

‘Great work folks!’: establishing interpersonal communication through politeness strategies in transparent peer reviews of research articles

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine how referees establish interpersonal relationships by mitigating criticism and expressing compliments as a realization of politeness strategies through the analysis of a specific corpus of transparent peer review reports (TPRs) with 220 reports totaling approximately 200,000 words. For the analysis, employing a framework drawn primarily on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness strategies and following a detailed review of the literature, we coded all occurrences of politeness strategies using UAM Corpus Tool 3.3x (O’Donnell, 2021). Conducting intercoder/intracoder reliability tests, we identified and interpreted a variety of politeness strategies at the sentence and discourse levels, which were used for mitigating criticism and expressing compliments. Our results suggest that reviewers resorted to a variety of politeness strategies, predominantly negative politeness strategies, to mitigate their criticism directed at the authors of manuscripts. This is significant especially in the light of earlier studies in which reviewer reports appeared to include some blunt/hurtful comments due partly to the anonymity of the reviewing process. Rather than focusing on just communicating criticism or a required change, reviewers were found to have cared about politeness and seemed to achieve interpersonal communication goals in TPRs by means of favoring an egalitarian approach rather than an authoritative one, supporting Gosden’s (2003) argument on the interpersonal aspect of reviewing discourse. This research contributes to our understanding of how criticism in TPRs can be conveyed without imposing, leading to encouraging, constructive and polite reports in English as part of science communication, especially when the review reports are publicly available.

Keywords: transparent peer review, interpersonal communication, open science movement, digital genres, politeness strategies

Resumen

“¡Buen trabajo, gente!”: la comunicación interpersonal a través de estrategias de cortesía en revisiones por pares transparentes de los artículos de investigación

En este artículo examinamos cómo los revisores establecen relaciones interpersonales al mitigar las críticas y expresar cumplidos como una realización de estrategias de cortesía mediante el análisis de un corpus específico de informes de revisión por pares transparentes (TPR por sus siglas en inglés) con 220 informes de aproximadamente 200.000 palabras. Para el análisis, y utilizando un marco basado principalmente en las estrategias de cortesía de Brown y Levinson (1987) y tras una revisión detallada de la literatura, codificamos todos los casos de estrategias de cortesía usando UAM Corpus Tool 3.3x (O'Donnell, 2021). Tras realizar pruebas de fiabilidad entre codificadores/intracodificadores, identificamos e interpretamos una variedad de estrategias de cortesía a nivel de oración y de discurso que se utilizaron para mitigar las críticas y expresar cumplidos. Nuestros resultados sugieren que los revisores recurrieron a una variedad de estrategias de cortesía negativa para mitigar sus críticas dirigidas a los autores de manuscritos. Esto es significativo especialmente a la luz de estudios anteriores en los que los informes de los revisores parecían incluir algunos comentarios directos/hirientes debido, en parte, al anonimato del proceso de revisión. En vez de centrarse sólo en la comunicación de críticas o en cambios requeridos, descubrimos que los revisores se preocupaban por la cortesía y parecían alcanzar objetivos de comunicación interpersonal en las TPRs al favorecer un enfoque igualitario en lugar de autoritario, apoyando el argumento de Gosden (2003) sobre el aspecto interpersonal del discurso de los revisores. Esta investigación contribuye a entender cómo se puede transmitir la crítica en TPRs sin imponer, lo que conduce a informes alentadores, constructivos y respetuosos en inglés como parte de la comunicación científica, especialmente cuando los informes de revisión están disponibles al público.

