A Discourse Analysis of Speech Acts and Politeness Strategies Used by Jimmy Fallon in "The Tonight Show"

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Abstract

This study was conducted to examine how Jimmy Fallon uses speech acts and politeness strategies in his interactions with guest stars on "The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon." The main focus of this study is how language is used not only to convey information, but also to build social relationships and maintain the comfort of the interlocutor. The method used is a qualitative descriptive approach with discourse analysis techniques. Data was obtained from two interview videos on the show's official YouTube channel, namely the episodes with Angelina Jolie and Justin Timberlake. These two episodes were selected because they represent two different types of social relationships, namely formal and casual, allowing for a comparison of the language strategies used by the host in different contexts. Data were analyzed using Austin and Searle's speech act theory and Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. The results of this study indicate that Jimmy Fallon consistently uses expressive and directive speech acts to convey praise, guide the conversation, or lighten the mood with his interlocutors. Additionally, positive politeness strategies are most frequently used, particularly to build rapport and show respect for guests. These findings show that language plays a crucial role in creating effective, polite, and entertaining interactions in the context of entertainment media. These results also show that Jimmy Fallon can change the way he speaks based on how close he is to his guests. He uses supportive and empathetic expressions, such as giving subtle compliments and ensuring that his conversation partner is comfortable, in episodes with Angelina Jolie, which tend to be more formal. Meanwhile, Fallon is more free to use comedy, jokes, and a relax. Direct speaking style in episodes with Justin Timberlake, his close friend. This supports the idea that a person's social context and their relationships with others greatly influence how they speak. Therefore, it is hoped that the findings of this study will enhance our understanding of language use strategies in entertainment media as well as how language shapes social image and dynamics in public communication.

Key words: discourse analysis, speech acts, politeness strategies, talk show, media communication.

Introduction

According to Austin and Searle, speech acts encompass various communicative purposes, including stating, commanding, promising, or praising (Jahn, 2025). However, Brown and Levinson's theory states that politeness strategies involve minimizing threats to the "face" of the interlocutor by using positive and negative strategies (Fathi, 2024). This study aims to explain how Fallon uses language as a flexible social tool using discourse analysis methodology. Two episodes of the show, featuring Angelina Jolie and Justin Timberlake, were analyzed as they represent two different social relationships, intimate and formal. It is expected that this analysis will uncover communication patterns reflecting differences in social context. They will also explore how a professional host adapts their speaking style to interact effectively and ensure smooth interactions. In the entertainment industry, effective communication is one of the keys to success. A host must not only be able to ask questions and discuss specific issues, but also make the audience and guests feel comfortable. As a type of entertainment media, talk shows have a unique communication dynamic that requires interactions to feel natural while remaining controlled. Therefore, it is crucial to study how hosts use their language, especially when they strive to balance entertainment, politeness, and professionalism. Known as a great host, Jimmy Fallon can quickly capture people's attention, even with new audiences.

The use of speech acts and good manners, which can demonstrate empathy, warmth, and intelligence when reading social situations, is closely related to this ability. By examining Fallon's speech in two different episodes, we can gain a better understanding of how social context influences our decisions to use language. In the episode with Angelina Jolie, Fallon tends to communicate in a more formal and cautious manner due to his professional relationship with Jolie, which is not particularly intimate. Conversely, in the episode with Justin Timberlake, Fallon communicates in a more relaxed, humorous, and spontaneous manner, reflecting the personal closeness he has built over the years. Researchers can analyze the linguistic structure and social function of each utterance thanks to the discourse analysis approach used in this study. Researchers can use speech act theory to understand the intent and effect of each of Fallon's statements. On the other hand, politeness theory helps identify how Fallon manages interpersonal relationships in public spaces while maintaining a positive image of himself and the people he meets. Furthermore, this research has broader

implications, particularly in terms of pragmatic learning and cross-cultural communication. The ability to use language in a polite, flexible, and adaptive manner is increasingly important in this interconnected world, both for media professionals and the general public in various social contexts. By studying how prominent figures like Jimmy Fallon communicate, we can understand the importance of pragmatic sensitivity, appropriate word choice, and the proper use of nonverbal language in building good social relationships.

