SIGEH ELT: Journal of Literature and Linguistics
Volume 6 Number 1, March 2026, pp: 919-931
E-ISSN: 2775-8834

Politeness Strategies and Social Dimensions in Tulsa King Season 1 TV Series: A Sociopragmatics Study

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Article Info

Submited:
30 March 2026
Reviewed:
19 April 2026 – 1 September 2026
Accepted:
2 September 2026
Published:
24 September 2026

Keywords:
Sociopragmatics; politeness strategies; social dimensions; TV series.

Abstract

Television discourse presents a rich yet underexplored site for examining how politeness strategies shift dynamically within asymmetrical relationships across extended narrative arcs. This study analyzes interactions between Dwight and Tyson in Tulsa King Season 1 using a qualitative descriptive design. Data were collected from 14 purposively sampled dialog excerpts and analyzed through qualitative content analysis based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory and Holmes and Wilson's (2017) social dimensions framework. Findings reveal that all four politeness strategies are present: bald-on-record appears in five data points, negative politeness in four, off-record in three, and positive politeness in two. The status scale remains a structural constant, while social distance and the functional scale shift most visibly over time, driving a transition from unmitigated directness in early episodes toward more relationally attentive communication later in the season. The study concludes that politeness strategies function not as fixed communicative tools but as responsive instruments shaped by evolving social dimensions within a structurally unequal but relationally transformative relationship. This study contributes to sociopragmatics by offering a replicable framework for analyzing the dynamic co-evolution of politeness strategies and social dimensions in serialized television discourse.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.36269/sigeh.v6i2.5083
Publisher: Universitas Muhammadiyah Lampung
Journal Homepage: https://journal.uml.ac.id/index.php/ELt/index
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INTRODUCTION

Human interaction is rarely straightforward; speakers continuously adjust their language to manage relationships, avoid conflict, and position themselves relative to others. At the heart of these adjustments lies politeness, a strategic and social communicative mechanism used to manage face, negotiate interactional terms, and signal relational attitudes (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Face, the social self-image claimed and maintained in interaction, has been expanded beyond original positive and negative dimensions to include quality, relational, and identity face (Fajriyah et al., 2026). Because every communicative act carries the potential to threaten this face, speakers employ politeness strategies precisely to mitigate that risk and maintain social relationships (Muhayyang et al., 2026).

Television series have been established as a legitimate site for sociopragmatic inquiry. Bednarek (2018) demonstrates that television dialog presents structured yet socially grounded representations of interaction that reflect character expression and complex social patterns. Sociopragmatics focuses on the social dimensions of language use that shape social relationships and norms (Van Compernolle, 2014, as cited in Kasim & Satria, 2024), while pragmatics examines

how meaning depends on situation, participants, and intention rather than literal form alone (Irgy et al., 2022; Anastasya & Supri, 2024). Sociolinguistics further provides tools for analyzing how factors such as status, solidarity, and formality shape linguistic choices (Holmes & Wilson, 2017; Meyerhoff, 2019; Kenetova et al., 2022; Simatupang et al., 2024; Simatupang & Zuraida, 2025). Building on this foundation, several studies have applied politeness theory to audiovisual data productively. Indrawati, Tarjana, and Nurkamto (2018) show that politeness strategies in Friends reflect specific social values, while Hendar and Jaya (2021) and Hendar and Trisnandi (2019) demonstrate that strategies are tied to communicative goals and social relations respectively. Firdaus and Zuraida (2024) and Kholiq et al. (2026) further confirm that politeness principles operate meaningfully in audiovisual contexts as a mechanism through which characters negotiate relationships and social expectations. Ryabova (2015) reinforce that strategy selection is relational, contextually negotiated, and tied to parameters of social distance, power, and interactional purpose.

