Dek tenik nani jak selesai, sampe ne arak subuh*
There is no way we will finish this now; it might go until subuh (morning prayer). |
| 60 | PPi | : | *Lamun dekman lengkap arte berane niki,,silak te penyalak obor*
If the offerings are not complete yet, let us go ahead and light the torches. |

In extract 9, it occurs amid a prolonged negotiation. PPh exaggerates the time expected to complete the discussion, joking that it might continue until subuh (morning prayer). PPi responds with a similar overstatement, suggesting they light torches. The use of hyperbole here softens the frustration felt over delays and avoids attributing blame. *Pembayun* shared that exaggeration signals a cooperative stance and shared understanding. Humor and overstatement function as tools to reduce interpersonal tension, preserving the face of

all participants while still expressing dissatisfaction. In Sasak culture, such exchanges are emblematic of indirect confrontation wrapped in jest.

In these cases, exaggeration is a deliberate and culturally salient form of off-record politeness. Exaggeration is often employed as a politeness or mitigation device to maintain social harmony in interactions within certain Southeast Asian cultures. This strategic overstatement mitigates requests or criticisms, helping speakers emphasize their communicative goals without directly challenging the face of the interlocutor (Astruc & Vanrell, 2016; Duffau & Fox Tree, 2024). For instance, exaggeration can be purposely employed (e.g., in ceremonies) to amplify feelings of gratitude or happiness, thereby orchestrating a sense of collective celebration and agreement (Rezaie, 2014; Wang et al., 2010).

Exaggeration is often correlated with humor or irony in ritual discourse and contributes to lessening the seriousness while reinforcing ties among participants. The mutual coherence of humor provides everyone involved with a of "saving face" in a fraught social situation, serving as a vehicle for commenting on otherwise loutish or controversial opinions (Meiratnasari et al., 2019; Syting & Gildore, 2022). These humorous exaggerations are closely tied to oral traditions that value storytelling and embellishment, leading to an enhanced communicative experience (Beschieru, 2021; Duffau & Fox Tree, 2024). In many Southeast Asian cultures, the norms of politeness may be more relaxed and refer to the collective values in some cultures and social hierarchies, where hyperbole is allowed more freely than in individualistic cultures. Hyperbole is often acceptable and appreciated when it serves to the benefit of group cohesion or a collective cause. On the other hand, there are various cases where international students use excessive exaggeration in their speech, which can be perceived as insincere or disrespectful to individuals, provoking a backlash and highlighting the need to balance humor and propriety. (Getkham, 2014).

Metaphorical Expression as an Off-Record Politeness Strategy

In the Sasak marriage ceremony, metaphorical language is an essential off-the-record politeness strategy. Instead of using literal or direct language, speakers use culturally resonant metaphors to critique, humble, or evaluate in a way that minimizes face loss and conforms to social norms.

Extract 10: SSDJG

| 60 | PPi | : | *Ternyate dek dengan sembarangan, semaken te petoes kau lapah* |
| | | | *Clearly, not just anyone moves like waking a hungry buffalo.* |

In the extract, 10 PPi delivers this utterance after witnessing another speaker perform a song. The metaphor "like waking a hungry buffalo" is an indirect compliment, indicating that the performer is powerful and energetic. This metaphor is a culturally embedded form of praise, allowing PPi to express admiration while avoiding overly direct flattery. Using an animal metaphor familiar in Sasak's cultural imagery, PPi draws on shared knowledge to ensure the comment is positive yet modest.

Extract 11: SSDLSD

| 65 | PPi | : | *Selapauk dedare anyong penek ne, sik tembang niki, lamun tiang jak jauk dunie bekek langit* |
| | | | *All the young maidens would lose control hearing this song: my voice is as far from yours as the earth is from the sky.* |

In extract 11, PPi compliments PPh's singing with a metaphor comparing their voices to the distance between earth and sky. The expression serves two functions: praising PPh while simultaneously showing humility. In Sasak culture, direct self-praise is frowned upon, so PPi uses metaphor to avoid elevating himself while elevating the other speaker. This strategy also preserves the social equilibrium between the interlocutors.