A language research method called discourse analysis emphasizes the use of language in social contexts. (Johnstone, 2008) say that discourse analysis involves looking at how verbal interactions create meaning and how language shapes and regulates social relationships. This approach is highly relevant in the context of talk shows like The Tonight Show because it allows researchers to understand not only the content of speech but also the social implications associated with it. Speech act theory was first proposed by Austin and later developed by Searle. According to (Reiland, 2024) , speech acts can be classified into several types, including perlocutionary acts (the effects produced), illocutionary acts (the purpose of the utterance), and locutionary acts (what is said). Illocutionary acts, or the speaker's desire to say something, such as giving praise or starting a new topic, are the focus of this research. Speech acts are the basis of pragmatic communication, according to (Jahn, 2025) because they reveal how utterances are used in real-life situations.

In addition to speech acts, politeness strategies are also very important in this analysis. Brown and Levinson developed the most significant politeness theory, distinguishing between positive and negative politeness strategies. According to (Fathi, 2024) positive strategies demonstrate solidarity and closeness, while negative strategies respect the speaker's personal space and autonomy. In practice, the level of familiarity, social status, and the existing situation greatly influence the selection of these strategies. According to (Xafizovna, 2022), politeness strategies are not universal but are highly influenced by culture. Therefore, Fallon must adapt his speaking style to remain polite yet entertaining on international shows like The Tonight Show. This aligns with (Nu'man, 2023) findings, which state that variations in

politeness strategies across cultures indicate that the form and frequency of strategy use are highly determined by social norms and cultural expectations.

In a similar study on Saturday Night Live, (Yulianti et al., 2022) found that implicature and politeness strategies are often used to balance humor and respect for the audience. This suggests that entertainment media not only help convey messages but also help maintain social balance and build self-image. Therefore, the theoretical framework of this study includes Austin and Searle's theory of speech acts and Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness. Both theories are examined in the context of entertainment media and adapted to the social relationship between the host and the guest. This study provides a strong foundation for investigating how Jimmy Fallon uses contextual communication strategies to build effective, polite, and engaging interactions. The discourse analysis approach combines an understanding of context, interaction goals, and the social identities of participants in addition to the main theories above. Identity in discourse interaction changes according to the language used, according to (Johnstone, 2008). The identity of a talk show host like Jimmy Fallon is shaped by the way he speaks, the words he chooses, his nonverbal expressions, and how he interacts with the audience. Therefore, discourse analysis considers not only the structure of speech but also the meaning formed by complex social interactions. Understanding politeness strategies also depends on the idea of "face" developed by Brown and Levinson. Maintaining relationships with others during public events is crucial for maintaining a positive atmosphere and enabling smooth interaction (Rahayuningsih et al., 2020).

Method

This study conducted descriptive qualitative research with discourse analysis as its main focus. Researchers were able to explore how language is used effectively to achieve social goals in entertainment media interactions with guest stars on The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon by identifying and describing various speech acts and politeness strategies used by Jimmy Fallon. Two episodes from the show's official YouTube channel were used as data sources. In the first episode, Angelina Jolie appeared in "Angelina Jolie Returns to Late Night Without Shoes After Ten Years Absent to Discuss Maria, The Outsiders," which lasted 10 minutes and 11 seconds and was uploaded on December 6, 2024

https://youtu.be/BW5C66yD_8I?si=5UrVNaiIcmQUnv0V.The second episode features Justin Timberlake, which is 9 minutes and 3 seconds long and was uploaded on September 17, 2024 https://youtu.be/rsOmvFt2L18?si=AiZ3x7lOx5fTcsTg These two episodes were selected because of the difference in the social relationship between the host and the guest Angelina Jolie with a formal show and Justin Timberlake with an informal show.

Non-participatory observation was used to collect data. The researcher watched the episodes without direct involvement and then manually transcribed all statements made by Jimmy Fallon. The transcription included verbal expressions, discourse markers (such as "uh" and "you know"), and paralinguistic elements such as laughter and tone of voice. Speech Act Theory (Austin & Searle) and Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson) are the two main theories used to analyze the data. Communicative functions (locutionary, illocutionary, perlocutionary) and politeness strategies (positive, negative, bald on record, and off record) distinguish each utterance. Comparing these two types of social relationships helps us better understand how Jimmy Fallon communicates in relational situations.

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crucial for maintaining a positive atmosphere and enabling smooth interaction (Aporbo et al., 2024) .

Result & Discussion

Here is the presentation of the result analysis from the videos. The complete presentation has listed in the table 1 below.

