

Politeness Strategies in Sadiq Khan's May 2024 Victory Speech

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Abstract:

This research explores the use of politeness strategies in Sadiq Khan's May 2024 victory speech, applying Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory as the analytical lens. Political speeches, especially post-election ones, are rich in pragmatic functions that serve to affirm legitimacy, express gratitude, and manage public perception. Using a descriptive-qualitative method, the study analyzes the speech transcript to identify utterances that reflect four main politeness strategies: Bald On-Record, Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness, and Off-Record. Sixteen utterances were classified and interpreted based on their pragmatic roles in mitigating face-threatening acts (FTAs), building solidarity, and asserting leadership. The findings show that Khan strategically balances directness and empathy, using politeness to navigate political tension and reinforce his image as an inclusive leader. For instance, expressions of gratitude and solidarity enhance audience rapport, while indirect criticisms and apologies soften confrontational elements. These linguistic choices reflect broader socio-political narratives, demonstrating how politeness functions as a persuasive tool in democratic discourse. This study contributes to the intersection of pragmatics and political communication by highlighting the nuanced role of politeness in shaping leadership identity and public trust. It also opens avenues for future research on cross-cultural politeness strategies and comparative analysis across political contexts and genres.

Keywords: Politeness Strategies; victory speech; Brown and Levinson; political pragmatics; Sadiq Khan

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini mengkaji strategi kesantunan dalam pidato kemenangan Sadiq Khan pada Mei 2024 dengan menggunakan teori kesantunan Brown dan Levinson (1987) sebagai kerangka analisis. Pidato politik, khususnya setelah pemilu, sarat dengan fungsi pragmatis yang bertujuan menegaskan legitimasi, menyampaikan rasa terima kasih, dan membentuk citra publik. Melalui metode deskriptif-kualitatif, penelitian ini menganalisis transkrip pidato untuk mengidentifikasi ujaran yang mencerminkan empat strategi kesantunan utama: Bald On-Record, Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness, dan Off-Record. Sebanyak 16 ujaran diklasifikasikan dan ditafsirkan berdasarkan peran pragmatismenya dalam meredakan ancaman terhadap muka (FTA), membangun solidaritas, dan menegaskan kepemimpinan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Khan secara strategis menyeimbangkan antara ketegasan dan empati, menggunakan kesantunan untuk meredakan ketegangan politik dan memperkuat citranya sebagai pemimpin inklusif. Ungkapan terima kasih dan solidaritas memperlambat hubungan dengan audiens, sementara kritik tidak langsung dan permintaan maaf membantu menghaluskan elemen konfrontatif. Pilihan bahasa ini mencerminkan narasi sosial-politik yang lebih luas, menunjukkan bagaimana kesantunan berfungsi sebagai alat persuasi dalam wacana demokratis. Studi ini memberikan kontribusi pada kajian pragmatik dan komunikasi politik dengan menyoroti peran kesantunan dalam membentuk identitas kepemimpinan dan kepercayaan publik. Penelitian lanjutan dapat mengeksplorasi strategi kesantunan lintas budaya dan analisis komparatif dalam berbagai konteks dan genre politik.

Kata kunci: Strategi Kesantunan; Pidato kemenangan; Brown dan Levinson; pragmatik politik; Sadiq Khan

INTRODUCTION

Political speeches serve as powerful instruments for shaping public perception, asserting leadership, and fostering solidarity. Among the many rhetorical tools employed, politeness strategies play a crucial role in managing interpersonal relationships and projecting a favourable image of the speaker. Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework help mitigate face-threatening acts and maintain social harmony, especially in high- stakes contexts such as electoral victories (Fathi, 2024). Sadiq Khan's May 2024 victory speech, delivered after securing a third term as Mayor of London, presents a compelling case for examining how linguistic politeness functions within political discourse.

