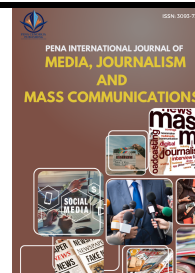




## Pena International Journal of Media, Journalism and Mass Communication

Journal homepage:  
<https://penacendekia.com.my/index.php/pijmmc/index>  
ISSN: 3093-7337



# Politeness in Conflict: A Qualitative Analysis of Grand Strategy of Politeness in the Film 'Shortcomings' (2023)

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### **Article history:**

Received 15 August 2025

Received in revised form 18 September 2025

Accepted 25 September 2025

Available online 8 October 2025

#### **Keywords:**

Language learning; movie; politeness strategy

### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the politeness strategies used in the movie 'Shortcomings (2023)'. By utilising Grand Strategy of Politeness, provided by Geoffrey Leech in 2005, finalised in 2014, the purpose of the study is to explore the politeness strategies used by the characters of the movie. For certain individuals like Ben Tagawa, who is the movie's main character, who struggle to be polite or could not see the importance of being polite to build rapport and maintain good relationships, this incapacity will eventually become an issue for them. Hence, the study seeks to research ways or examples of politeness by observing characters' interaction. By identifying, determining, and examining the reasons for any strategies used, the researcher will be able to meet the purpose of this research. Furthermore, the gap in existing research studies particularly one using Grand Strategy of Politeness and in the context of films and related media shows there is a need of conducting the current study. Therefore, to achieve this paper's objective, the researcher will be using qualitative methodology throughout the analysis of findings from the movie. The movie Shortcomings (2023) is deliberately chosen to match the researcher's objective and interest in investigating from the lens of intercultural settings. The findings will be analysed using a descriptive approach, according to content analysis guidelines and based on Leech's GSP which contain 10 maxims in total. Lastly, this paper is hoped to provide useful resources for future researchers and readers who are interested in politeness study while promoting the usage of politeness strategies for achieving successful communication.

## 1. Introduction

Politeness is a crucial factor in human connection and communication [21]. To apply politeness in communication, there are strategic applications and guidelines in order to convey one's message exactly as planned while considering the feelings of others. But is politeness only limited to language? Brown [4] mentioned that politeness is assumed to be the anticipated background when

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<https://doi.org/10.37934/pijmmc.2.1.5067>

communicating; it is typically not articulated but consists of adhering to standards of suitable behaviour. This is also supported by Mambetniyazova *et al.*, [14] that politeness is a phrase that represents linguistic elements related with rules of social behaviour, such as civility, relationships, respect and distance. On another side, Leech [11], one of the politeness theorists, stated the use of politeness in communication is based on (a) the language and (b) the social or cultural context. Hence there are (a) linguistic-oriented and (b) sociocultural-oriented aspects of politeness, and this paper will be investigating politeness from the linguistic point of view. On top of that, most linguists' definitions of linguistic politeness agree that 'face' is the most relevant concept to talk about in linguistic politeness [16]. Politeness, in the context of films, movies and other related media, is not that far different from the general view of politeness. Just like the politeness people use in daily lives, politeness in films can be influenced by genre, age of characters and the social distance between the characters. For example, romance films like "Me Before You" tend to utilize more positive politeness methods since the protagonists are in a loving relationship and must keep a respectful tone [19]. Furthermore, politeness is also determined by the gap in the age, younger characters would use more positive strategies to avoid offending the other [7]. Proximity also plays a role in a way that close friends or couples in movies tend to use positive strategies to sustain their relationship [9]. In this paper, the context that the researchers were investigating from is a movie entitled "Shortcomings", aired in 2023, about a 30-years old Asian American, who works as a movie manager at a local theatre in the Bay Area. From the start, the protagonist Ben Tagawa is portrayed as someone negative and cynical towards everyone and everything around him. Even though he is part Asian himself, he turns his nose away from any sort of progress made for Asian American representation, alluding it to selling out and inauthentic representation. Other characters such as his girlfriend, Miko who is the opposite of his character, his other Asian friend, Alice, his colleague Autumn and a friend of Alice, Sasha, who will all be researched and used as the subject of the study.

Nuessel [17] confirmed that it is accepted that theories of politeness have roots in these linguistic subfields, because politeness is explicitly concerned with language usage that is related with pragmatics, and it is a phenomenon that indicates a relationship between language and social context. Therefore, it can be deduced that politeness depends on the context and is very contextual. Olshtain and Treger [18] stated some politeness act is valid in a certain culture, location, or situation but may not be appropriate in other communities, locations, or circumstances. Asia [3] also said that a speech may be perceived as polite in one community while regarded as disrespectful in another. Hence the reason some linguists would call politeness as constraints on human interaction, with its objective is to regard others' feelings, develop degrees of mutual comfort, and foster connection. However, it is undeniable that politeness is still considered important in a conversation. People utilise politeness methods to ensure seamless communication and a pleasant relationship. It is a method for avoiding confrontation and developing excellent connections or cohesion in social situations [1]. Unfortunately, not everyone has the capability to distinguish between what is and what is not polite [22]. They end up humiliating other people and making a lot of mistakes as a result. The closest example being the main character of this paper's chosen movie, Ben Tagawa. He is a non-conformist and highly critical of others. Thus, this study seeks to investigate the possible politeness strategies that he uses or should have been using as the main character in the movie. It is imperative that a character like Ben Tagawa be studied because this has undoubtedly been the case for many individuals, based on how engrossed Ben was in his own thoughts. In conjunction to that, this study intends to:

a. identify the politeness strategies used in the movie "Shortcomings" (2023).