Table 1. Analysis Result

No	Jimmy Fallon's Utterance	Speech Act type	Illocutionary Purpose	Politeness Strategy	Context
1.	Don't worry about it. This is all be fine. **(1:11)**	Directive (Mild)	Comforting / Reassuring	Positive politeness (Solidary)	Responding to Angelina's nervousness
2.	Did you forget your shoes? **(0:13)**	Directive (Interrogative)	Opening topic playful	Positive politeness (Humor & Softener	Addressing Angelina's being barefoot
3.	You are incredible, as I told you, in 'MARIA'. Congratulations **(3:00)**	Expressive	Praising the guest	Positive politeness (Showing Approval)	Complimenting Angelina for her role
4.	We need more people like that **(3:59)**	Expressive	Admiration of guest's values	Positive politeness (approval)	Responding Angelina's story about being a funeral direction
5.	You don't even ask. I just give you advice. **(2:23)**	Assertive (with irony)	Stating playful complaint	Bald on record (due to intimacy)	Joking with Justin about unsolicited advice
6.	You look like Maria Callas… I mean, you really knocked it out of the park **(7:21)**	Expressive	Strong compliment	Positive politeness	Praising Angelina's performance
7	I'll wear a latex mask. I'll Tom Cruise 'Mission Impossible' when I go to the show **(4:53)**	Commissive	Expressing humorous willingness	Positive politeness (joke & exaggeration	Responding to Justin's pressure with humor
8	Do you get nervous when you see me? **(5:62)**	Directive (question)	Teasing & prompting response	Record (playful insinuation)	Asking Justin about pressure of famous friends watching
9	15 minutes set, yeah. Not happening. You're crazy **(1:25)**	Directive	Refusing joking proposal	Bald on record	Turning down Justin's idea with humor

This study focuses on the types of speech acts, illocutionary intentions, and politeness strategies used in various social contexts in two episodes of The Tonight Show featuring Jimmy Fallon alongside Angelina Jolie and Justin Timberlake. The research utilizes transcripts derived from direct observation. Jimmy Fallon demonstrates in the episode with Angelina Jolie that he tends to use expressive and instructive speech acts to build comfortable relationships and leave a positive impression. For example, Fallon tells Angelina, "Don't worry about it. It'll all be fine." To show solidarity, this utterance involves a directive speech act with a calming illocutionary purpose combined with positive politeness techniques. This helps create a supportive and relaxed atmosphere as it reflects empathy and support.

Additionally, Fallon explicitly offers praise through expressive speech acts, such as in the sentence, "You're amazing, as I told you in 'MARIA.' Congratulations." The illocutionary purpose here is to show appreciation and recognition for Angelina's achievements, while the intended illocutionary effect is to make the guest feel valued. This is reinforced by a positive politeness approach through agreement, which demonstrates sincere appreciation for the guest. Fallon says, "We need more people like that," in response to Angelina's story about her experience as a funeral director. This utterance is an expressive speech act that shows admiration for the narrator's principles and contains a positive politeness strategy in the form of value affirmation. Fallon explicitly expresses his praise with expressive language, as in the sentence, "You're amazing, like I said in 'MARIA.' Congratulations." This is reinforced by a positive politeness approach through agreement, which shows sincere appreciation to the guest. Public praise is a practical way to manage impressions (Radovanović, 2023).

Fallon offers strong praise, "You look like Maria Callas... I mean, you really knocked it out of the park," with the aim of boosting confidence and validating Angelina's appearance. This is a combination of expressive speech acts and positive politeness tactics through enthusiastic praise that enhances the guest's public image. Overall, Fallon maintains a soft, supportive, and empathetic tone in this episode. In contrast, Jimmy Fallon speaks to Justin Timberlake in a more relaxed, humorous, and informal style. This is evident in the use of assertive, commissive, and directive speech

acts. Due to their close relationship, these are often delivered using bald on record or off record strategies.

In contrast, Jimmy Fallon speaks to Justin Timberlake in a more relaxed, humorous, and informal style. This is evident in his use of assertive, commissive, and directive speech acts. Due to their close relationship, these speech acts are often delivered using a straightforward (bald on record) or indirect (off record) strategy. For example, when Fallon says, "You didn't even ask. I'm just giving you advice," the statement contains irony and bluntness characteristic of informal banter. This type of interaction highlights the balance between coercion and intimacy, reflecting the social dynamics of friendship (Racionero-Plaza et al., 2021). "I'm going to wear a latex mask," Fallon joked. One of the commission's actions that uses hyperbole as a comedic tool is, "I'm going to do a Tom Cruise-style 'Mission Impossible' when I go to the event." Humor in entertainment discourse often helps people become more familiar with each other and reduces the power distance between the host and the audience, according to (Dalyan et al., 2022). Humor as a method of direct conversation is very useful for building relationships and conveying entertainment (Chelly et al., 2022).