Despite the extensive scholarship on political rhetoric, studies focusing specifically on politeness strategies in post-election speeches remain limited. Existing research tends to prioritize ideological framing, persuasive appeals, or populist rhetoric, often overlooking the nuanced interpersonal dynamics embedded in language use (Chilton, 2004; Wodak, 2013). In addition, although Khan's previous speeches have been analysed for themes of radicalism and extremism (Zulatsari, 2017), little attention has been paid to the way he uses politeness to express gratitude and reinforce his legitimacy and leadership image. This gap highlights the need for research focused on the pragmatic dimensions of his victory speech (Rajik, 2025).

This study aims to identify and categorize the politeness strategies used by Sadiq Khan in his May 2024 victory speech, using Brown and Levinson's model as the analytical framework. By conducting a qualitative approach, the research seeks to uncover how these strategies function to construct political identity, manage audience rapport, and align with broader socio-political narratives. The study also considers the role of context, audience, and media framing in shaping the delivery and reception of politeness acts.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the intersection between pragmatics and political communication. By revealing the strategic use of politeness in contemporary political speeches (Ayunikmah et al., 2023; Krisagbedo et al., 2021; Megah & Soframi, 2020; Nasuli et al., 2021; Rajik, 2025) this study deepens our understanding of how language functions as a tool of persuasion to build image and prevent conflict. Furthermore, these findings can provide insights for academics, speechwriters, and political analysts interested in the subtle mechanisms leaders use to build trust and



authority in democratic societies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that studies language use in context, focusing on how meaning is shaped by social and situational factors. According to Yule (2010), pragmatics helps us understand not only what is explicitly said, but also what is implied. In political discourse, pragmatic analysis is essential to uncover the speaker's intentions, persuasive strategies, and relational positioning. Victory speeches, in particular, are rich with pragmatic elements as they aim to express gratitude, assert legitimacy, and foster solidarity. The pragmatic lens allows researchers to explore how language functions beyond its literal meaning, especially in high-stakes political communication.

Politeness Strategies

Politeness strategy is a communication technique used to maintain social harmony, minimise actions that threaten self-esteem, and show respect to the interlocutor. Brown and Levinson (1987) introduced the concept of 'face' which is divided into 'positive face' (the desire to be liked and approved of) and 'negative face' (the desire for autonomy and freedom from coercion). Their theory outlines four main politeness strategies: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record. These strategies depend on context and are often influenced by power relations, social distance, and cultural norms.

In political speeches, politeness strategies serve a dual function: they help leaders express humility, acknowledge the contributions of others, and build rapport with a diverse audience. Thanking predecessors, speaking respectfully to citizens, and using inclusive language (e.g., 'we' rather than 'I') are common politeness gestures that strengthen solidarity and credibility.

Recent studies have expanded the scope of politeness theory by examining its application in political debates and digital discourse. Mulyono et al. (2025) highlight how politeness principles were strategically used in the 2024 presidential election debate to manage ideological tension and maintain public rapport, showing that even confrontational settings benefit from pragmatic sensitivity. Similarly, Lioni and Pujiati (2025) explore politeness strategies among Indonesian speakers in televised debates, emphasizing how indirectness and face-saving acts are adapted to digital platforms and



culturally specific expectations. These findings reinforce the relevance of Brown and Levinson's framework in contemporary political contexts and support the present study's focus on post-election speech as a site of pragmatic negotiation and leadership construction.

Victory Speech

Victory speeches are a genre of political discourse delivered after electoral success. They are performative acts that mark the transition from candidate to leader, and often include expressions of gratitude, unity, and future vision. According to Chilton and Schäffner (2004), political speeches are inherently strategic, aiming to persuade, legitimize, and mobilize. Victory speeches, in particular, are designed to consolidate support, reduce post-election tensions, and signal the speaker's leadership style.

Sadiq Khan's May 2024 victory speech, delivered after securing a third term as Mayor of London, is a compelling example of how politeness strategies are employed to navigate political sensitivities, express appreciation, and reinforce democratic values. By analyzing the speech through Brown and Levinson's framework, this study seeks to uncover how Khan balances authority with humility, and how his linguistic choices reflect broader socio-political dynamics.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a descriptive-qualitative method to examine the politeness strategies embedded in Sadiq Khan's May 2024 victory speech. The qualitative paradigm is chosen to allow for in-depth interpretation of linguistic choices within their socio-political context, aligning with Creswell's (2023) emphasis on meaning-making through contextual understanding.