Palabras clave: revisión por pares transparente, comunicación interpersonal, movimiento de ciencia abierta, géneros digitales, estrategias de cortesía

1. Introduction

Being part of “a negotiation process between reviewers and author(s) with the editor of the journal” (Räsänen, 1999, p. 124), reviewer reports are expected to shed light on how suitable a manuscript is for publication. Peer review, a common practice in the academic publication process, is considered to have a range of communicative functions (such as gatekeeping, and

didactic ones) on the way to increasing the quality of manuscripts submitted to journals. Following the digitalization of science practices embraced by researchers, journals, and publishers at different levels, some prestigious journals have implemented ‘transparent’ peer review as a recent initiative. This practice remarkably contributes to the whole reviewing process being digitally and openly accessible for diverse audiences in order to bolster the quality and transparency of the whole process. As a core component of scholarly research, peer review is the gatekeeper of scientific advancement. It ensures the quality of a manuscript and helps readers to keep abreast of significant and trusted work. In terms of interpersonal communication, reviewer reports act like an element of dialogue, negotiation and consensus between reviewers and authors (Hewings, 2004). As a dynamic communication process, peer review comprises several rounds of reviewer comments and author rebuttals regarding the quality of manuscripts until they satisfy the parties involved, that is reviewers, editors, and authors.

Traditionally, peer review has been hidden from readers of the published manuscript. We know that reviewers engage in a thorough review of an article and criticize ideas, methods, and purposes (Council of Science Editors, 2022). They point out weaknesses and offer feedback for improvement, thus contributing to the publication of significant work. However, because it takes place behind closed curtains in most journals, peer review has remained poorly understood in some dimensions. How reviewers and authors establish interpersonal communication, and the language, style, and tone of comments in reviewer reports has not been clearly known except for some previous studies (for example, Kourilova, 1998; Fortanet, 2008; Silbiger & Stubler, 2019; Hyland & Jiang, 2020). These studies demonstrate that authors occasionally receive discouraging, discriminating and harsh comments which could have a negative impact on their confidence and motivation, such as:

- (1) I felt like I was reading a horror movie. (example in Hyland & Jiang, 2020)
- (2) The first author is a woman. She should be in the kitchen, not writing papers. (example in Silbiger & Stubler, 2019)

A diligent reviewer is expected to provide a report that offers critical and informative feedback to the authors while maintaining a supportive and polite tone, thus achieving interpersonal social goals (Johnson, 1992). To effectively construct such a report, which encompasses substantive goals and

content, reviewers need to employ specific rhetorical and communicative strategies. Among these strategies, the use of politeness strategies becomes essential as they serve to mitigate the impact of criticism on the content and quality of the manuscript.

Akbaş and Farnia (2021) argued that moving from ‘analogue’ discourses (Kuteeva & Mauranen, 2018, p. 2) to digitally enhanced academic discourses thanks to affordances provided by internet technologies seems to bring new constellations of genres in online spaces, which fuels the open science and digital and internal science communication movement. In line with this, transparent peer review (TPR) has been a recent component of the open science movement which is intended to provide unhindered access to quality research and make products of scientific inquiry, such as datasets and software, publicly available. The adoption of TPR seems to be growing, which showcases the strength of peer review and improves the thoughtfulness of reports. Traditionally, the huge effort that goes into the process of peer review remains invisible. The growing practice of TPR demonstrates how much a study improves through the peer review process. This transparency allows readers and researchers to witness the iterative nature of the review process and the valuable contributions made by reviewers. Through TPR, the improvements made to a study based on reviewer feedback become evident, showcasing the strength of the peer review system in refining and enhancing scholarly work. Considering the conceptualization of Herring et al. (2004) of digital communication, we argue that TPR reports, when made available as supplementary material published alongside research articles, contribute to the emergence of a distinct part-genre closely linked to the genre chain of research articles, similar to some others such as *Highlights Section* characterized as “emerging part-genre bound to research articles available in an online space” (Akbaş & Farnia, 2021, p. 88). These TPR reports could potentially enhance open science practices and improve public epistemology, presenting an innovative approach for effective science communication. This could also be regarded as an attempt to create an innovative approach for the sake of effective science communication. Regardless of all the changes and attempts to improve the peer review system, the bottom line is that communication, relationships, and respect are at the core of academic publishing. With this in mind, in this paper, we examine the interpersonal communication established by reviewers and editors who play a crucial role in ensuring the quality of research and academic writing in manuscripts, as their

communication practices are integral to maintaining high-quality standards (Chong & Lin, 2023).