Throughout both episodes, Fallon demonstrated an ability to balance entertainment goals with pragmatic sensitivity. His language was tailored to the social status, character, and level of familiarity of each guest. In short, Fallon engages guests and viewers while maintaining smooth and entertaining interactions by using directive, expressive, commissive, and assertive speech acts alongside politeness strategies. According to discourse analysis, language choices in institutional media contexts are influenced by social goals, aligning with Fallon's awareness of context and interpersonal distance. These results are in line with Searle's (1979) classification of expressive speech acts, which are used to indicate the speaker's psychological state regarding a particular situation. The positive politeness used here reflects the approach used by Brown and Levinson (1987) to pay attention to the listener's wishes; these wishes are often used to create familiarity and maintain social harmony.

Conclusion

This study shows that Jimmy Fallon uses language strategically in talk shows to communicate and maintain social harmony. It shows that the dominant speech acts are directive and expressive in two episodes featuring Angelina Jolie and Justin

Timberlake. Fallon creates a calm and friendly atmosphere by using praise, jokes, and careful topic shifts. This strategy enhances audience engagement and guest comfort while improving the flow of conversation. Fallon consistently employs positive politeness strategies such as empathy, validation, and pleasant humor. He uses careful praise and emotional support to create a sense of safety in his more formal relationship with Angelina Jolie, while in his more informal relationship with Justin Timberlake, he freely uses direct humor and off-the-record tactics to demonstrate closeness. The results support the theory that the use of speech acts and politeness strategies depends on social relationships, communication intentions, and interaction situations. Fallon effectively adapts his speaking style, demonstrating that speaking in the entertainment media requires high pragmatic sensitivity.

This research is expected to enhance our understanding of language use in public contexts, particularly in entertainment media. Additionally, the findings of this study will provide practical insights into politeness and communication strategies that are important for building a professional image and maintaining relationships with others in public spaces. This study not only contributes to pragmatic theory and discourse analysis, but also highlights the importance of considering interpersonal aspects in public communication. Jimmy Fallon, a well-known public figure, demonstrates that effective communication depends not only on speaking ability or entertainment skills, but also on recognizing the emotional needs of the listener. This is evident when he responds to Angelina Jolie's nervousness with empathy and attention, and when he jokes with Justin Timberlake in a relaxed manner without compromising their rapport or politeness.

This research has a significant impact, particularly in the fields of language teaching and interpersonal communication. Students, teachers, and communication practitioners can learn valuable lessons from how Fallon adapts his communication strategies to social contexts and interpersonal relationships. This demonstrates how speech acts and politeness techniques can help avoid conflicts and create a productive and harmonious communication environment (Saputra et al., 2021). This research also emphasizes that language analysis must incorporate cultural elements, social relationships, and situational contexts. Depending on who is involved and their relationship, the same actions, such as giving advice or joking, can be received very differently. This proves that language cannot be separated from its social environment.

Therefore, studies like this can enhance cross-cultural pragmatic studies (Eljazouli & Azmi, 2024).

Methodologically, this research also demonstrates that discourse analysis based on politeness theory and speech acts can be used to explore the meaning of communication in popular entertainment. This approach may have received less attention in academic studies to date. This research emphasizes that popular media are valid and valuable sources of data for linguistic studies, particularly those related to the social functions of language, by utilizing real-world data from media interactions. Finally, the findings of this study open the door for further research (Sun et al., 2021). Future researchers can expand the data by studying more episodes or comparing the communication styles of hosts from various cultures. Such research will enhance our understanding of the diverse ways communication is used worldwide and raise awareness of the importance of politeness and balance in every public interaction.

Author's Biography

Nadia began her journey of learning English after graduating from high school. Although she has never taken formal English courses, she has developed her skills independently through college studies and personal exploration. She is currently a fourth semester student in the English Education Department at UNISKA Kediri. Her primary interest lies in English writing, where she continues to explore both the academic and creative aspects of the language. Through university studies and self-directed practice, she strives to deepen her understanding of English language education and further develop her writing skills.

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