

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of The Study

Interactions between men and women, especially in the realm of dating, often reveal an unspoken imbalance of power (West & Zimmerman, 1987). There is an imbalance in power, control of conversation, and the way each party negotiates their position. This dynamic is also evident from the perspective of traditional gender norms, which expect women to be friendly and non-aggressive, while men are encouraged to take the initiative and be assertive (Lakoff, 1975). This gap creates a situation where women may feel compelled to continue interactions that make them uncomfortable due to the pressure to be polite and avoid conflict. One of the most interesting aspects of this imbalance is how it manifests through language, especially politeness strategies. Language is not only used to exchange information, but also to negotiate power, stake face, show social position, and this study examines through the theory of Brown and Levinson (1987). Research on the relationship between gender and language, particularly through the findings of Deborah Tannen (1990), shows that differences in linguistic patterns between men and women are not merely a matter of personal choice, but are shaped by different social and cultural processes. These differences in communication style can influence how individuals negotiate their position, social relations, and power in interactions. Therefore, language becomes an important arena for observing how gender

relations and power work implicitly in everyday communication. Importantly, this power imbalance does not remain static throughout an interaction. As a relationship develops across different relational stages, the use of politeness strategies and the negotiation of power shift accordingly, reflecting the changing dynamics between the parties involved.

Issues of gender inequality and power negotiations are often depicted in literature, film, and social media (Gill, 2007). Representations of gender interactions in fiction can illustrate power dynamics more subtly through dialogue, gestures, and the language choices used by characters. Short stories and contemporary novels have begun to describe the often unspoken experiences of modern women (Butler, 2000), particularly in relationships, to see how women and men use strategies of politeness to maintain their positions in social relationships. These works attempt to dissect the awkward moments, misunderstandings, and even subtle threats that fill dating life, which were previously considered trivial and normal. By focusing on narratives from a female perspective, these literary works serve as tools to explore or criticize deeply rooted social norms and become a space for representing issues of power that arise in everyday life.

Kristen Roupenian's short story "Cat Person," published in *The New Yorker* in 2017, became phenomenal precisely because it successfully captured the nuances of a deep issue. The story, which tells of a brief relationship between a 20-year-old female college student named Margot and a 34-year-old man named Robert, whom she met through her workplace. What makes "Cat Person" important as part of this research corpus is how it uses language and politeness

as tools of gender power. Every conversation, every word choice, and every silence between Margot and Robert is filled with tension and power negotiations. An analysis of this story reveals how the issue of politeness strategies is not merely a matter of manners, but a gradual mechanism of life and a representation of power imbalances in relationships that recur throughout the story. "Cat Person" becomes a female experience in a relationship, especially in terms of discomfort, social pressure, and how women often act politely to avoid negative reactions from men. However, academic studies focusing on politeness strategies as a representation of gender power in this short story are still very limited. What makes Cat Person particularly compelling as an object of pragmatic analysis is that the relationship between Margot and Robert does not unfold as a single static interaction, but rather progresses through a series of relational stages from initiation to termination in which the use of politeness strategies shifts dramatically for each character. This distinction matters because Brown and Levinson's (1987) original framework was formulated around the analysis of individual face-threatening acts evaluated against a fixed set of contextual variables (P, D, R) at a single point in interaction, an approach later criticized by discursive politeness scholars (Watts, Ide, & Ehlich, 1992; Eelen, 2001) for treating politeness as a static, isolated calculation rather than as something that emerges and shifts across the unfolding course of a relationship. As the relationship develops, the asymmetry in emotional investment and communicative power between Margot and Robert becomes increasingly visible through their language choices. Even Margot's final silence, which contains no verbal utterance, functions as a deliberate

communicative act that brings the relationship to a definitive close. This relational progression makes *Cat Person* a uniquely rich text for examining how politeness strategies operate not only as expressions of gender difference, but as dynamic tools of power negotiation across the arc of an intimate relationship.

Previous studies have examined the relationship between politeness strategies, gender, and power in various contexts. Darta et.al. (2023) analyzed politeness strategies related to power relations in literary texts, while Muhammad et.al (2023) examined differences in politeness strategies based on gender in film narratives. Diana et al. (2020) also highlighted the relationship between requests, gender, and power in the film script *Moana*, while Syakur et al. (2025) showed the relationship between politeness strategies, social status, and power relations in the classic novel *Pride and Prejudice*. In addition, Ayesha (2022) found differences in the use of gender-based politeness strategies in academic contexts. In general, these studies confirm that politeness strategies are closely related to gender constructs and power positions in interactions. However, these studies generally still focus on the classification of strategy types and differences in their frequency, and have not explicitly examined how politeness strategies function as representations of gender power relations in contemporary short stories. In addition, previous research has mostly focused on films, classic novels, or nonfiction interactions, so that modern short stories as spaces for intense power negotiations through dialogue have been relatively rarely explored. In fact, in contemporary short stories, power relations are often constructed implicitly through language choices and the dynamics of communication between characters.

Different from previous studies, this study does not only identify and compare the types of politeness strategies used by each character, but also traces how those strategies shift across the relational stages of the romantic relationship and examines how such shifts reflect the negotiation of power and gendered communication patterns as theorized by Deborah Tannen (1990) and structured by Knapp's Relational Development Model. Based on this gap, this study aims to examine how politeness strategies function as dynamic tools of power negotiation in the romantic communication between the characters Margot and Robert in Kristen Roupenian's *Cat Person*, tracing how those strategies shift across the relational stages of their relationship.

1.2 Research Question

Based on the identified research gap regarding politeness in the short story *Cat Person*, this study is systematically guided by the following main questions:

1. What types of politeness strategies are used by Robert and Margot in their romantic relationship?
2. How do power, distance, and rank of imposition, as contextual variables shape the negotiation of politeness in romantic relationship interactions within *Cat Person*?
3. How are politeness strategies used in the communication pattern between Margot and Robert in their romantic relationship?