2. Interpersonality, Politeness and peer review

Referring to the interactive and relational aspects of communication, interpersonalness focuses on the dynamics between individuals and the construction of social connections (Sancho Guinda et al., 2014). It encompasses various elements such as rapport building, empathy, and maintaining social harmony. Within academic communication, interpersonalness seems to be significant in establishing effective relationships between writers-readers and speakers-listeners as interlocutors (Mazzi, 2014). Politeness, as a specific aspect of interpersonalness, is closely linked to the expression of respect, consideration, and social norms in communication. It is referred to as a “system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange” (Lakoff, 1973, p. 34). In the context of academic communication, politeness could potentially serve as a mechanism for managing the potential face-threatening acts that may arise during the exchange of ideas and evaluation of scholarly work. It involves employing strategies to soften criticisms, show appreciation, and maintain a positive social atmosphere while engaging in critical discourse. We believe that the relationship between politeness and interpersonalness in academic communication is essential for fostering constructive interactions, especially in the peer review genre. Politeness enables reviewers/authors to convey their ideas and arguments effectively while minimizing the potential negative impact on others’ faces. It substantially helps create an interaction in which diverse perspectives can be shared and debated without undermining the interpersonal relations necessary for scholarly discourse.

Mainly influenced by the notion of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) and the cooperative principles (Grice, 1975), several politeness theories have been developed by linguists. Lakoff (1973) was one of these linguists who attempted to explain politeness and integrate it with the conversational maxims suggested by Grice (1975). She proposed two basic rules in her politeness theory: (1) be clear and (2) be polite. She underlined the pivotal role of pragmatic competence by suggesting that grammar should exceed its traditional function to include pragmatic aspects. This was

extended by the Politeness Theory put forward by Brown and Levinson (1987). Regarded as the most prominent and extensively used theory of politeness, it provides a detailed classification of politeness strategies and the communicative preferences of individuals in the strategic use of language (Nobarany & Booth, 2015). The theory extends the meaning of *face* by making a distinction between *positive* and *negative* face.

Politeness and face are two close-knit terms in pragmatics (Redmond, 2015). Face is defined as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (Goffman, 1967, p. 213). Brown and Levinson (1987) described face as the public self-image which can be lost or maintained in social interaction and should be preserved to maintain harmony between people. Positive face denotes being appreciated. Negative face is the desire to be free of imposition and not to be blocked as it is considered as someone walking into your own private territory (Redmond, 2015). Acts such as complaints, insults, criticism, disagreement, suggestions, and directions can be given as examples of face-threatening acts. It is essential to use politeness strategies to mitigate these acts and maintain face (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Building on the understanding of politeness and face introduced earlier, we now turn our attention to how these concepts come into play within the context of peer review. As argued by Katsampoxaki-Hodgetts (pre-print), the inherently critical and evaluative nature of peer review brings forth a power imbalance between the parties involved. However, we argue that the mode of transparent peer review, in contrast to traditional ‘hidden’ reviewer reports, could offer a more egalitarian and less face-threatening environment for the reviewers acting as gatekeepers and the authors as the ones-to-satisfy-the-reviewers. The open nature of the process might enhance the communication and application of politeness strategies to a greater extent, facilitating constructive and respectful interactions between participants.

3. Previous work on peer review: Examining politeness and interpersonal relations

Reviewer reports are now far from being a totally “occluded genre” (Swales, 1996, p. 46) as there is a movement stemming from open science practices to publish them alongside the final version of the article to enhance transparency in the process and give readers and researchers first-hand

insight into the interaction between authors and reviewers. Previous studies have offered a glimpse into what we can find in ‘non-transparent’ reviewer reports due to their occluded status. Reviewers play a crucial role in assessing the overall merit and contribution of a study to the field, conducting evaluations that encompass various dimensions, including the analysis, findings, and discussion of the research. While the primary focus of reviews tends to be on the substantive content and arguments presented in the manuscripts (Mungra & Webber, 2010), it is noteworthy that negative feedback regarding writing style and linguistic accuracy is frequently observed within this genre (Hewings, 2004). Reviews of course contain a considerable amount of ‘criticism’, which may comprise nearly half of reviewer comments (Fortanet, 2008) in the non-transparent reviewer reports. Compared with other forms of academic genre, criticism in reviewer reports is blunt, less hedged, and more authoritative probably because peer review occurs in a less public domain and reviewers are anonymous (Kourilova, 1998).

