

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Politeness strategies based on Brown and Levinson (1987) are the ways speakers manage communication to maintain harmony and protect each other's face from threats during interaction. Brown and Levinson (1987:61) define face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself," and they explain that interaction involves maintaining this self-image in communication. Politeness strategies are used as tools to minimize the negative impact of face-threatening acts (FTAs) and to create more acceptable and respectful exchanges between speaker and listener, and one of the key social factors influencing this choice is relative power (P), which refers to the degree of power one individual has over another in a conversation.

Sari and Simatupang (2024) analysed politeness strategies in character conversations using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory combined with Leech's (1977) language function classification theory to categorize speech patterns in certain scenes from the *Legally Blonde* (2001) film. While their study successfully identified and classified the four types of politeness strategies employed in the film, it lacked an analysis of how such strategies function within the broader context of power relations and societal hierarchies. Therefore, this study analyses the politeness strategies that Elle Woods uses in her assertive speech acts, and how these strategies are influenced by relative power, social distance, and rank of imposition to reveal power relations throughout the film.

Legally Blonde is a novel authored by Amanda Brown that was adapted into an American comedy film directed by Robert Luketic and written by Karen McCullah Lutz and Kirsten Smith in 2001. It is a story of a stylish sorority girl named Elle Woods who follows her ex-boyfriend to Harvard Law School in an effort to win him back. Along the way, she transforms from an empty-headed stereotype to a clever lawyer, develops her passion for the law, and gains a new sense of self-worth independent of a man.

Elle Woods' character development is particularly evident through her shifting communication styles and politeness strategies as she experiences different social contexts and relations of power. At first, she was underestimated by her colleagues and professors because of her appearance and background. However, Elle slowly adapts her communication style to gain reputation and respect across different social contexts and hierarchies.

Studying politeness strategies in film dialogue offers insights into how language becomes a tool for navigating and potentially transforming social hierarchies, as Brown and Levinson (1987:74) state that "the weightiness of a face-threatening act is a function of the social variables: power, distance, and ranking of imposition," particularly in academic and professional settings where power relations are constantly negotiated. Studying Elle Woods' politeness strategies in her assertive speech acts is significant because it shows that language choices are not just a reflection of social position, but can also be a tool to challenge and change power relations, especially in academic and professional settings.

1.2 Research Problems

To analyse Elle Woods' politeness strategies in assertive speech acts to reveal the power relations in the *Legally Blonde* film, the research questions in this study are formulated.

1. What kinds of politeness strategies does Elle Woods use in her assertive speech acts throughout the *Legally Blonde* (2001) film?
2. How do Elle Woods' politeness strategies in her assertive speech acts reveal power relations in this film?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine Elle Woods' politeness strategies in her assertive speech acts in *Legally Blonde* (2001) using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and Searle's (1979) speech acts theory. This study aims to identify the types of politeness strategies Elle uses in her assertive speech acts and analyse how these strategies reveal power relations within the film's social contexts.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

Based on the research problems above, the objectives of the study are:

1. To analyse the kinds of politeness strategies used by Elle Woods in her assertive speech acts in the *Legally Blonde* (2001) film based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and Searle's (1979) speech acts theory.

2. To analyse how Elle Woods' politeness strategies in her assertive speech acts reveal power relations across different social contexts in the film.

1.5 Review of Previous Studies

I have chosen ten previous studies that analysed politeness strategies from different perspectives. The previous studies are divided into three topics: studies that focus on analysing *Legally Blonde* and politeness strategies as the object and the topic of study, studies that focus on analysing politeness strategies as the topic, and studies that focus on the relationship between politeness strategies and power relations in films.

I found two studies exploring the *Legally Blonde* film from different aspects. Sari and Simatupang (2024) examined politeness strategy use and their impact on character interaction in *Legally Blonde* with an analysis of seven examples of dialogue from all four types of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and Leech's (1977) language function classification theory. The study used qualitative descriptive methodology to examine positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record strategies across various character interactions. However, this study only analyses general politeness strategy identification and classification without examining underlying power relations.

Charismawati (2013) examined the use of positive and negative politeness in refusals in three American drama films, of which *Legally Blonde* contributed 31 refusal utterances (42,5%) out of 73 utterances under study. Refusal utterances

were analysed by the researcher using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory with quantitative comparative methodology. The study found that negative politeness strategies (56,2%) were more frequently used than positive politeness strategies (43,8%) in refusal situations, with "be conventionally indirect" being the most common strategy. Nevertheless, this study is only an analysis of refusal speech acts and their politeness strategy patterns.

However, this study will focus on how the main character, Elle Woods, uses politeness strategies in her assertive speech acts to reveal power relations in different social interactions throughout the film, which neither of the two previous studies has fully explored in their analysis.