Extract 12: SSBP

| 50 | PPi | : | *Halus manis subasaning raga lwir kadya subasaning para ratu luwih.* |
| | | | *The speech was so refined and sweet, like the words of noble kings.* |

In this case, PPi compares the speech of another participant to that of royal figures. The metaphor honors the recipient and demonstrates high regard for their eloquence. Such expressions reinforce cultural ideals of politeness and humility, elevating the other party's status while implicitly lowering the speaker's own.

It is consistent with local etiquette that prioritizes humility, especially in formal or ceremonial language. With these examples,

Metaphors protect literal meaning; that is, metaphors are ambiguous compared to direct meaning: speakers could praise or criticize in a gentle, artistic, or socially acceptable manner. They introduce a layer of abstraction that allows for interpretation without confrontation; we are still telling the same story, but it requires an accepted level of familiarity with our cultural narrative, from the nightly news, to hang together.

In cultural and ritual communication, inferences about indirectness occur since shared knowledge enables the participants to understand the slight variations and implicit messages that are not explicitly stated. In collectivist societies, the shared background knowledge among community member's fosters familiarity, making hints, associative meanings, and impressions more significant. In communities with strong oral traditions, this dependence on the group's knowledge is further evident; it allows for dynamic interaction between speakers and listeners, who can come to understand the significance of vague language or allusions made during performative rituals based on their own relevant social experiences and culturally determined narratives. Contextualizing linguistic expressions in relation to social and cultural events and associative meaning-making would be invaluable. The implicit references in ritual discourse serve as politeness devices that allow members to articulate their needs or critiques without explicitly challenging their interlocutor. This indirectness preserves face, encourages mutual understanding, and reinforces social bonds. With both contextual clues and standard community norms, participants can approach complex social interactions in a more cohesive and socially relevant manner, allowing members to maintain a shared sense of interaction that is primarily respectful and civil.

Widely used across cultures, particularly in ritual or religious contexts, metaphor serves as a politeness strategy, allowing speakers to convey criticism or humility in a culturally significant manner. Metaphorical language in Sasak and other Indonesian cultures is often rooted in elements of nature, spirituality, and communal living, reflecting the shared experiences and values of these cultures. In particular, as a staple food, metaphors associated with rice represent abundance and prosperity, whereas the invocation of water brings about purification. *Pembayuns* are handy devices for conveying criticism or humility indirectly. Using metaphorical techniques can soften the face-threatening acts that may be inherent in speakers' commentaries or critiques on the subject matter, which may need to be avoided in the deliberation process to create a more civilized discussion atmosphere. (Meiratnasari et al., 2019). As an illustration, a speaker might note, "The river flows quietly but carries stones," strongly advising against reflection less verbally than directly admonishing a person. Language remains a ritual in the Indonesian community, allowing them to critique and maintain social harmony, intimating their inseparable bond within the tapestry of culture. Therefore, referencing metaphors also strengthens the variety of communication by reflecting the cultural values of respect and delicacy, so that the cultural context behind Sasak society and language, among others, should also be considered when articulating words (Astruc & Vanrell, 2016; Widiana et al., 2024).

Strategic Functions of Off-Record Politeness Strategies in Managing Social Dynamics

This section systematically discloses how off-record politeness strategies were instantiated in the *Sorong Serah* of Sasak elopement practices, providing the communicative function, face-saving orientation, and correlation with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory for each strategy. As examined in the preceding sections, the strategies of hinting, associative hints, overstatement, and metaphor have specific functions in mitigating face-threatening acts (FTAs), particularly in negotiating sensitive topics such as dowry, role, and ritual obligations.

According to the Brown and Levinson model, speakers of an FTA (face-threatening act) can do so on-record or off-record. In an on-record situation, speakers may then decide whether to rectify it through positive or negative politeness. Off-record strategies that fit the Sasak *Pembayuns* involve the speaker blurring their intention, leaving it ambiguous and open to interpretation, which allows the speaker to avoid accountability and potential conflict.