Gosden’s (2003) study expanded upon the work of Kourilova (1998) by conducting an analysis of evaluative language in reviewer comments, primarily drawing upon Halliday’s (1985) metafunctional categories. The reviewer comments were categorized under specific headings such as ‘technical detail’, ‘claims’, ‘discussion’, ‘references’, and ‘format’. Gosden (2003) then further interpreted these categories within Halliday’s metafunctional framework, which encompasses the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions of language. The findings revealed that the majority of comments in the reviewers’ reports were related to technical detail (27%) and discussion (34%). In terms of the metafunctional categories, a significant number of comments were oriented towards the interpersonal function of language. Mungra and Webber (2010) conducted a comprehensive analysis of reviewers’ feedback on a limited sample of manuscripts submitted by Italian medical researchers to international journals. The primary objective was to identify the most prevalent comments and criticisms offered by peer reviewers. The analysis revealed that a majority of the comments tended to be critical in nature, although a noteworthy proportion of the feedback expressed positive evaluations of the manuscripts. The findings indicate that comments pertaining to scientific and methodological aspects of the research slightly outweighed those concerning language usage, including lexical and grammatical errors, clarity, and verbosity. In a similar vein, employing a comparable methodological approach, Tharirian and Sadri

(2013) examined reviewers' remarks on manuscripts submitted by Iranian researchers. Their analysis also indicated a greater frequency of reviewer comments in the reports related to content as opposed to those focusing on language use. Silbiger and Stubler (2019) investigated the content and frequency of unprofessional reviewer comments directed at authors rather than at the quality of the study. They found that these negative comments are pervasive and have subsequent impacts specially on early career researchers, harming their self-confidence, motivation and productivity. Having analyzed publicly available blunt and demotivating reviewer comments shared by authors on a website, Dynel (2020) and Hyland and Jiang (2020) also observed a large amount of aggressive comments directed at the quality of the study or the competence of the author. Focusing on the traumatic experiences of authors on the way to getting their work published, Hyland and Jiang (2020) suggested that the peer review process, when confined to authors, reviewers, and editors, could encompass fierce criticism, which seems to be rather confrontational and demotivating for the authors, as in "[i]t is clear that the author has read way too much and understood way too little" (Hyland & Jiang, 2020, p. 5). These studies contribute valuable insights into the types of comments provided by reviewers, highlighting the prevalence of critiques concerning the substantive aspects of the manuscripts being reviewed.

Belcher (2007), however, found considerable politeness in reviews through which the reviewers attempted to redress the face-threatening acts. Johnson (1992) studied compliments in peer reviews focusing primarily on how the interpersonal function of language (Halliday, 1985) was realized in reviewer compliments. Hyland (2015) scrutinized peer reviews in applied linguistics and found that reviewer comments were less direct and generally mitigated. Reviewers used good news-bad news, hedging and question-asking strategies to soften the impact of negative evaluation. Paltridge (2015) observed various examples of indirect speech acts, such as suggestions and clarification requests, which can be also interpreted as an attempt at politeness by reviewers. He argued that these suggestions should be interpreted as directives as they are made by someone of higher authority.