While Daar et al. (2023) demonstrate that Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework, particularly the off-record strategy, can be applied to naturalistic cultural speech events, their study is limited to (1) a single politeness strategy, (2) retrospective interview accounts rather than directly transcribed spontaneous dialogue, and (3) a single, ritually bounded speech event rather than an evolving relationship. Moreover, their focus on politeness and cultural values does not address how strategy selection interacts with the social dimensions proposed by Holmes and Wilson (2017). This leaves a gap in understanding how all four politeness strategies operate and shift in relation to social dimensions within a structurally unequal yet evolving relationship. To address this gap, the present study combines Brown and Levinson's full politeness-strategy framework with Holmes and Wilson's social-dimensions framework to examine how strategy selection changes as an unequal relationship develops. The study examines serialized television dialogue between Dwight and Tyson in Tulsa King Season 1 to (1) identify the politeness strategies used and (2) analyze the social dimensions influencing their selection. By combining both frameworks, this study contributes to sociopragmatics by demonstrating how politeness strategies function as responsive communicative choices shaped by evolving social dimensions within an unequal but developing relationship.

By combining Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987) with Holmes and Wilson's (2017) sociolinguistic framework, this study contributes to sociopragmatics research by demonstrating how politeness strategies function not as fixed communicative tools but as responsive instruments shaped by evolving social dimensions within a structurally unequal but relationally dynamic relationship.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to provide a comprehensive description of phenomena in their natural context. The data consist of dialogues between the two main characters of Tulsa King Season 1, Dwight and Tyson, across all nine episodes. Their relationship transitions from strangers through an employer-employee arrangement into an asymmetrical, deeply personal mentor-protégé dynamic, providing rich sociopragmatic data. Using purposive sampling, dialogue segments was selected based on their capacity to represent specific politeness strategies, yielding 14 sampled exchanges from the 27 identified across the season.

The primary data source was the official subtitle file for Tulsa King Season 1, with time-coded dialogue and speaker names. Data collection had three stages: reviewing all nine episodes to isolate exchanges between the two characters, verifying the extracted dialogue against the

audiovisual material, and purposively sampling segments marked by Face-Threatening Acts, clear social roles, and strong social influences.

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis within a sociopragmatic framework, guided by Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory and Holmes and Wilson's (2017) social dimensions framework. The analysis followed four stages: examining the socio-situational context of each interaction; coding and categorizing dialogs according to specific politeness strategies; assessing the correlation between strategies and prevailing social dimensions; and interpreting findings descriptively through the lens of sociopragmatic theory.

Triangulation was employed as the primary verification strategy, with each sampled dialog cross-referenced between the subtitle file and the audiovisual material to confirm transcription accuracy, speaker attribution, and contextual meaning. Categorization of politeness strategies was conducted systematically against the criteria established by Brown and Levinson (1987), ensuring coding decisions remained grounded in the theoretical framework rather than subjective interpretation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Due to the scope of Tulsa King Season 1, data collection was limited strictly to interactions between Dwight and Tyson. Out of 27 potential dialogue excerpts, 14 were selected via purposive sampling based on face-threatening acts, power shifts, and social dimensions. Brief or transactional exchanges were excluded to capture their full relationship trajectory. Table 1 presents the distribution of politeness strategies across these selected excerpts, and Table 2 outlines the distribution of social dimensions.

Table 1. Distribution of Politeness Strategies.

Politeness Strategy	Data
Bald-on-Record Strategy	5
Positive Politeness Strategy	2
Negative Politeness Strategy	4
Off-Record Strategy	3

Table 2. Distribution of Social Dimensions.

Social Dimension	Data
Social Distance Scale	4
Status Scale	7
Formality Scale	0
Functional Scale	3

Data 1 – Off-Record Strategy

Situation context: The conversation takes place at the very beginning of Dwight and Tyson's relationship, immediately upon Dwight's arrival in Tulsa. Tyson approaches as a cab driver with a friendly greeting, while Dwight's responses resist the warmth he extends. The two have no established relationship at this stage.

Tyson: “Name's Tyson, welcome to Tulsa. Where to, man?”
Dwight: “Hotel.”
Tyson: “Which one?”
Dwight: “One where no one will break my balls.”(00:10:45 - 00:10:53 Tulsa King S01E01)

Dwight's reply constitutes an off-record strategy. Rather than naming a specific hotel, he conveys his expectation indirectly through a condition, leaving the actual request implied. The profanity sharpens the utterance and discourages further inquiry, while the indirectness preserves deniability. Tyson's attempts at warmth go entirely unreciprocated, which communicates hierarchy more effectively than any direct assertion of authority.