These strategies demonstrate the Sasak speakers' preference for indirect, high-context communication which prioritizes relational harmony over confrontation. The use of off-record politeness not only reflects strategic linguistic

Table 2. Off-Record Strategies in Sasak *Merariq* (Elopement) Functions and Face Orientation

Strategy	Communicative Function	Face-Saving Orientation
Hinting	Indirectly criticizing or requesting without imposing	Negative Face
associative Clues	Using shared cultural knowledge to infer meaning	Positive Face
Overstating	Exaggerating to reject, mock, or humorously critique	Negative/Positive Face
Metaphorical Expression	Encoding evaluation or humility via culturally resonant symbolism	Positive Face

behavior but also embodies the profound moral and cultural values embedded in the Sasak cultural practice. Notably, such strategies rely heavily on shared interpretive frameworks between speaker and listener, reinforcing group identity and socio-cultural coherence. Politeness strategies in cross-cultural pragmatics literature have been extensively categorized, primarily drawing on the foundational work of Brown and Levinson (1987) and subsequent adaptations and critiques.

Brown and Levinson (1987) classified politeness into positive, negative, and off-record strategies which enable individuals to navigate social interactions, strengthening the social bond or minimizing threats to one another's face. With the emergence of more nuanced frameworks, comparisons of off-record strategies between different speech communities have been made, including cross-cultural differences in requests and politeness strategies in American English and Saudi Arabic, which highlight the cultural specificity in these interactions (Tawalbeh & Al-Oqaily, 2012).

The framework of Brown and Levinson (1987) remains helpful for analyzing the linguistic choices in the Sasak *merariq* ritual. Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that the effectiveness of each strategy relies not only on its theoretical classification but also on how well-suited it is to local traditions and communicative expectations. In this way, vague politeness serves the complex process of negotiating marriage alliances within Sasak culture by enabling socially valued exits that save face and offer flexibility of interpretation, both of which are essential for maintaining social harmony. Thus, while structures of politeness can be viewed through the lens of Brown and Levinson's theory, the actual practice of politeness among the Sasak is a delicate balancing act influenced by the context of the social environment and cultural structures.

IV. DISCUSSION

This study's results confirm that Sasak speakers employed off-record politeness strategies, especially during the *Sorong Serah* ritual, which serves significant communicative and cultural functions. This affirms the function of politeness as both a communicative and moral resource in ritual discourse. These strategies enable parties to avoid conflict in sensitive negotiations, such as those surrounding dowries and ritual obligations, and reflect the deep-rooted Sasak values underpinning such sensitive communications. Patterns of directness or indirectness can be culturally conditioned based on social relationships and the specific situation. However, the tendency for indirectness reflects the collectivist-oriented culture that compromises and respects the hierarchy and society as a domain of moral obligation under Adat (custom). According to Sukarno (2018), politeness in collectivist societies, such as Indonesia, extends beyond mere social conventions, reflecting societal and moral values that help maintain a sense of respect and cohesion among their members. Indirectness is considered a virtue in Sasak culture; the language used in this way, ranging from metaphor to associative clues and hints, avoids confrontation and thus preserves the interlocutor's face, allowing for the consensus necessary to make a decision. These practices align with the commitment to maintaining a communal identity and relational equilibrium, rather than prioritizing individual aggression. In contrast, individualistic cultures emphasize clarity and assertiveness in speech (Mahmud et al., 2019).

Ethnographic data also demonstrates that Sasak communicators draw upon standard cultural schemas and expectations to help decode such indirect utterances with minimal ambiguity. So, metaphors such as "squeezing the rocks that have no water" are no linguistic embellishments but culturally accepted poetic indirection. This respect for high-context communication means that any disagreement reinforces relationships rather than tearing them apart. These findings further support the work of Mahmud et al. (2019) and Yaqin et

al. (2022, 2023), who argue that ritual discourse constitutes a social practice of re-establishing order and solidifying societal norms of face-saving and harmony. If the vernacular notes that off-record politeness is more than a functional linguistic strategy, it embodies social values; it is performative. Especially in rituals like *merariq,* where social ties are (re)negotiated through marriage, internal negotiations falling off the record, politeness through off-record strategies enables participants to maintain decorum while pursuing complex negotiations. Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory has been strongly criticized for its limited relevance to non-Western contexts, despite being seminal in its approach. The Sasak case study supports this criticism by revealing that indirectness in interaction achieves adjudged options concerning face management, which is but one of many socio-cultural imperatives (including honor, ritual propriety, and communal obligation).