As the most comprehensive source on the genre of peer review, Paltridge (2017) incorporated three aspects of peer reviews (i.e., pragmatic, linguistic, and pedagogical) and analyzed discourse features, politeness strategies, evaluative language, and rhetorical patterns in reviewer reports. He suggested that the use of indirect speech acts and other strategies, such as apologizing

or impersonalizing issues, could be employed by reviewers to save the face of authors being criticized. Paltridge (2017) also emphasized that reviewers are advised to provide a critique that is “positive, balanced, and critical yet objective” (p. 99), avoiding personally offensive comments since constructive criticism in this genre is seen as crucial, regardless of the manuscript’s acceptance for publication. In other words, as Paltridge (2017) argued, reviewers generally seek to create a positive sympathetic relationship with authors by resorting to various politeness strategies to save authors’ faces and soften the blow of criticism with regards to the quality of the manuscript. For instance, instead of expressing criticism directly as in “Delete this section of the text”, the reviewer could prefer a positive politeness strategy such as “I hope the author will agree to delete this section of the text” or a negative one as in “Could the author delete this section of the text?” (Paltridge, 2017, p. 97).

Yakhontova’s (2019) study contributes to our understanding of anonymous peer review by examining the genre features and language used in reviewer reports and analyzing their communicative function. In her research, Yakhontova compared two distinct research fields, namely applied linguistics and applied mathematics, to explore potential differences in the language employed in reviewer reports. One significant finding of Yakhontova’s (2019) study is the prevalence of commands in reviewer reports within the field of applied mathematics. This suggests that reviewers in this discipline are more inclined to use imperative language to convey their suggestions or recommendations to authors. The identification of this linguistic pattern provides valuable insights into the specific communication strategies employed in different research domains during the peer review process.

The existing body of literature contains a considerable amount of research on politeness strategies employed across various academic genres and perspectives. However, due to the closed nature of the peer review process, there has been limited exploration on a broader scale regarding reviewer reports, with Paltridge’s (2017) study being one notable exception. While Paltridge (2017) offered valuable insights by exploring reviewer reports from multiple perspectives, it is worth noting that his analysis of politeness strategies was not exhaustive and did not encompass the specific context of transparency in peer reviews. Additionally, Nobarany and Booth (2015) conducted a comprehensive investigation into politeness strategies and found that nearly 85% of criticisms provided by reviewers were mitigated by a politeness strategy in open, signed reviewing. However, to the best of our

knowledge, their study primarily focused on quantitative results, lacking an in-depth linguistic analysis of the reviewer comments in the reports. Consequently, there remains a gap in the literature concerning a detailed examination of politeness strategies within transparent reviewer reports from a linguistic perspective.

The incorporation of peer review reports alongside published articles in some journals, which enhances transparency in the peer review process, provides researchers with easier access to reviewer reports and offers an opportunity to analyze the communication dynamics between reviewers and authors. By adopting a linguistic perspective and capitalizing on the increased availability of reviewer reports, our research seeks to shed light on the communicative practices and effectiveness of politeness strategies in transparent peer review contexts. In line with this, the current study was designed to extend the existing research on the language of peer review and further our understanding of the interaction between reviewers and authors. Our research sought to examine the potential effects of transparency in reviewer reports, specifically when they are made publicly available alongside the corresponding articles. Our primary objective was to investigate whether this increased transparency would result in a notable impact on the language used by reviewers, particularly in terms of expressing criticism in a manner that is both polite and non-imposing. To achieve this aim, we explored the politeness strategies employed by reviewers in Transparent Peer Review (TPR) contexts to facilitate effective interpersonal communication.

4. Research Methods

We investigated how reviewers used politeness strategies to achieve a particular level of politeness and maintain interpersonal communication in the TPR process. We adopted a corpus-based approach for this as it allows us to analyze the language in actual use. We relied on the Politeness Theory of Brown and Levinson (1987) while analyzing our data. We also benefited from the Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962) to interpret reviewer comments, especially those in which indirect speech acts were performed, which guided us in exploring ties between the elements involved in communication in reviewer reports and we could emphasize the interactional aspect of reviewer comments. Our analysis of politeness in peer review extended beyond a reliance solely on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987).