Regarding social dimensions, social distance is the most prominent, sitting at its highest point given the complete absence of prior familiarity. The status scale is immediately foregrounded through Dwight's refusal to reciprocate Tyson's friendliness. Despite the informal setting, the exchange carries none of the warmth informal communication typically produces. The functional scale sits correspondingly low, with Dwight's terseness resisting Tyson's affiliative tone and leaving the exchange transactional and emotionally closed.

Data 2 - Bald-on-Record Strategy

Situation context: Still during their first encounter, Tyson attempts to inquire about Dwight's business affairs. Dwight positions himself as a senior criminal figure, and the topic, concerning organized crime activities, is sensitive and confidential.

Tyson: “So, is this a wedding? A funeral?”
Dwight: “Business.”
Tyson: “What kind of business?”
Dwight: “The ‘none of your fuckin’ business’ kind of business.” (00:11:56 - 00:12:05 Tulsa King S01E01)

Dwight's response constitutes a bald-on-record strategy, deployed without any mitigating devices. The refusal is direct and unqualified, with profanity intensifying its force. Rather than attending to Tyson's face needs, the utterance functions as an explicit boundary-setting act that forecloses further inquiry entirely.

Regarding social dimensions, the status scale is the most prominent, with Dwight exercising his superior position without any accommodation. Social distance remains at its highest, reflecting the absence of familiarity and the sensitivity of the subject being deflected. The formality scale is low in register, but Dwight's response imposes a hierarchical logic that overrides the conversational context. The functional scale similarly sits at a low level of emotional openness, with the utterance functioning confrontationally rather than relationally.

Data 3 - Off-Record Strategy

Situation context: Tyson is now employed as Dwight's driver. The interaction occurs when Dwight subtly expresses dissatisfaction that Tyson did not open the car door for him, signaling an expectation of hierarchical courtesy.

Tyson: “You getting in?”
Dwight: “You would think for two grand a week, you'd get out and open the door.”
Tyson: “Seriously? You want me to do that shit?”
Dwight: “No. But it would have been nice if you offered.” (00:09:59 - 00:10:09 Tulsa King S01E02)

Dwight's utterance operates as an indirect expression of expectation, carrying implied criticism rather than an overt directive. By framing his dissatisfaction hypothetically, he avoids issuing an explicit command while still making his displeasure legible, placing the exchange within the off-record strategy. The construction implies Tyson has fallen short of a normative standard, threatening his positive face, while Dwight maintains deniability by stopping short of direct imposition.

Regarding social dimensions, the status scale is the most prominent, with Dwight asserting authority while stopping short of an outright command. The social distance scale is also relevant, as

the emerging familiarity between them is what allows indirectness to function at all; a stranger would more likely receive silence or a blunt directive. The informal setting supports the off-record approach by providing enough relational space for implication to land. The functional dimension is low in emotional openness but carries a pointed undercurrent of dissatisfaction communicated through implicature.

Data 4 - Bald-on-Record Strategy

Situation context: Dwight and Tyson are in the car, with Dwight driving to practice for a driving test. The exchange reflects routine workplace interaction within their established hierarchical structure.

> Tyson: “You want me to drive?”
> Dwight: “I got it.”
> Tyson: “You sure? I don’t mind driving.”
> Dwight: “Oh, you shouldn’t mind. I pay you enough.” (00:05:36 - 00:05:42 Tulsa King S01E03)

Tyson's offer, phrased as a question, functions as an indirect speech act that softens any potential imposition on Dwight's negative face, signaling awareness of the power gap between them. Dwight's reply operates differently: rather than accepting or declining, it redirects the exchange toward the terms of their arrangement. The reference to financial compensation is direct and unmitigated, placing it within the bald-on-record strategy, and its effect is to threaten Tyson's positive face by reducing their relationship to its economic terms.

Regarding social dimensions, the status scale is the most prominent, with Dwight's invocation of payment functioning as a direct appeal to his superior position. The social distance scale is also relevant, as the reminder of subordination lands harder precisely because some relational closeness has already developed. The informal setting is overridden by the contractual register Dwight imposes, and the functional dimension closes off any relational warmth that Tyson's offer might otherwise have opened.