- b. determine the types of politeness strategies used in the movie "Shortcomings" (2023).
- c. investigate the reasons for identified politeness strategies used in the movie "Shortcomings" (2023).

## **2. Literature Review**

Marti [15] believes the social normative perspective on politeness is that every community has a set of explicit standards that stipulate how members should behave or think about situations. Politeness theory is a popular field of study among well-known linguists such as Paul Grice who created the Cooperative Principle which became the base of Robin Lakoff's politeness theory, one of the earliest theories in the field, as early as 1973. Lakoff [10] formed the basis of Politeness theory rules consisting of, 1) be clear and, 2) be polite. As mentioned in her study, the first rule 'be clear' has already been formulated or completed with the help of Grice's 4 maxims which are, Maxims of Quantity, Maxims of Quality, Maxims of Relevance and Maxims of Manner [10]. However, Lakoff [10] expressed her opinion on how an exciting conversation could not adhere to these rules. As we must be clear and concise, conversation can only be stiff and formal [10]. This is where the second rule, 'be polite' comes into the picture. An exciting conversation may not all the time adhere to the rules of be clear, but people can try their best to be as polite as possible by following the rules of politeness. 3 sub rules were presented, 1) Do not impose, 2) Give options and, 3) Make listener feel good and be friendly [10]. While this theory may seem relevant, the researcher will not be using the framework for this study as it is too broad and does not capture the cultural aspect that exists in communication in terms of politeness.

However, Lakoff's theory is considered significant to be discussed as it inspired other linguists in creating more detailed politeness theories that will be explored further into this study [8]. At a certain point, in 1944, the concept of 'Face' was brought over to America by Hu, a Chinese anthropologist [23]. "Face" refers to something emotionally involved, which may be lost, preserved, or increased, and must be continually addressed throughout interaction [4]. Losing face implies feeling ashamed or humiliated [4]. According to this theory, a face represents wishes or desires that need to be satisfied. Negative face means the desire to be free from others interference while positive face means the desire for their wants to be acceptable to others. There are 4 main strategies in Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. The first one is a bald-on record, corresponding to Grice's Maxims [4]. Secondly, positive politeness which has 15 sub strategies referring to the listener's positive face. Third, negative politeness which has 10 sub strategies referring to the listener's negative face. Lastly, off record that houses 15 sub strategies. Off record is simply the opposite of bald-on record. Off record strategy allows the speaker to leave the interpretation up to listeners' judgement [4].

Politeness strategy is a rapidly expanding subject of research in pragmatics. From the beginning with Lakoff, the mother of current politeness theory [6], followed by Brown and Levinson's well-known and extensively utilised politeness theory, and other significant theories by qualified linguists. However, the number of research using Leech's GSP, particularly in the context of films and similar mass media, remains low. Especially films with intercultural settings, there are a limited number of studies employing Leech's GSP. There is, however, research that examines three various types of media: political discussion, actor interviews, and a comedy show. Although it is a quantitative study and examines at meta discourse and corpus levels, it provides a clear picture of how GSP is used. Allaf-Akbary's [2] study on personal meta discourse and the politeness principle investigated the overall frequencies in all three media using corpus analysis, and from the viewpoint of meta discourse: speaker-oriented, participant-oriented, and listener-oriented. One of the many findings demonstrates that Leech's GSP M8 (opinion reticence), M4 (modesty), and M2 (tact) were the most

used maxims in speaker-oriented units across all genres. Another significant conclusion from this study was that the generosity maxim may be successfully applied to commercials to grab attention and persuade customers. The researchers provide their perspectives and suggest how these findings might be applied to real-world circumstances. They also discovered that more individuals from Western nations voice their thoughts in a conversation following a lecture, and if there is no discussion, the presentation is termed a 'failure' [2].

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design and Approach**

Throughout the entire research process, this study made use of qualitative methods. This method is appropriate for this study because according to William [24], qualitative research draws on interpretivist and constructivist perspectives, attempting to truly comprehend a research subject rather than anticipate outcomes, as in the positivist paradigm. Understanding the characters of the film *Shortcomings*, and the sociocultural influences that may or may not influence them, was critical for producing neutral observations and analysis. Qualitative research is also carefully done, internally consistent, comprehensive, and helps answer significant concerns about people and their lives (Lim, 2025). Above all, qualitative research is vital for interpreting complicated situations and has a unique capacity to capture individuals' unique perspectives [12]. This study utilised qualitative methodology, focusing on the movie's characters to understand their behaviourism and attitudes, allowing for a more in-depth investigation of the subjects and all essential points.