1.3 Objective of the study

In relation to the research questions above, this study aims to investigate how politeness strategies function in the romantic communication between the

characters Margot and Robert in Kristen Roupenian's "Cat Person."

Specifically, this study aims to:

1. To identify the types of politeness strategies employed by Robert and Margot in their romantic relationship, based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework, in order to describe the dominant patterns of each character's linguistic behavior across the relational stages of their interaction.
2. To analyze how the contextual variables of power, social distance, and rank of imposition function as tools of negotiation in the romantic relationship interactions between Robert and Margot, and to explain how these variables shape the selection of politeness strategies at each stage of their relational development.
3. To examine how the politeness strategies used by Robert and Margot reflect and shape the communication patterns in their romantic relationship, as interpreted through Deborah Tannen's (1990) concepts of report talk and rapport talk and the relational trajectory described by Knapp's Relational Development Model.

1.4 Scope of the study

This study analyzes the use of politeness strategies by the characters Margot and Robert in Kristen Roupenian's short story *Cat Person* (2017), focusing on how these strategies function as tools of power negotiation across the development of their romantic relationship. The scope of this study is limited to the dialogues and narrative passages that contain verbal interactions between

the two characters, without including reader responses, authorial intent, or film adaptations. Internal monologue and narrative descriptions of characters' nonverbal behavior are also included where they provide contextual grounding for the interpretation of politeness choices.

The analysis is conducted in three integrated stages. First, the study identifies and classifies the types of politeness strategies employed by each character based on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory as the primary analytical framework. This classification also considers the three contextual variables of power (P), social distance (D), and rank of imposition (R) to explain how each strategy reflects the negotiation of face and power relations between the characters.

Second, the identified patterns of politeness strategy use are examined across the relational stages of Margot and Robert's romantic relationship, structured according to Knapp's Relational Development Model (initiating, intensifying, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating). This stage of analysis traces how politeness strategies shift dynamically as the relationship progresses, rather than treating them as static patterns.

Third, the patterns identified through both stages of analysis are interpreted using Deborah Tannen's (1990) gender communication theory, specifically the concepts of rapport talk and report talk to explain how gendered communication orientations shape the use and interpretation of politeness strategies throughout the romantic relationship. Beyond the scope of Brown and Levinson's (1987)

politeness framework, this study draws on Wu, Afzaal, and Abdel Salam El-Dakhs's (2025) framework of conversational silence in rapport management to account for communicative silence as a meaningful pragmatic act. This includes Margot's silence in the terminating stage of the relationship, which can be interpreted as an instance of rapport destruction, marking the definitive breakdown of the relationship rather than a mere absence of speech. This study does not aim to provide a sentence-level linguistic feature analysis of every utterance, nor does it seek to make generalizable claims about gender communication beyond the scope of the text. The findings are interpretive and contextually grounded within the narrative of Cat Person as a literary object of pragmatic analysis.

1.5 Significance of the study

This study has theoretical significance, and an explanation of this significance is presented as follows.

1. Theoretical Significance

Theoretically, this study contributes to pragmatic studies, particularly in the study of politeness and power relations in romantic communication. By applying Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory to a contemporary short story, this study expands the application of politeness theory, which has previously been used more in everyday conversation, films, or other media, to the analysis of literary works, particularly short stories. This study also enriches the study of language and gender by integrating the

perspectives of Deborah Tannen (1990) to explain how politeness strategies function as a form of power negotiation in intimate interactions. Through an analysis of the short story Cat Person, this study shows that politeness functions not only as a social norm, but also as a pragmatic tool that represents power imbalances, social pressure, and the negotiation of power dynamics in romantic relationships. This study provides a deeper understanding of how language works as a representation of power in literary texts.

2. Practical Significance

a. For Students

This study can help students understand the concrete application of politeness strategies theory through literary text analysis. This study provides concrete examples of how pragmatic, politeness, and gender theories can be applied in the analysis of dialogue and interactions between characters.

In addition, this study encourages students to think critically about the use of everyday language, especially language that appears polite but contains power relations and social pressure, both in academic and social contexts.

b. For the English Literature Study Programme

This study is expected to enrich research in the English Literature Study Programme, particularly in the fields of pragmatics and discourse analysis. By using short stories as the object of study, this research emphasizes the importance

of micro linguistic analysis in understanding social relations and the representation of gender issues in literary works. The results of this study can be used as a reference and for the development of teaching materials.

c. For Other Researchers and Practitioners

This study is also expected to be useful for other researchers interested in language, gender, and power studies, particularly from a socio-pragmatic and literary perspective. In addition, the findings of this study can provide insight for writers, educators, and communication practitioners on how politeness strategies can function in romantic relationships namely as a means of maintaining harmony and as a mechanism that reproduces power imbalances in interactions.

1.6 State of the Art

Previous research on politeness strategies and gender has generally focused on films, novels, and popular media, emphasizing the classification of types of politeness strategies and differences in their frequency of use between male and female characters. Although these studies provide an important picture of the relationship between politeness and gender, most research still positions politeness strategies as a form of social norm, without examining in depth how these strategies function as mechanisms for negotiating power in intimate interactions. Unlike previous studies, this research presents a micro-analytical

approach to short stories by combining an analysis of politeness strategies with an interpretation of gendered communication style patterns based on Deborah Tannen's (1990) theory and the relational trajectory described by Knapp's Relational Development Model. Thus, this research provides a new contribution to understanding how politeness operates as a dynamic linguistic practice that represents power relations across the stages of a romantic relationship.



Intelligentia - Dignitas