Data 5 – Negative Politeness Strategy

Situation context: Following a violent incident that left bullet holes in Dwight's car parked outside Tyson's house, Dwight considers severing their arrangement out of concern for Tyson's safety.

> Dwight: “You see the bullet holes in that car? The missing windows where your head could have been?”
> Tyson: “Yeah, I seen it.”
> Dwight: “I'm not here to get you killed. It's bad enough that thing was parked in front of your house all night. God forbid your mother, your sister, somebody walks by and gets mistaken for me.” (00:27:51 - 00:28:07 Tulsa King S01E03)

Dwight's explanation constitutes a negative politeness strategy. Rather than ending the arrangement without explanation, he frames the severance as an act of protection, justifying the decision in terms of Tyson's wellbeing and that of his family. This minimizes the face threat inherent in dismissal and attends to Tyson's positive face by making clear the decision reflects concern rather than dissatisfaction. The reference to Tyson's mother and sister extends the protective framing further, reinforcing its sincerity.

Regarding social dimensions, the functional scale is the most prominent, marking a significant shift in Dwight's emotional register away from the confrontational tone of earlier exchanges toward something genuinely protective. The social distance scale is also relevant, as the care Dwight takes in explaining his decision signals that the distance between them has already begun to close. The status scale, while present, is exercised through justification rather than

assertion, reflecting a degree of relational accommodation absent in their earliest exchanges. The formality scale remains low, but the sincerity of the justification distinguishes it from the transactional informality that preceded it.

Data 6 – Negative Politeness Strategy

Situation context: Directly following Data 5, Tyson pushes back against Dwight's decision and makes a case for continuing to work together, requiring careful navigation of the power dynamic between them.

Tyson: “Look, I hear you, okay? I'm just saying that I'm willing to pay my dues.”
Dwight: “What dues?”
Tyson: “Look, I know you think I'm some punk ass bitch, but I'm not, I'm willing to put the work in, just give me a chance.” (00:28:09 - 00:28:17 Tulsa King S01E03)

Tyson's remark constitutes a negative politeness strategy. The opening hedge pre-emptively acknowledges the negative perception he anticipates Dwight holds, softening the imposition before the request is fully articulated. By addressing the assumed criticism directly, Tyson reduces the friction of making a demand that falls outside the terms Dwight has already set, while simultaneously asserting his own positive face by rejecting the characterization. The directness of "just give me a chance" is unmitigated, but its force is considerably cushioned by the hedging that precedes it.

Regarding social dimensions, the social distance scale is the most prominent. Tyson's willingness to push back openly reflects a degree of familiarity that would not have been present in their earliest exchanges; the fact that he risks the confrontation at all suggests the distance between them has narrowed enough to make such a move viable. The status scale remains structurally present, but Tyson's hedging reflects an attempt to navigate rather than simply submit to the hierarchy. The functional scale sits at a notably high level of emotional investment, with Tyson's self-assertion carrying a personal urgency that distinguishes this moment from the more transactional exchanges that came before.

Data 7 – Bald-on-Record Strategy

Situation context: Following Tyson's plea to continue working with Dwight, the exchange reaches a decisive point as Dwight determines the outcome of the arrangement.

Dwight: “Listen, kid.”
Tyson: “I'm not a kid. I'm 25 years old. I get it.”
Dwight: “This is your choice.”
Tyson: “Fine. Now, what do you need? (00:28:18 - 00:28:42 Tulsa King S01E03)

Dwight's remark, "This is your choice," constitutes a bald-on-record strategy. The statement is direct and unmitigated, transferring the responsibility of the decision entirely to Tyson rather than explicitly accepting or rejecting his plea. There is no hedging, no elaboration, and no acknowledgment of the emotional weight of Tyson's argument. The brevity is characteristic of Dwight's tendency to assert control through minimal language, and it contrasts sharply with the more protective tone of his preceding remarks.