There are several approaches to applying qualitative methodology, and in this study, a descriptive approach was adopted. This approach gives a complete overview of events or experiences, and its merits include a clear approach, concentration on subject viewpoints, and flexibility to varied research situations [12]. The descriptive approach was very relevant to this study, as it was used to investigate Ben Tagawa and other main characters, illustrate their conducts, and determine whether they can be classified according to Leech's GSP. Most significantly, qualitative descriptive is a pragmatic and successful approach to expressing human experiences and occurrences [12]. This approach was particularly appropriate for this study since the researcher used the characters' experiences and situations to explain their actions.

#### **3.2 Setting and Sample**

This study was based on Randall Park's directorial debut, *"Shortcomings"* (2023), a comedy-drama film based on Adrian Tomine's graphic novel of the same title. The plot focuses on Ben Tagawa, a sarcastic and insecure Asian American guy living in Berkeley, California. Ben's obsession with other women, especially white women, and his lack of ambition create tension in his relationship with his fiancée, Miko, who is a complete opposite of Ben, ambitious and passionate about Asian representation in the film industry. When Miko relocates to New York for an internship, Ben goes on a journey of self-discovery, while struggling with his anxiety and prejudices. The film explores questions of identity, cultural assimilation, and human growth. Ultimately, Ben's experiences cause him to ponder on his relationships and views towards the world, resulting in a difficult realisation of his own problematic self and the need for change. This particular movie was chosen based on the method of purposive sampling, which is a non-probability strategy for choosing data based on their attributes or judgement. Campbell [5] confirms that it is used to better match the sample to the research's goals and objectives, hence enhancing the study's quality and reliability of the data and findings. This means the movie was purposefully picked as it matched the

researcher's interest in investigating politeness strategies in diverse cultures such as the Asian American. Furthermore, this movie also has a unique feature, where Ben Tagawa is not portrayed as a common main character. Instead, he is created as someone who sabotages his own future with his attitude and tendency to be pessimistic.

### *3.3 Instrument and Materials*

The research instrument that was implemented for this study is a content analysis guide based on the framework by Leech's GSP. Content analysis is a human or computer-assisted technique that measures and examines the meanings and connections of words, sentences, and concepts in words [20]. Thus, this instrument acted as an organised method to find and classify examples of politeness strategies throughout the language and interactions of the film. *Shortcomings* (2023) was chosen because of its distinctive context, diverse culture, and contemporary narrative to guarantee its relevance to current events and future study.

### *3.4 Data Collection Procedure*

First, appropriate data selections were made in accordance with the researcher's requirements: intercultural setting and films that debuted in 2023 or 2024. The final data set selected was *Shortcomings* (2023). After that, it was downloaded and watched twice on a reliable movie streaming website. Then, the movie's screenplay was retrieved on Script Slug, a trustworthy website for movie scripts meant for research and teaching. The script was read thoroughly and checked for accuracy by watching the movie for the third time. Major and significant scenes were noted for analysis while watching. The noteworthy scenes were taken out and revisited to determine whether they truly qualify as demonstrations of Leech's GSP. This final list of the scenes was then categorized into the ten GSP categories.

### *3.5 Data Analysis Procedure*

This section describes the data analysis technique for studying the politeness strategies utilised in the film "*Shortcomings*" (2023) through a qualitative, descriptive lens. The research was based on Geoffrey Leech's GSP (2007), which presents a thorough framework for comprehending politeness in communication. Leech's framework divides politeness into ten super maxims, each expressing a distinct component of polite action. As the researcher analysed the data using content analysis guidelines, character interactions were prioritised as the unit of analysis. A coding method were constructed, consisting of ten lists of Leech's GSP: Generosity, Tact, Approbation, Modesty, Obligation (of S to O, S: Self, O: Other person), Obligation (of O to S), Agreement, Opinion Reticence, Sympathy, and Feeling Reticence. The selected data that are certain to indicate politeness strategies were marked or labelled and assigned to the appropriate super maxims. The frequency of each politeness strategy was counted to estimate its predominance. Regular peer evaluations and feedback sessions with the researcher's supervisor and a partner in the same field of study will verify the coding and analysis. The descriptive method was used to convey the results, emphasising important examples of politeness strategies from the film along with their context.

### 3.6 Reliability and Validity

In the research "Politeness Strategies Used in Movie Shortcomings (2023)," audit trails were used to establish reliability and validity. Audit trails entail keeping complete records of the research process, such as the decisions made, the reasoning behind those decisions, and the procedures performed throughout data collection and analysis. This strategy promoted transparency and allowed other researchers to monitor and assess the study's methodology, improving its reliability and validity. By adopting audit trails for this study, it provided a high degree of reliability and validity while analysing the politeness methods utilised in the film "Shortcomings" (2023). This approach gave a clear, transparent, and replicated approach to study, which increased the credibility of the findings.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

Before going in-depth into every evidence that are identified with politeness strategies in the movie "Shortcomings" (2023), it is essential to first outline the various politeness strategies identified within the movie. Notably, all ten maxims of Grand Strategy of Politeness are effectively demonstrated and employed throughout the film. There are 13 pieces of evidence found from the movie based on the GSP list. Every evidence is coded and numbered, for example, E1, E2, and E3. There are 7 maxims with only 1 evidence, while there are 3 maxims with 2 pieces of evidence.

### 4.1 The Types of Identified Politeness Strategies and Evidences

Following is the identified evidence categorised into their respective maxims.