We incorporated recent studies (i.e., Martínez, 2001; Liu & Zhao, 2007; Warchał, 2010; Kim, 2014; von Fintel & Gillies, 2015) that complemented and enriched our understanding of politeness and helped us decide our framework, as depicted in Figure 1. Bald on-record strategy indicates no effort to mitigate the criticism as being bald and blaming with no redressive action. Such comments can make the recipient feel uneasy. Positive politeness strategies, oriented towards the mitigation of the threat to the positive face, are employed in order to fulfill the addressee's desire for respect. Negative politeness strategies aim to soften the impact of the threat to the negative face, which desires to be free of impositions. The final category strategy, off-record, is avoiding face-threatening acts, which is rarely observed in genres such as peer review. The use of indirect speech acts, ambiguous statements and metaphors is prevalent in this strategy. Brown and Levinson's (1987) taxonomy of politeness strategies enabled us to identify various ways in which reviewers mitigated criticism for the sake of politeness.

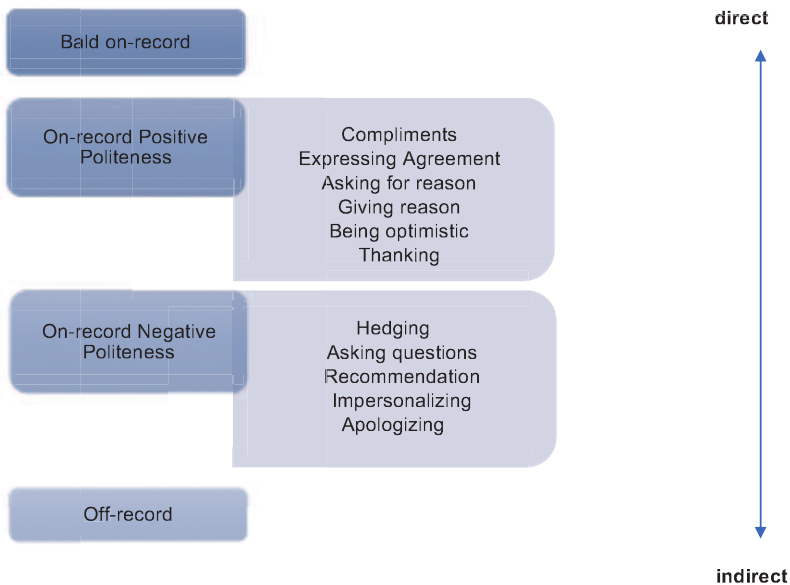


Figure 1. The framework of politeness strategies employed in the study

Given the evaluative aspect of reviewer reports, critical comments made in them should be interpreted in ways other than the literal meaning which they

would suggest (Paltridge, 2017). It is therefore necessary to interpret comments considering the linguistic and non-linguistic context and blending this with background knowledge. These comments not only convey criticism but also make a request for the improvement of the paper (Fortanet, 2008). In the following example taken from our corpus, the reviewer is not just asking a question, but is also recommending that author(s) include the mentioned information:

(3) Would including this information not improve the parameter estimations?

4.1. Data Collection

The corpus for the present study comprised a set of 220 reviewer files written for 100 papers in the field of Physical Sciences which were submitted to the high-impact journal *Nature Communications*. This journal publishes review reports alongside the papers published, with the authors' approval. We built our corpus from transparent reviewer reports for each manuscript from <https://www.nature.com/ncomms/> and converted reports which were in either PDF or Word format into txt files using AntFileConverter 3.3 (Anthony, 2022), that is, we normalized texts for the analysis. Each reviewer report file includes a maximum of three reviewer reports written by three different reviewers. Each reviewer report included several rounds, to a maximum of four. The size of the corpus is 185,088 words. Most reviewers recommended minor or major revisions. Although there were few instances of rejection by a small number of reviewers for particular papers, all of these manuscripts were published in the journal based on editorial decisions. The identity of the reviewers was not disclosed in the reviewer reports; in line with this, when we refer to the transparency of reports, we specifically focus on the transparency of reviewer reports themselves, rather than the disclosure of reviewers' identities. Since we focused on how reviewers establish interpersonal communication, we excluded author responses from the reports in this study, but we did classify author rebuttals and add them into our larger corpus which could potentially be used for future research.