Regarding social dimensions, the status scale is the most prominent, though exercised in an unusual form. Transferring the decision is itself an act of authority; only the dominant figure has the standing to determine where accountability falls. The social distance scale is also relevant, as the reduced distance between them is what allows Dwight's brevity to read as decisiveness rather than dismissiveness. A more distant relationship would require elaboration. The functional scale sits low despite the weight of the moment, with minimal language closing the discussion firmly rather than leaving room for further negotiation.

Data 8 – Positive Politeness Strategy

Situation context: After the Manfredi Crime Family successfully sold their laughing gas supply, Dwight gives Tyson a share of the earnings. Their relationship has evolved from strictly hierarchical into a developing mentor-protégé dynamic, and the tone reflects approval and recognition.

Dwight: “Buy yourself something pretty.”
Tyson: “I might get me one of them rings.”
Dwight: “You know what? This one has lost its luster. Here, take it.”
Tyson: “You serious?”
Dwight: “Yeah, take it. Come on, you earned it.” (00:15:03 - 00:15:20 Tulsa King S01E04)

Although Dwight's directives are grammatically imperative, their face-threatening potential is considerably reduced by context. Embedded within an act of generosity, they function as expressions of goodwill rather than impositions. The statement "You earned it" shifts the tone toward affirmation and recognition, placing the interaction within the positive politeness strategy as Dwight works to build solidarity rather than assert authority. Presenting the ring casually rather than ceremonially further softens the dynamic, avoiding any patronizing quality and keeping the exchange relationally balanced despite the underlying hierarchy.

Regarding social dimensions, the social distance scale is the most prominent, as the relational closeness required for this kind of exchange would have been entirely absent in their earliest interactions. The functional scale sits at its highest point so far in the dataset, with the exchange operating almost entirely on the level of emotional recognition rather than information or authority. The formality scale remains low but carries a relational warmth rather than transactional quality.

The status scale, while structurally present, is the least foregrounded here, as Dwight deliberately steps back from authority to affirm Tyson on more equal and personal terms.

Data 9 – Off-Record Strategy

Situation context: Tyson has been arrested and temporarily detained. Dwight, returning from New York, questions him about the incident. The situation carries tension as the arrest may have direct implications for the Manfredi Crime Family.

Dwight: “What happened here?”
Tyson: “Impound. Got hauled off. Spent the night in jail. They took my phone, which is why I couldn't even get in contact with you.”
Dwight: “What did you get arrested for?”
Tyson: “Working for you, apparently. (00:11:10 - 00:11:12 Tulsa King S01E06)

Dwight's question is direct and unmitigated, requiring Tyson to account for a failure without any softening. Tyson's response, however, is notably more careful. His use of "apparently" introduces a hedge that allows the implication of Dwight's responsibility to surface without being stated directly, signaling dissatisfaction and assigning implied blame while stopping short of open accusation. This places Tyson's utterance within the off-record strategy, as the criticism is communicated through implicature rather than explicit statement.

Regarding social dimensions, the status scale is the most prominent, as the power asymmetry most directly determines Tyson's linguistic choice. Resorting to implicature rather than direct accusation reflects the constraints of speaking upward within a hierarchy where open confrontation carries real risk. The social distance scale is equally relevant, as the moderate

familiarity between them is what gives Tyson enough relational footing to express frustration at all; a more distant relationship would have produced silence or pure deference. The functional scale carries notably higher emotional tension than earlier exchanges, with a single word communicating genuine dissatisfaction within carefully controlled boundaries.

Data 10 – Bald-on-Record Strategy

Situation context: Following Tyson's arrest, Dwight questions him about the presence of Bodhi's number in his phone contacts while in police custody. Loyalty and operational security are directly at stake.

Dwight: “Is Bodhi in your contacts?”
Tyson: “Yeah, of course he is.”
Dwight: “Why?”
Tyson: “Why?”
Dwight: “Why?”
Tyson: “We talk. We say things.”
Dwight: “Follow me.”
(00:12:08 - 00:12:16 Tulsa King S01E06)

Dwight's repeated use of "Why?" constitutes a bald-on-record strategy in its most aggravated form. Rather than accepting Tyson's response and moving on, the repetition functions as a pressure device rather than a genuine request for clarification, placing the full burden of justification on Tyson without indicating what an acceptable answer looks like. This reflects Dwight's tendency in moments of heightened operational risk to assert control through minimal but pointed language.