#### 4.2 Generosity Maxim (M1)

The first maxim is labelled as Generosity, which means S (S stands for Self) gives a high value to O (O stands for Other person) wants. In other words, generosity is valuing and catering to what other person's want. According to Leech [11], the typical speech act for this maxim is commissive, for example, offers, invitations and promises which are all an expression of a commitment.

Evidence 1:

ALICE: Isn't this like the perfect New York lesbian apartment?

BEN: Yeah, it's...it's a great place.

MEREDITH: **I'm sorry I don't have a room for you, Ben, but the couch is pretty comfortable, and—**

BEN: **No, that's fine. And listen...I could easily stay at a hotel. I don't want to impose...**

MEREDITH: **No, the more the merrier! It'll be like a slumber party.**

ALICE: Well, don't say that. He'll think he's gonna get some hot three-way action or something!

Evidence 1 is showing Ben and his friend Alice and her girlfriend Meredith. To add to the context, Ben came to New York City to find her ex-girlfriend, so he is staying over at Meredith's 1-bedroom apartment as Meredith is her friend's acquaintance. This apartment has only 1 bedroom, though it does have a living room with a couch fit for one adult. It can be seen when Ben first came into the apartment, he was hesitant to see how small it was, and was wondering where he should settle down. Meredith, noticing his hesitancy, quickly addresses the situation and apologizes that she could not prepare a room for him, which she then points out to the couch that is just as comfortable. While this may not be particularly a generous offer, Meredith has at least given him an option and a place to stay. Quoting directly from Leech [11], "Offers, invitations and promises are intrinsically 'generous'...". There are no means of measuring generosity in the general sense of politeness, so there is no the most generous offer, nor the least generous offer. Then, Ben attempts to be virtuous and courteous, saying that the couch is perfect for him and that he could simply stay at a hotel instead of imposing on them. Meredith, upon hearing this as the host, promptly rejects his suggestion, reasoning that the more guests in the house, the better. This also demonstrates Meredith's continued generosity and hospitality to their guests, Ben.

#### 4.3 Tact Maxim (M2)

The second maxim is labelled as Tact, which means S gives a low value to S wants. S refers to Self, meaning that one puts low value on what one wants and indirectly will put high value on the other person's wants. The typical speech act is directives, for example a request would often come with an option to decline the request. Hence, for S to avoid imposing on O, they would have to practice being tactful to show politeness.

Evidence 2:

BEN: Hey! What are you doing here?

MIKO: I was having lunch down on Fourth Street, **so I got you some take-out**. BEN: With who? You're all dressed up.

MIKO: Just...Ling and Ramon and some of the other festival people. **Here... eat before the tempura gets soggy.**

*He takes the container from her.*

BEN: Thanks. I'll probably be home around one.

MIKO: I'll try to stay up.

Evidence 2 is showing Ben and Miko, his girlfriend. To add to the context, Miko was visiting his workplace, the local movie theatre, while bringing a lunch take-out for Ben, which is probably a rare thing, gauging from Ben's shocked reaction. Miko was actually in the area herself, and she was thoughtful enough to drop by the theatre and buy lunch for his boyfriend. What separates Generosity maxim and Tact maxim is Generosity is about giving, how much one can selflessly give to others. Tact maxim covers more on how one communicates with sensitivity and how to be a much more sensible person. A sensible girlfriend, naturally would drop by his boyfriend's office because she was also hanging out somewhere near the place. When Miko was handing Ben the lunch, she also directed him to eat the lunch right away or the tempura would get soggy, showing more on her tactfulness.

#### 4.4 Approbation Maxim (M3)

The third maxim is labelled as Approbation, which means S gives a high value to O's qualities. The difference between Approbation maxim and Generosity maxim is that Approbation works with the qualities or existing traits of another person. The typical speech act is compliments. On the other hand, though they are usually subtle, criticisms can occasionally surface in situations where S played a prominent social role or when O was a third party rather than the hearer [11].

Evidence 3:

*Autumn stands spotlighted on a darkened stage, her make-up and clothing suggesting a mix of 90s grunge and Japanese anime. A battered electric guitar hangs from her neck. Behind her, we see the shadowy outlines of various other performers.*

AUTUMN: This next piece is entitled "Asylum." (dramatic pause) It's about immigration.

*The stage suddenly explodes with light and NOISE. Accompanied by a full band, Autumn begins wailing on her guitar, creating a FEEDBACK-DRENCHED*

Evidence 3 is showing Ben and Autumn, his colleague who has recently just started working at the movie theatre. To add to the context, Ben was left alone in Berkeley, while Miko moved to New York City for her internship. They took a break from their relationship so Ben is desperately looking for a rebound. This happens just at the right time, before Autumn comes into Ben's life. Autumn, a college student who is looking for a part-time job, and finally secured one at Ben's workplace. Ben, which the movie has established from the beginning, has a slight preference for a White woman. He would like to get to know Autumn better so he came to watch Autumn's live band performance. This scene particularly is the conversation Ben and Autumn had after the performance ended. Taken directly from the script, 'We move through the enthusiastic audience, finally settling on Ben, whose face is contorted with pain and disbelief.' It can be concluded that Ben was actually perplexed and clearly dislikes the idea of the performance and does not have good feedback about it. However, when Autumn enthusiastically asked him his thoughts on it, and even assumed that Ben must have hated the performance, Ben defensively said he was overwhelmed at first. Then, he struggled to actually describe what he was seeing which Autumn helped explain the idea behind the performance. Ben finally settled by politely saying that he did not know what to expect and the show was amazing. This is Ben's way of caring for Autumn's feelings and taking care of their blossoming friendship by telling a white lie.