4.2. Data Analysis

We analyzed politeness strategies in the reviewer reports drawing primarily on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. As no specific unit of analysis was suggested by Brown and Levinson, we decided that critical

comments conveyed in the form of a sentence best fitted the purpose of the research. Therefore, we took the sentence as the unit of analysis, and coded all the occurrences of politeness strategies using the adapted version of the politeness strategies framework (see Figure 1). In the process of identifying politeness strategies, we analyzed instances of lexical items related to the category of politeness strategy. To illustrate, for hedging, we analyzed epistemic words such as *modals* ‘could’, ‘may’, ‘might’, *verbs* ‘to think’ ‘to believe’ ‘to seem’, or *hedging devices* that convey fuzzy meaning like ‘somehow’, ‘perhaps’, ‘rather’:

- (4) It **seems to me** that the schemes shown in Fig. S6 for solution and crystal are rather similar.
- (5) The understanding of the growth mechanism **can** be wrong.
- (6) **Somehow** these statements **seem** to contradict each other.

In analyzing the lexical items, it was necessary to take into consideration the contexts in which they were used and their multiple functions. One of the typical examples of this is modal verbs. The sentence in example 7 was not tagged immediately as hedging since its main purpose is to suggest the required change, thus it was labeled as recommendation:

- (7) It **might** be helpful if the authors could provide the optimization process of the top electrode.

We carried out the analyses using the text annotation software UAM Corpus Tool 3.3x (O’Donnell, 2021) because it enabled us to tag each sentence in the corpus at different layers for a comprehensive analysis. Instead of completing the analysis of the whole data at one time, we first carried out a pilot study to evaluate the effectiveness of the chosen research methods. For this purpose, we tagged the sentences in 100 randomly selected reports. This helped us to acquire preliminary results and guided us in making necessary amendments to the coding frame for the main analyses.

Prior to the analysis of the whole data, we also conducted an *intercoder reliability test* to validate the coding process and provide sound interpretation of the data. Lombard et al. (2002) pointed out that intercoder reliability is crucial in qualitative research for achieving validity and reliability. A codebook which described politeness strategies and exemplified the coding process was designed to inform the second coder. We contacted the second

coder who had previous experience with corpus studies and the genre of peer review as a researcher. To determine the alignment between the coders, Cohen's kappa statistic was used. Intercoder reliability was calculated as 0.72 (86.2%) and it fell into the range 0.61–0.80, which illustrates substantial agreement between coders in line with the guidelines suggested by Landis and Koch (1977). After completing these crucial steps, we examined each report and tagged our corpus sentence by sentence in line with the above-mentioned framework. The tagging process yielded a total of 6,104 instances of interpersonal communication established by the reviewers in the reviewing process.

5. Results and Discussion

Following the tagging process and data analyses, we identified frequent use of politeness strategies in the corpus indicating an establishment of interpersonal communication with the author(s). The quantitative results showed that reviewers mitigated almost all criticism by employing at least one politeness strategy. The relative frequencies and the distribution of politeness strategies in the reviewer reports are presented in Table 1.

	Raw Frequency	Relative Frequency (percentage)	Distribution
Positive politeness	1047	0.17	212
Negative politeness	4997	0.81	190
On-record	60	0.009	44
TOTAL	6104		220

Table 1. Frequency and distribution of politeness strategies

Negative politeness strategies were the most frequently used strategy at 81.88%. This finding suggests that reviewers, as interlocutors, employed politeness strategies to index their stance within their discourse, utilizing their social identities and social actions (Çiftçi & Akbaş, 2021, p. 486). These strategies were employed for negotiation and stance-taking purposes, allowing reviewers to establish effective interpersonal communication with the authors. Reviewers also used positive politeness strategies in 17.18% of the criticisms. On-record bald criticism was observed in a small number of comments, 0.98%.