Regarding social dimensions, the status scale is the most prominent, reasserted in its most forceful form since the early episodes. Notably, the relational closeness developed between them affords Tyson no protection here, as operational stakes override the accommodation that has otherwise become more present in their dynamic. The functional scale sits low despite high tension, with both parties communicating through minimal and guarded language. The formality scale remains low in register, but the interaction carries the weight of a far more rigid power structure than the conversational setting suggests.

Data 11 – Negative Politeness Strategy

Situation context: Following a series of altercations involving Dwight's former crime family, Tyson suspects significant events have not been disclosed to him and presses Dwight for transparency. Their relationship has developed into a mentor-protégé dynamic, though Dwight still holds structural authority.

Tyson: “So, you gonna tell me what's going on?”
Dwight: “What do you mean?”
Tyson: “You coming back from New York, your hands all bruised. The bar is shot up. You and me checking all squirrelly. I mean, obviously something went down.”
Dwight: “Look, it's not that I don't trust you, but sometimes the less you know the better.”
Tyson: “Okay. So, it's for my own good, right?”
Dwight: “It is for your own good.” (00:10:58 - 00:11:17 Tulsa King S01E08)

Tyson's question pressures Dwight to disclose sensitive information, functioning as a face-threatening act toward his negative face. Dwight's response employs a negative politeness strategy, managing the friction of refusal carefully. The opening clause, "it's not that I don't trust you," functions as a hedge and reassurance, attending to Tyson's positive face before the refusal lands. The restriction that follows is cushioned by mitigating language, and the added justification, "it is

for your own good," recasts the withholding of information as protective care rather than an assertion of dominance.

Regarding social dimensions, the social distance scale is the most prominent. The relational closeness between them is precisely what compels Dwight to justify the refusal rather than simply deflect, a response that would have been unthinkable in their earliest exchanges. The status scale remains present but is exercised through care rather than assertion. The functional scale sits at a moderate to high level, with emotional weight on both sides as Tyson seeks transparency and Dwight navigates the tension between honesty and protection.

Data 12 – Bald-on-Record Strategy

Situation context: Occurring immediately after Data 11, Dwight confronts Tyson about the legal implications of knowing too much. The situation involves operational security and potential legal consequences.

Dwight: “Do you know what accessory is? Accessory after the fact?”
Tyson: “Not really.”
Dwight: “No? Okay. Well, if you know about a crime and you don't report it to the cops, you're part of that crime. You get it? Or do you need me to paint a bigger fucking picture?”
Tyson: “Look, I'm just saying, how am I supposed to stand guard if I don't even know what I'm guarding against?” (00:11:12 - 00:11:38 Tulsa King S01E08)

Dwight's explanation shifts from instructional to an aggravated bald-on-record strategy. The rhetorical question, "You get it? Or do you need me to paint a bigger fucking picture?", directly challenges Tyson's competence, with profanity intensifying the threat. No mitigation is used, as the high operational stakes push Dwight to reassert his authority. Tyson responds more cautiously; "I'm just saying" functions as a hedge, allowing him to express his concern without directly confronting Dwight.

Regarding social dimensions, the status scale is most prominent, as Dwight strongly reasserts his authority despite their growing familiarity. This familiarity allows Tyson to push back through a hedge, but not to openly challenge Dwight's authority. The high-tension functional scale and informal setting do not reduce the hierarchical dynamic governing their interaction.

Data 13 - Negative Politeness Strategy

Situation context: In the final episode, Dwight reflects on his role in involving Tyson in his criminal world. Their relationship has evolved into a mentor-protégé bond, and the tone reflects concern and moral reflection in a private, informal setting.