#### 4.5 Modesty Maxim (M4)

The fourth maxim is labelled as Modesty, which means S gives a low value to S qualities. In another word, one must be humble of oneself, reserved and practice modesty. The typical speech act is self-devaluation. In line with modesty, it is not preferred to accept compliments; rather, one may reciprocate a compliment, express gratitude to the giver, or "deflect" a compliment by saying something that diminishes the value of the complement to oneself [11].



Evidence 4:

SASHA: But before that, there's a peer review, and I'm not sure I trust them to-- sorry. **I'm sure it's *fascinating* to hear me go on and on about grad school politics.**

*Ben pretends to nod off.*

BEN: Huh? What?

SASHA: God, **I always do this! It's like, I'm living in this bubble**, and-- BEN: No, it's good. It kind of reminds me why I dropped out.

SASHA: What did you say you were studying?

Evidence 4 is showing Ben and Sasha, an acquaintance of his friend Alice. To add to the context, Sasha is also one of Ben's rebound relationships after Miko left him for her internship. This is one of the conversations that they had when they first got to know each other. Sasha is a graduate school student and was telling Ben everything about her graduate school. From the script, it can be observed that Sasha is being modest, or to be exact belittling herself when talking about it to Ben. Ben, who is a college dropout, might have not understood what Sasha was talking about. Sasha notices that Ben was looking uninterested in her story, it is said in the script that Ben only pretends to nod off to Sasha's rants. Noticing this, Sasha has to appear polite by quickly devaluing herself, first by using the word 'fascinating' as satire or sarcasm, because it is obvious that Ben is not fascinated at all. Next, Sasha added that her life is like living in a bubble, which has a negative connotation, that means to live in one's own world, completely isolated from what is happening around oneself. In another word, she is trying to say that she always got caught up in her own world.

#### 4.6 Obligation Maxim (of S to O) (M5)

The fifth maxim is labelled as Obligation (of S to O), which means S gives a high value to S's obligation to O. The typical speech act is apologising and thanking, for example, when one makes a mistake, they feel obligated to apologise and when one feels indebted to a person, they feel obligated to thank them.

Evidence 5:

*Ben wakes up to find Miko's side of the bed empty and the door ajar. He walks down the hallway to find Miko at the dining table, looking at her phone. Ben sits across from her, occasionally glancing in her direction. The room is SILENT except for the GURGLING SOUND of the coffee maker.*

**BEN: I'm sorry about last night...**

**MIKO: I know. Me too.**

BEN: I think we can both—

*The GURGLING SOUND tapers off, the machine BEEPS.*

MIKO: Coffee's ready.

*She hops up from her seat. Ben leaves his thought unfinished.*

Evidence 5 is showing the interaction between Ben and Miko at their house. To add to the context, they were fighting the day before because Miko found an unpleasant thing on Ben's laptop. She had to use his laptop because she left hers at work. The thing that bothers Miko the most was the fact that all of the girls on the site Ben was surfing on, were White. Then they had an argument which causes the fight, and leads to the above interaction. The next morning, Ben apologizes to Miko for what happened yesterday as he feels obligated to do so. Miko also responds by apologizing indirectly, saying 'Me too', which means she is thinking the same and is apologetic about what happened yesterday. Even later in the script, it does not look like Miko wanted to discuss the fight. But it can still be observed that Ben gives a high value to his obligation towards Miko, whom he hurt the feelings of.

#### 4.7 Obligation Maxim (of O to S) (M6)

The sixth maxim is labelled as Obligation (of O to S), which means S gives a low value to O's obligation to S. The typical speech act is responses to thanks and apologies. This means, when S receives thanks or apologies from O, to minimize the fault and debt, S will respond to these usually by saying "It's okay", "Don't worry", "It was nothing" which proves to be polite [11].

Evidence 6:

BEN: Listen, I just wanted to say... I'm really sorry about... the other night – AUTUMN: **It's totally cool.**

BEN: No, I think I misread things, and —

AUTUMN: **No, you didn't. It just..in the moment? It didn't feel right.** BEN: Yeah, that makes sense. I just—

AUTUMN: Sometimes I think the body knows better than the mind. You know, when it comes to sexual attraction.

BEN: Oh. Okay.

AUTUMN: And then sometimes the mind is like, “Well, maybe,” but then the body is like, (slowly shakes her head) “Nope.”

BEN: Right.

AUTUMN: I wasn't always able to do this, but I'm really trying to be more mindful of this stuff.

BEN: No, that's really great.