The primary data source is the publicly accessible transcript of Khan's speech, selected for its relevance as a performative political act marking electoral success. The analysis is grounded in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which categorizes face-saving strategies into four types: Bald On-Record, Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness, and Off-Record. Each utterance in the speech was examined for potential face-threatening acts (FTAs) and politeness markers, then classified according to its strategy type and sub-strategy (e.g., expressing solidarity, apologizing, rhetorical hinting).

To ensure analytical rigor, the data analysis followed the interactive model

proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), consisting of three concurrent steps: data reduction (identifying and coding politeness utterances), data display (organizing utterances into strategy categories), and conclusion drawing/verification (interpreting the pragmatic function of each utterance in relation to political identity and audience rapport). This triangulated approach enables the study to move beyond surface-level categorization and uncover the strategic use of politeness in constructing leadership ethos and managing public perception.

By combining pragmatic theory with qualitative analysis, this research offers a nuanced understanding of how politeness operates as a rhetorical tool in political discourse, particularly during moments of transition and public affirmation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 16 politeness utterances were identified in Sadiq Khan’s May 2024 victory speech. These were classified into four main categories based on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory: Bald On-Record, Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness, and Off-Record. Each category reflects distinct communicative intentions and strategic choices in managing face-threatening acts (FTAs) within political discourse.

Table 1. Frequency of Politeness Strategies in Sadiq Khan 2024 Victory Speech

POLITENESS LEVEL	FREQUENCY
Bald On-Record	5
Positive Politeness	5
Negative Politeness	3
Off-Record	3
TOTAL	16

Bald On-Record

Sadiq Khan’s victory speech contains five utterances that exemplify Bald On-Record strategies, which are characterized by directness and a lack of mitigation. These utterances are typically used when the speaker wants to convey sincerity, urgency, or authority without softening the message. For example, “*Thank you from the bottom of my heart*” is a clear and emotionally charged expression of gratitude. It lacks hedging or indirectness, making it a prototypical Bald On-Record act. The directness enhances Khan’s emotional transparency and reinforces his authenticity, which helps build trust with the audience. Similarly, “*I promise to repay the trust you’ve placed in me*” is a straightforward commitment that avoids modal verbs like “might” or “hope to,” signaling

determination and reliability. This utterance projects Khan as a responsible and dependable leader. The statement “*We faced a campaign of non-stop negativity*” delivers a direct critique of political opponents, asserting moral positioning without euphemism. While potentially face-threatening, it serves to establish resilience and moral clarity. Additional utterances such as “*It has been a difficult few months*” and “*It is time for Rishi Sunak to give the public a choice*” reflect candid acknowledgment of challenges and assertive calls for democratic action. These utterances collectively demonstrate how Bald On-Record strategies can be employed to project honesty, decisiveness, and political agency, especially in moments of public affirmation where clarity and strength are essential.

Positive Politeness

Five utterances in the speech were categorized as Positive Politeness strategies, which aim to satisfy the hearer’s positive face—their desire to be liked, appreciated, and included. This strategy is particularly effective in political discourse, where building solidarity and emotional rapport is crucial. Khan’s use of inclusive language in “*We ran a campaign that was in keeping with the spirit and the values of this city*” emphasizes shared values and collective identity, aligning his leadership with the moral fabric of London’s electorate. The phrase “*A city that regards our diversity not as a weakness but an almighty strength*” reframes multiculturalism as a source of pride and resilience, reinforcing Khan’s image as a progressive and inclusive leader. Personal acknowledgments such as “*A special thank you goes to my mum... my amazing wife... our daughters*” humanize the speaker and present him as emotionally grounded, while “*It’s Londoners who inspire me every day*” functions as a direct compliment that elevates the audience’s role in his leadership journey. These utterances foster emotional closeness and present Khan as a relatable figure who values community and shared purpose. The declaration “*I will always be a mayor for all Londoners*” further underscores his commitment to universal representation and non-discrimination. By affirming shared values and expressing admiration, Khan uses Positive Politeness to strengthen audience rapport and present himself as empathetic, inclusive, and community-oriented.