Tyson: “You okay?”
Dwight: “Yeah. I'm just feeling like I shouldn't've dragged you into all of this.”
Tyson: “We talked about this already, it's fine.”
Dwight: “You should've listened to your father and found another job.”
Tyson: “This is what I want to do. This is what I wanna do right now.” (00:23:07 - 00:23:21 Tulsa King S01E09)

Tyson's opening question attends to Dwight's positive face through genuine concern. Dwight's response marks a notable shift: by directing blame toward himself and acknowledging moral accountability, he steps back from his usual authoritative stance and protects Tyson's positive face in the process. This places the utterance within the negative politeness strategy, as the self-critical framing signals regret and momentarily minimizes hierarchical distance. His subsequent remark reintroduces a mild face-threatening act by implying Tyson made a poor decision, but the tone carries a paternal quality that situates the criticism within a protective rather than dominant register.

Regarding social dimensions, the functional scale is the most prominent, sitting at its highest point of emotional openness across the dataset. Dwight's self-blame represents a level of vulnerability that would have been entirely absent in their earliest exchanges. The social distance scale is equally central, as the narrowed distance is what makes this openness possible at all. The status scale recedes almost entirely behind the relational and emotional register of the moment, and the private informal setting creates conditions that distinguish this exchange from the more guarded, operationally driven interactions that preceded it.

Data 14 – Positive Politeness Strategy

Situation context: Following Tyson's personal declaration attributing his growth to Dwight's influence, Dwight responds in a way markedly different from his characteristic communicative behavior across the season.

> Tyson: “There's a way to live your life. Stand up for what you believe in. Take what you want. And look after your friend. You showed me that, man.”
> Dwight: “You're a good man, Tyson. I'm glad it was you that picked me up that day.”
> Tyson: “My gangster!”(00:24:01 - 00:24:23 Tulsa King S01E09)

Dwight's response constitutes a positive politeness strategy. For a character whose default register has been bald-on-record throughout the season, the directness of this affirmation is notable precisely because it carries no irony, no deflection, and no protective indirectness. The statement attends to Tyson's positive face by affirming his character openly, while the personal reflection that follows reveals a degree of vulnerability that stands in sharp contrast to the authority-driven communication of their early exchanges. Rather than asserting dominance, Dwight acknowledges the value of the relationship on equal and personal terms.

Regarding social dimensions, the functional scale reaches its highest point across the entire dataset, with Dwight's affirmation carrying no informational content beyond its emotional significance. The social distance scale marks its most significant reduction across all fourteen data points, with Dwight communicating on terms that would have been unthinkable at the start of the season. The status scale, while structurally intact, is entirely absent from the affective register of the moment, with neither party invoking hierarchy in any form. The exchange sits at its most informal and personal, consistent with the private and emotionally open setting in which it takes place.

Discussion

All four politeness strategies identified by Brown and Levinson (1987) are present across the dataset. As shown in Table 1, bald-on-record is the most frequent, appearing in five data points (Data 2, 4, 7, 10, 12), followed by negative politeness in four (Data 5, 6, 11, 13), off-record in three (Data 1, 3, 9), and positive politeness in two (Data 8, 14). This distribution is not arbitrary but tracks the relational evolution between Dwight and Tyson across the season. Bald-on-record dominates interactions marked by high social distance and status asymmetry, though its reappearance in Data 10 and 12 demonstrates that heightened operational stakes can temporarily override relational warmth even after periods of closeness. Off-record strategies shift in function across the season, moving from Dwight's deflection in Data 1 and implied displeasure in Data 3, to Tyson's use of implicature in Data 9 to assign blame without direct confrontation, showing the strategy becomes available to the subordinate party as familiarity develops. Negative politeness marks the gradual humanization of the power dynamic through hedging, justification, and self-blame, while positive politeness, the least frequent, is reserved for peak moments of solidarity where hierarchy recedes entirely. As shown in Table 2, the status scale is the most dominant social dimension, shaping seven data points as a structural constant throughout the season. Social distance

is most prominent in four data points, reflecting the progressive narrowing of interpersonal familiarity, while the functional scale determines three, capturing the shift from transactional to affective engagement in the later exchanges. The formality scale shows no independent determining role, remaining consistently low across all data points. Together, these patterns answer both research questions: strategy selection maps directly onto accumulated relational history, and it is the interplay between a rigid status hierarchy and the shifting social distance and functional scales that drives the adoption of more face-attending strategies over time.