Evidence 6 is showing the interaction between Ben and Autumn after his visit to Autumn's house. To add to the context, something happened during his visit, where he nearly kissed Autumn, but Autumn rejected it. Thus, Ben apologises to Autumn for the incident. Autumn responds by dismissing the incident and does not really take to heart about what happened yesterday. It looked like she was totally fine with it. This is actually her way of being polite for the sake of her friendship with Ben. This response by Autumn minimizes Ben's fault yesterday. Ben proceeds to further defend himself. Autumn then explains what she really felt about yesterday, she did not feel it was the right moment. Autumn continues on how she felt about the overall situation and how she is working towards bettering herself. The conversation ends when Ben shows his support towards Autumn's effort in being more mindful about her feelings.

#### *4.8 Agreement Maxim (M7)*

The seventh maxim is labelled as Agreement, which means S gives a high value to O's opinions. The typical speech act is agreeing or disagreeing. This means, agreement is the preferred response to someone's opinions, while disagreement is non-preferred. Disagreement is usually preceded by hesitancy, delay, or the use of temporizing words like "Well...", meanwhile agreement is intensified [11].

Evidence 7:

BEN: (cont'd) (into phone, disappointed) Oh, hey.

ALICE: Nice to hear from you too, asshole!

BEN: Sorry. What's up.

ALICE: I had like, three minutes with absolutely nothing better to do, so I thought I'd give you a call.

BEN: Well...here I am.

ALICE: Oh my god, you sound like one of those hostage videos! (flat) "I...am...being...treated well..."

BEN: Listen, uh...if I...if I came out there, could I maybe...stay with you for a little while?

*Ben waits for a response. Alice looks taken aback.*

ALICE: (laughing) Holy shit. Is this your rock bottom?

BEN: No. High school was my rock bottom.

ALICE: **(still laughing) Oh, right. And you've gone nowhere but up!**

Evidence 7 is showing the interaction between Ben and his friend Alice. To add to the context, Alice moved to New York to look for a better opportunity, leaving Ben in California. This interaction happens weeks after Alice's move. In this scene, Ben was asking Alice if it is possible to stay with her, should he decide to come to New York. Alice was especially surprised and even mentioned in the script 'taken aback', because Ben was so adamant about not going to New York, or just getting out of his comfort zone in general. So, Alice was really shocked and thought something must have happened to Ben that would make him take this last resort. So, Alice unhesitatingly asked, if this is his lowest point in his life right now. But, Ben being himself who does not like to show others his vulnerability, said flatly that this is not his lowest point. He also insisted that high school was his rock bottom. Alice, who reads between the lines (which Ben is totally having a problem and needs help with), is being polite by agreeing with Ben that his lowest point was indeed his high school era and since then, he has 'gone nowhere but up'. From this, it can be perceived that Alice has the option to deny Ben's words or experiences and continue to probe Ben with questions but Alice did not do that. It's because she is polite enough to understand that her friend needs her and she needs to be considerate even though she is agreeing with Ben while laughing.

#### 4.9 Opinion-reticence Maxim (M8)

The eighth maxim is labelled as Opinion reticence, which means S gives a low value to S's opinions. The typical speech act is giving opinions. While it is rare in Eastern culture and seen as offensive, in Western countries, it is seen as positive. When giving opinions, people commonly use propositional hedges like "I think," "I guess," "I don't suppose," and "It might be that" to lessen the impact of their own opinions [11].

Evidence 8 :

BEN: (cont'd) I'm sorry! Come on...I was just...

SASHA: What?

*He takes her hand. They stop walking.*

**BEN: You're just so incredibly beautiful, I assume every guy we pass hates my fucking guts.**

*She can't help but laugh.*

Evidence 8 is showing the interaction between Ben and Sasha, one of his rebound relationships. It has been mentioned plenty of times since the beginning of the movie that Ben has an unhealthy obsession with White women despite his girlfriend Miko, being Japanese like himself. His rebound was also with two White women, the first being Autumn and followed by Sasha. In this second rebound, Ben's true nature is discreetly shown, although not obvious, how Ben unconsciously thought of other people's opinion when seeing him and Sasha together in public. Ben basically thought of Sasha as a trophy girlfriend because he suggested that the stranger thought of them 'Good job!', while visualizing it using his body language, raising his eyebrow and making a thumbs up gesture. Sasha being a quick witted girl, asked Ben if he only sees her as a White girl, rather than a normal woman that is not defined by race. Ben defended himself. When she asks the question to Ben, Ben could not agree to her statement as his secret will get out and that is probably the last thing he wants. Because of this, he has to suggest another opinion of the whole situation to Sasha. The triggering situation was the stranger who randomly looks at them, so he has to redirect the conversation to the stranger or anyone else but him. That is when he said his opinion that she is so beautiful that every guy they pass will hate his guts. In a way, he is being polite by not hurting Sasha's feelings any more than what the conversation could have been. Even though he has to make up some white lie to cover up the truth.

#### 4.10 Sympathy Maxim (M9)

The ninth maxim is labelled as Sympathy, which means S gives a high value to O's feelings. The typical speech act is congratulating or commiserating. Either congratulating or sympathizing with them, being empathetic toward others is considered polite.

Evidence 9:

MIKO: You're probably excited to have a little peace and quiet.  
BEN: Yeah, right.  
MIKO: Well, I'm sure it'll be good for you.  
BEN: Hey... **I don't think I ever said congratulations on the internship... I'm glad you're happy about it...** I'm gonna miss you.  
MIKO: It's just a few months. You're gonna love being a bachelor again.