Negative Politeness

Three utterances were identified as Negative Politeness strategies, which aim to respect the hearer’s negative face—their desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. This strategy is often used to soften potentially face-threatening acts,



especially when addressing sensitive topics. Khan's apology, "*I'm truly sorry for putting you through this,*" acknowledges the emotional toll of political campaigning and demonstrates humility. The intensifier "truly" adds sincerity, and the phrase "putting you through this" recognizes the audience's discomfort, mitigating the impact of the utterance. Similarly, "*I know there have been times when this job has taken a toll on you*" expresses concern for the well-being of close supporters, particularly family members, and shows awareness of the personal costs of leadership. The modal "I know" softens the statement, and the phrase "taken a toll" implies emotional strain without assigning blame. Even the critique "*That's not right, or fair*" is framed in abstract moral terms rather than personal attack, allowing Khan to express disapproval while maintaining politeness. These utterances help Khan navigate emotionally charged content with sensitivity, reinforcing his image as a thoughtful and morally grounded leader who values the autonomy and dignity of others. By using Negative Politeness, Khan demonstrates emotional intelligence and respect, which are essential for maintaining credibility and trust in democratic leadership.

Off-Record

Three utterances were categorized as Off-Record strategies, marked by indirectness and implication. This strategy allows the speaker to convey messages without committing to explicit statements, often used to avoid confrontation or maintain plausible deniability. Khan's reference to "*Some of the stuff on social media, the protests by our home, the threats...*" implies hostility and intimidation without naming individuals, enabling him to express concern while preserving a diplomatic tone. The vagueness of the utterance allows listeners to infer the seriousness of the situation without triggering direct conflict. The phrase "*Some people said it couldn't be done*" subtly challenges sceptics, asserting his success without direct confrontation. By using "some people," Khan avoids personalizing the critique, which helps maintain civility and tact. Likewise, "*London has rejected the politics of division*" contrasts his campaign with that of his opponents through implication rather than accusation. The phrase "politics of division" is ideologically loaded but remains indirect, allowing Khan to position himself as a unifier without engaging in overt criticism. These utterances demonstrate how Off-Record strategies can be used to deliver pointed political messages while preserving decorum, enabling the speaker to balance assertiveness with diplomacy. In doing so, Khan maintains a leadership style that is strategic, respectful, and rhetorically effective in managing post-



election tensions.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that politeness strategies are essential rhetorical tools in political discourse, particularly in post-election contexts where leaders must assert authority while maintaining empathy and public rapport. By applying Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework to Sadiq Khan's May 2024 victory speech, the research identified sixteen utterances categorized into Bald On-Record, Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness, and Off-Record strategies, each serving distinct pragmatic functions such as expressing gratitude, building solidarity, softening confrontation, and asserting moral positioning. Khan's strategic use of direct statements, inclusive language, respectful apologies, and indirect critiques reflects a deliberate effort to manage face-threatening acts while reinforcing his image as a morally grounded and inclusive leader. These findings demonstrate how politeness operates not only to maintain social harmony but also to construct political identity, legitimize leadership, and align with broader socio-political narratives.

The study contributes to the intersection of pragmatics and political communication by highlighting the interpersonal dimension of political rhetoric and the persuasive power of linguistic choices in shaping public trust. It also affirms the relevance of qualitative, context-sensitive analysis in uncovering the nuanced functions of language in democratic leadership. Future research could build on these insights by exploring cross-cultural variations in politeness strategies, examining how different political systems and cultural norms influence the use and reception of politeness in political speech. Additionally, comparative studies across genres—such as debates, interviews, or crisis addresses—could further illuminate how politeness adapts to different communicative goals and audience expectations, enriching our understanding of political pragmatics in diverse settings.

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