Furthermore, I found five additional studies that examine politeness strategies such as bald-on-record, off-record, positive politeness, and negative politeness under Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Irawansari and Ariyaningsih (2024) analysed *Pitch Perfect 2* (2015). They reported that characters from the film used all four types of politeness strategies, with bald-on-record being the most dominant. The study shows that politeness strategies can be used in studying how characters organize talk in competitive group settings.

Hakim and Novitasari (2022) analysed *Onward* (2020) and discovered that the main character, Ian Lightfoot, often used bald-on-record strategies because of the urgency in most adventure scenes. The study emphasizes that politeness strategies are not just decided by the character's personality but also by situational and socio-cultural aspects.

Mubarok (2025) analysed *The Garfield Movie* (2004) and concluded that positive politeness strategies were the most frequently used, showing the characters' attempts at maintaining social harmony and expressing friendliness. However, Garfield himself applied bald-on-record strategies to highlight his blunt humor, while negative and off-record strategies appeared less frequently.

Dewi and Ayomi (2023) focused only on positive politeness strategies in *Encanto* (2021). They found that the main character, Mirabel, mostly used "Give or Ask for the Reason", while the other strategies, such as Exaggeration, Avoid Disagreement, Offer/Promise, Be Optimistic, and Give Gifts, were used less. This proves that Mirabel relies on politeness to express harmony in her family while holding a marginalized position.

Setyawati and Rahayu (2020) analysed *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone Chapter 1* (2001). They concluded that negative politeness strategies are likely to appear in the way the Dursleys treated Harry, and positive politeness in compliments, greetings, and solidarity attempts. This study has shown that the politeness strategies in the film also recognize power relations, especially the difference in power between Harry and the Dursleys.

The final three articles focus on the relationship between politeness strategies and power relations in films. Asheva and Santosa (2022) examined the film *Joker* (2019) based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory within a socio-pragmatic approach. The study found that politeness strategies are not only used to maintain communication but also to reflect unequal social positions. For example, powerful characters like Murray Franklin tended to use less

politeness, while Joker's strategies changed depending on whether he was positioned as subordinate or dominant. This finding proves that politeness strategies can be used to uncover the circulation of power in social interactions.

Albab (2021) conducted a study entitled *Power Relation and Negative Politeness in The Irishman Movie (2019)*. This study focuses on how negative politeness is used as a strategy to manage hierarchical relations between mob members and political figures. The findings show that subordinate characters used negative politeness most frequently to show respect and avoid threatening the face of their superiors, while dominant figures often used bald-on-record strategies to assert authority. This study demonstrates that politeness strategies work as tools to negotiate power in unequal relationships.

Amalia et al. (2023) examined *Bridgerton Season 1 (2020)* to discover how power is represented through politeness strategies in aristocratic society. It was confirmed in the research that each of the four types of politeness strategies: bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record, was used by the characters, but depended significantly on social class. The nobles and royals strategically used politeness in order to maintain power as well as to maintain class distinctions, while lower-status characters used politeness as a way to show deference. In this study, politeness strategies also act as symbolic markers of social power and hierarchy.

However, no prior study has specifically analysed how the politeness strategies of a main character in her assertive speech acts reveal and potentially challenge current power relations when moving through several social hierarchies.

To address this gap, this study uses Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and Searle's (1979) speech acts theory to analyse how Elle Woods' politeness strategies reflect, negotiate, and transform power relations across different social contexts in *Legally Blonde*.

1.6 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on analysing Elle Woods' politeness strategies in her assertive speech acts in *Legally Blonde* (2001) using Brown and Levinson's theory and Searle's (1979) speech acts theory. The analysis examines the politeness strategies used by Elle Woods throughout the film. The study examines how her politeness strategies reveal power relations across different social contexts within the film and is limited to Elle Woods' use of politeness strategies and does not examine strategies used by other characters toward Elle Woods.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to politeness theory and speech acts theory by offering an analytical model of how a main character uses politeness strategies in her assertive speech acts to reveal power relations through her language choices in film settings. While a previous study identified what politeness strategies were used, it did not look at why they matter for understanding power. This study shows how Elle Woods changes her way of speaking from cautious and deferential when she was powerless to direct and confident as she gained authority.

By revealing these patterns, this study addresses the missing piece: understanding that the way we speak is not just a reflection of who has power, but can actually be a tool to change those power relations. This study aims to offer a deeper understanding for readers about power relations in film dialogue, especially in schools and workplaces.

1.8 Writing Organization

This study is written in four chapters, which are divided into several sub-chapters. The chapters are:

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This chapter consists of the background of the study, research problems, purpose of the study, objectives of the study, review of previous studies, scope of the study, significance of the study, and writing organization.

CHAPTER II: THEORY AND METHODS

This chapter consists of an explanation of the theoretical framework and methods used for this study.

CHAPTER III: FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This chapter consists of the findings and discussion of politeness strategies in Elle Woods' assertive speech acts to reveal power relations in the film.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

This chapter consists of an explanation of the study.