Evidence 9 is showing the interaction between Ben and Miko. To add to the context, this happens before Miko moves to New York for the internship. They were having one last conversation while Ben was sending Miko off to the airport, he remembers he had not congratulated her properly for the internship. So, to be polite, Ben said that he is glad to see she is happy because of the offer. He acknowledges Miko's happiness and is empathetic and emotionally appropriate towards her. He also validates her enthusiastic feelings about moving to New York and does not ignore them.

#### 4.11 Feeling-reticence Maxim (M10)

The tenth and the last maxim is labelled as Feeling reticence, which means S gives a low value on S's feelings. The typical speech act is suppressing feelings, for example when being asked "How are you?", the initial answer is likely to keep any negative news to oneself, even if they feel tempted to talk about their problems.

Evidence 10:

BEN: Hey, it's me. Yeah, I just got back.  
ALICE: So what's the deal? Are you standing on a chair with a noose around your neck?  
BEN: **No, I...I'm fine.**  
ALICE: Okay, cool! Can I—  
BEN: **I mean, I'm not fine, but I'm—**  
ALICE: Listen, can I call you later?

Evidence 10 is showing the interaction between Ben and Alice. To add to the context, this interaction happens right after Ben drove Miko to the airport. Alice, as a caring friend, called him as soon as Miko left. Ben, who does not feel good after having separated from Miko, attempts to suppress his feelings when his friend Alice asks him how he is feeling. He suppressed by saying he is fine at first, but then proceeds to explain he's not completely, all fine but still can bear with it. This is how Ben is polite by not confessing what he really feels, and burdens Alice with his feelings.

#### *4.12 The Reasons for Identified Politeness Strategies and Evidences*

After identifying the politeness strategies utilized in the film, it is necessary to investigate why they were used. Generally, politeness strategies are employed to establish rapport and maintain positive relationships. Leech, on the other hand, believes that politeness is separated into two categories: pos-politeness and neg-politeness, both of which are tied to the face concept. The concept was first put forth by the Chinese anthropologist Hu in 1944, and Goffman expanded on it in 1955. Face describes the emotional components that must be addressed during an interaction and can be preserved, improved, or lost. Face is an important concept that is influenced by and deeply ingrained in society, particularly in the Asian community. The face concept is also used as the foundation or premise for politeness strategies, such as the well-known Brown & Levinson Politeness strategies and George Leech's GSP. In accordance with Leech's view towards Face, it is divided into two, positive face goal and negative face goal. The goal for the first is to enhance the face, by maintaining a person's self-esteem, meanwhile the latter has the purpose to avoid losing face, by losing means to lower a person's self-esteem. Positive face goal is achieved through practicing pos-politeness which are the odd numbers of the maxim, while negative face goal is achieved through neg-politeness which are the even numbers of the maxim.

#### *4.13 Positive Face Goal (Pos-politeness)*

Based on Leech's face theory underpinned by the original concept by Goffman, positive face goal is to enhance or maintain one's face and self-esteem. In achieving this, pos-politeness which are the odd numbers in the GSP list must be utilized: Generosity maxim (M1), Approbation maxim (M3), Obligation (of S to O) maxim (M5), Agreement maxim (M7) and Sympathy maxim (M9). It is investigated that there are 8 pieces of evidence with the goal of achieving positive face. The first evidence is listed as Generosity maxim, which is categorized as pos politeness. This evidence contains the scene of Ben's visit to Meredith's house. Meredith has a positive face goal as she is the house owner and also Alice's girlfriend, so she has to maintain her face even though her house is small and does not have a proper bedroom for Ben. She maintains her face by insisting Ben to stay and suggests the couch for settling down.

The second evidence is listed as Approbation maxim, the third maxim in the GSP list. This evidence contains the scene of Ben and Autumn at her live band performance. Ben has a positive face because he wants to appeal and look good in Autumn. He has to maintain his face as he is a few years older than Autumn and does not want to be regarded as someone who is not up to date with the current trending music. By using Approbation maxim and complimenting Autumn's performance was amazing despite his initial reaction, he successfully enhanced his face.

The third evidence is listed as Obligation (of S to O) maxim, the fifth maxim. This evidence contains the scene of Ben and Miko apologizing to each other. Ben has a positive face, as he wants to make up to her girlfriend, because he was the one who started the fight. He maintains his face by initiating the apology to Miko, using the fifth maxim. The fourth evidence, also under the same maxim, is the scene of Ben coming over to Autumn's house. Ben has a positive face because he does not want to hurt Autumn's feelings and he wants to get closer to her. So he apologizes for making an inappropriate pun of Autumn's artwork. Then, he proceeds to enhance his face more by praising the artwork. According to Leech [11], pos-politeness (which includes Approbation maxim, the odd-numbers maxim), where Speaker does a face enhancing act by attaching value to Header through offers, compliments, and sympathy.