The findings confirm Indrawati, Tarjana, and Nurkamto's (2018) view that politeness strategies reflect specific social values, and support Hendar and Jaya's (2021) link between strategies and communicative goals. They align with Hendar and Trisnandi (2019) in showing that strategies reinforce social relations, but extend that finding by demonstrating a dynamic communicative arc across a season rather than a static distribution. The study also validates Firdaus and Zuraida (2024) and Kholiq et al. (2026) in treating television dialogue as a legitimate site for negotiating social expectations. Where this study diverges from prior literature is in treating social context as an active analytical category rather than background information, systematically pairing Holmes and Wilson (2017) with Brown and Levinson (1987) to account not only for which strategies appear but for why they appear when they do.

The findings support Brown and Levinson's (1987) core claim that speakers mitigate face threats to maintain relationships and reduce conflict, as confirmed by Muhayyang et al. (2026), while adding a temporal dimension absent from the original theory: perceived threat levels are shaped by accumulated relational history rather than the immediate conditions of any single exchange. The data further suggest that the relative weights of power, distance, and imposition fluctuate across time, and it is the divergence between decreasing social distance and a structurally rigid status hierarchy that produces the more complex, relationally attentive strategies of the later episodes. Incorporating Fajriyah et al.'s (2026) expanded conception of face captures nuances beyond the original positive and negative binary: Tyson asserts identity face in Data 6 by resisting dismissal, while both characters manage relational face through self-blame in Data 13 and affirmation in Data 14, demonstrating that an expanded framework is necessary for analyzing relationships that are both hierarchically structured and personally significant.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of 14 dialog excerpts confirms that all four politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) are present across the exchanges between Dwight and Tyson. Bald-on-record is the most frequent at five data points, followed by negative politeness in four, off-record in three, and positive politeness in two. The status scale functions as a structural constant throughout, while social distance and the functional scale shift most visibly, with the former narrowing and the latter moving from transactional to affective engagement across the season.

These findings indicate that strategy selection is shaped not only by the immediate conditions of any exchange but by the accumulated relational trajectory between participants. Bald-on-record asserts control under operational stress; negative politeness attends to face needs in moments of tension or concern; off-record shifts from deflection to implied dissatisfaction as familiarity grows; and positive politeness marks peak solidarity where hierarchy recedes. Together, these patterns confirm that politeness strategies function not as fixed communicative choices but as responsive instruments shaped by evolving social dimensions within a relationship that is structurally unequal but relationally transformative.

This study contributes to sociopragmatics theoretically by demonstrating that Brown and Levinson's (1987) social variables interact dynamically rather than producing fixed outcomes; methodologically by offering a replicable framework integrating Politeness Theory with Holmes and Wilson's (2017) social dimensions for the analysis of serialized television discourse; and empirically by showing that strategies are not merely reflective of social relations but constitutive of relational change across the arc of a season.

The study is limited by its focus on a single dyadic relationship within one scripted season, restricting generalizability and meaning that identified strategies reflect authorial intent alongside organic communicative behavior. The use of purposive sampling further means the 14 excerpts represent a curated rather than exhaustive account. Future research could examine broader character relationships across multiple seasons, apply the dual framework to other genre contexts to test wider applicability, incorporate multimodal analysis to capture paralinguistic dimensions beyond verbal strategies, or apply the framework to naturally occurring asymmetrical interactions to test findings against unscripted communicative behavior.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the supervisors for their valuable guidance, constructive feedback, and continuous support throughout the completion of this research. The authors also gratefully acknowledge Universitas Widyatama for providing the academic environment and institutional support that contributed to the completion of this study.

Credit Authorship Contribution Statement

Aditya Akmal Firdaus: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing original draft, Review and Editing. **Ida Zuraida Supri:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Writing – Review and Editing, Supervision.

Funding

This research was independently funded by the authors and received no external financial support.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors used ChatGPT and DeepL Translator to assist with language translation and to support the data-coding process, and Mendeley to organize citations and references. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed, verified, and revised by the authors. The authors retained full responsibility for the data analysis, interpretation, conclusions, and final content of the manuscript.

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