This implies the necessity to complement politeness theory theoretically, which establishes the interdependence between culturally motivated indirectness and local morality and ritual norms. Wildan et al. (2024) reported that incorporating localized values (e.g., humility, harmony, hierarchical state) into long-standing theoretical models could result in a richer yet contextually specific understanding of politeness phenomena. In another example, Sasak culture has a linguistic habit of utilizing overstatement or metaphor to represent critique, defying Gricean maxims, but this is a culturally bound, accepted, and respectful manner of expressing disagreement (Yaqin & Shanmuganathan, 2018).

Furthermore, the face-saving behavior in the Sasak society prioritizes relational equilibrium over individual autonomy. This critical distinction opens the way for reconceptualizing "face" in non-Western settings not just as a separate image, but as a socially distributed asset that is textured by ritual and custom. Thus, we have also seen some empirical support for pluralizing politeness theory in relation to high-context, ritual-centered cultures. It entails introducing ethnographic perspectives that draw out the moral logic behind indirectness and embeddedness of speech acts within ritual practices of culturally bounded applicability, made apparent in the *Sorong serah*.

The implications are essential beyond the Sasak context. The insight into indirectness as something culturally valued in intercultural communication may foster sensitivity in communication across cultural borders. Competence in the effective use of indirect styles is essential in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Duffau & Fox Tree (2024) and Ojwang et al. (2010) argue that some traditional implicit cues for a particular culture, such as interpreting off-record politeness and not being offended by thinking of oneself as superior to something, can help avoid misunderstandings and foster mutual respect. In applied domains such as diplomacy, negotiation, and education, understanding cultural expectations related to indirectness can facilitate dialogue management and prevent unnecessary conflict. For example, in diplomatic or organizational contexts where people from Southeast Asia are involved, recognizing that a common metaphor or rhetorical questioning can indicate disagreement or resistance without open confrontation can lead to more effective communication.

Sasak's elopement rituals, with their ritualized politeness, also provide comparative potential. Similar strategies in ceremonial talk are found in other collectivist or ritualized societies, including those of the Javanese and Balinese, as well as the Arab and South Asian communities. Comparative work might consider how metaphors, honorifics, or associative speech promote face and mitigate conflict across cultures. This study can advance our understanding of universal vs. culture-specific aspects of politeness phenomena. The Sasak case has demonstrated that politeness is not only a matter of linguistic politeness or pragmatic strategy; it is a medium through which social values, identity, and power relations are negotiated.

V. CONCLUSION

This study investigated off-record politeness strategies among Sasak *Pembayun* (Adat leaders) during *merariq*, a culturally sanctioned elopement ritual in Lombok, Indonesia. By examining discourse data from *Sorong Serah* ceremonies, the research identified four key off-record strategies: giving hints, using associative clues, overstating, and metaphorical expression. These strategies proved to be integral not only for managing face-threatening acts but also for upholding the moral, relational, and ritual values embedded in Sasak cultural practices. Indirectness was not merely a

stylistic preference but a communicative necessity informed by collectivist norms and a desire for social harmony. The findings challenge the universal applicability of Western-centric politeness theories, particularly Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, by demonstrating how politeness in high-context, ritual-oriented cultures is shaped by collective identity, honor, and hierarchy. While the study confirms the relevance of off-record politeness strategies, it also highlights the need for cultural adaptation in politeness models. The reliance on shared cultural knowledge and ritual obligation underscores a more dynamic and context-sensitive understanding of face and interaction. This study's limitations include its focus on a specific ethnic and ritual context, which may limit generalizability. Future research should explore similar strategies in other Indonesian or Southeast Asian communities and examine how gender, generational differences, or digital communication contexts influence indirectness. This study contributes to a growing body of research advocating for a culturally grounded understanding of politeness. This study affirms the role of ritual communication as a site where language, culture, and morality intersect, offering valuable insights into cross-cultural pragmatics and sociolinguistics.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD) Research Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their identities have been kept strictly anonymous to ensure confidentiality. The research fully complies with the ethical standards and publication guidelines of Jurnal Arbitrer.

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DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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