The fifth evidence is listed as Agreement maxim, the seventh maxim. This evidence contains the

scene when Ben was asking Alice's permission to stay at her girlfriend's house in New York. Alice has a positive face because she is Ben's close friend, so she needs to maintain her self-esteem and the trust between them. Ben rarely gets out of his comfort zone, but he needed to come to New York to reconcile with Miko, so Alice understands Ben's silent plea. Therefore, she agrees to help Ben and does not tease him as she would often do. The sixth evidence also comes from the same maxim. This evidence contains the scene where Ben saw Miko with another man. Meredith and Alice both have a positive face, because they disagree with Ben but do not want to say it outright. So, as friends, to maintain their faces, they respond to Ben's claim towards Miko's new boyfriend with neutral opinions. The seventh evidence is listed as Sympathy maxim, the ninth maxim. This evidence contains the scene when Ben was sending Miko to the airport. Ben has a positive face as he was essentially still Miko's boyfriend, also because they will not be seeing each other for a long time. From this, he maintains his self-esteem and image for one last time to Miko by congratulating her on the internship offer.

#### *4.14 Negative Face Goal (Neg-politeness)*

Based on Leech's face theory underpinned by the original concept by Goffman, negative face goal is to avoid the loss of face, and by losing means lowering of one's self-esteem. In achieving this, neg-politeness which are the even numbers in the GSP list must be utilized: Tact maxim (M2), Modesty maxim (M4), Obligation (of O to S) maxim (M6), Opinion-reticence maxim (M8) and Feeling-reticence maxim (M10). It is found that there are 6 pieces of evidence with the goal of achieving a negative face. The first evidence is listed as Tact maxim, the second maxim. Miko, a Japanese-American and Ben's girlfriend, who shows a lot of Japanese values throughout the movie, has the goal of avoiding loss of face. Naturally as girlfriends, Miko would drop by Ben's workplace whenever she was in the area. She also bought Ben a lunch as her way of being tactful. She even told Ben to eat the lunch (tempura) immediately or it would get soggy, which would indirectly make her lose face, because she was the one who brought the lunch. Hence, the reason she requested him to eat right away.

The second evidence is listed as Modesty maxim, the fourth maxim. This evidence contains the scene of Sasha and Ben talking about her grad school. Sasha wants to avoid the loss of face when she notices that Ben looks uninterested in her story, most likely because Ben is a college drop-out and nothing in the story is relatable to him. They were also getting to know each other better so she does not want to look like boasting. So, she self-deprecated herself by saying that she is always in her own bubble. This way, she is avoiding loss of face by humbling herself and being modest, in another word lowering her self-esteem intentionally. The third evidence is also under the same maxim, which contains the scene where Alice was telling Ben about Meredith's career. Meredith particularly has a negative face because she mentioned that writing is always her first answer when people ask her about career. Even though she is actually a Professor in Barnard University. This implies she regards writers higher than lecturers, and thus does not want to lose face by saying she works as a lecturer.

The fourth evidence is listed as Obligation (of O to S) maxim, the sixth maxim. This evidence contains the scene of Ben apologizing for trying to kiss Autumn. Ben wants to avoid losing face for his rash action. He also does not want to be regarded as pushy or that he has ulterior motives of getting closer to Autumn. So, he apologizes to Autumn for thoughtlessly going after something private such as a kiss. The fifth evidence is listed as the Opinion-reticence maxim, the eighth maxim. This evidence contains the scene of Ben and Sasha going out in public and getting stared down by a White guy. In this scene, Ben has a strong reason why he wanted to avoid losing face to Sasha when he got cornered by Sasha's question. Sasha asks him if she is only worth a White girl to him of which



Ben does not answer. Naturally, he does not want Sasha to know of his White-girl obsession. So, he avoids losing face by changing the topic of the conversation, from him to her.

The sixth evidence is listed as Feeling-reticence maxim, the tenth maxim. The evidence contains the scene where Alice is calling Ben after Miko has left for New York. Ben, as shown throughout the movie, is rather negative for a main character, so naturally he is not quick to show that he is vulnerable. Even with his close friend Alice, he does not confess his real feelings, although it is obvious he is sad about Miko's leaving.

## 5. Conclusion

This study investigated the use of politeness strategies in the film *Shortcomings* (2023) by applying Geoffrey Leech's Grand Strategy of Politeness (GSP) framework. Through a qualitative, descriptive content analysis of character interactions, the study identified all ten maxims of GSP in the dialogue, demonstrating both positive and negative face goals throughout various interpersonal dynamics. The protagonist, Ben Tagawa, serves as a compelling subject due to his consistent disregard for social harmony, allowing for a nuanced analysis of how politeness is used, neglected, or reversed in everyday communication. The findings revealed that characters employed politeness strategies to maintain rapport, manage emotional distance, and express cultural values—particularly in contexts involving social hierarchies, romantic relationships, and intercultural tension. The evidence suggests that both positive politeness (e.g., generosity, approbation, agreement) and negative politeness (e.g., tact, modesty, feeling-reticence) were used to either enhance face or avoid its loss, depending on the situation and characters' intentions. This research contributes to the field of pragmatics and politeness theory by demonstrating the relevance and applicability of Leech's GSP in analyzing cinematic texts, especially those with multicultural or intercultural themes. It also underscores the importance of using film as a pedagogical and analytical tool for understanding the complexities of politeness in real-world communication. Future research may benefit from applying GSP to a broader range of media and exploring its cultural adaptability in non-Western and multilingual contexts.

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