5.1. Negative politeness

The negative politeness strategy, being the most prevalent means of softening criticism (81.88% of all politeness strategies), indicates that reviewers aimed to avoid imposing on the authors. Table 2 presents the frequency data for the four primary negative politeness strategies employed by reviewers. Instead of merely expressing criticism, reviewers appeared to acknowledge the researchers' efforts and conveyed their critique using negative politeness strategies ranging from recommendation to asking questions. This approach enabled them to uphold the essential interpersonal relationships expected within the peer review genre. The identification of these findings can be attributed to the pragmatic competence exhibited by the reviewers.

	Raw Frequency	Relative Frequency (percentage)	Distribution
Recommendation	1983	0.32	167
Hedging	1229	0.20	178
Impersonalizing	1032	0.16	139
Asking questions	753	0.12	121

Table 2. Negative politeness strategies: frequency and distribution

Recommendation, which is directly connected to the interpersonal characteristics of peer review, was the most extensively used strategy in the reports as shown in Table 2. Reviewers generally avoided direct reference to the authors by making recommendations in an indirect way, as in examples 8 to 11. Reviewers' use of indirect strategies for making recommendations can be viewed as an essential aspect of fostering interaction with the author(s) within the peer review process. Such indirect strategies could contribute to the relational dynamics inherent in academic settings (Çiftçi & Vásquez, 2020) and support social practices pertaining to the established norms, conventions, and communicative behaviors that characterize scholarly discourse.

- (8) Some more discussion **should be included** about what would cause Vinalia Faculae.
- (9) **It would be interesting to see** how excess air amounts are related to WTD changes, as seen in Fig. 4.
- (10) **I would urge the authors** to tone down some of these statements and use phrasing such as “have been interpreted to have formed by X” etc.

- (11) I **suggest** to give the reader a bit more information already at the end of the introduction, e.g., by adding a statement such as “presumably due to a northward shift of storm tracks” or so.

Providing authors with constructive comments, in particular recommendations about their research and writing, opens up a dialogue for the sake of improving the quality of the work. To illustrate, example 11 above performs an action in the form of “eliciting additional information” (Mason & Chong, 2022, p. 670), which will definitely engage the author(s) when revising the manuscript. Other than such cases of asking authors indirectly to do something, when asking for very specific changes, especially mechanical ones, such as page numbers, spelling or missing references, reviewers used *imperatives* instead of writing longer or more polite expressions such as “Could you please add page numbers or line numbers to the ms?” which would be pragmatically inappropriate (Fortanet, 2008). In such comments, politeness and face threats did not become more of an issue for the reviewers and thereby they did not mitigate criticism for these minor issues:

- (12) **See** the review article cited in a previous comment.
 (13) **Add** page numbers or line numbers to the ms.

The communication here is task-focused (Fortanet, 2008) and reviewers could see no need for politeness as shown in examples 12 and 13. In the given context, reviewers may perceive that the task-oriented nature of the communication allows for more direct and straightforward language without compromising politeness since the main objective of the interaction is to address the specific tasks related to the reviewing process rather than establishing extensive rapport or employing elaborate politeness strategies.

However, it is essential to note that the lack of overt politeness does not imply rudeness or impoliteness. Reviewers could understand the professional expectations of the peer review process, where recommendations and suggestions are understood as necessary for improving the manuscript and ensuring its suitability for publication. Authors, in turn, are expected to interpret these recommendations as constructive guidance for enhancing their work, with their primary objective being the successful publication of their research. In other words, although recommendation, as a directive act, is potentially face-threatening (Brown & Levinson, 1987), authors are expected to interpret these recommendations as directions and make any

necessary changes (Paltridge, 2015). Authors therefore seem disposed to accept the suggestions by reviewers because their primary concern is the publication of their work (Chong, 2021). This compliance (Gosden, 2001) can also be interpreted as a willingness to engage in dialogue to help the construction of scientific knowledge (Mungra & Webber, 2010). Quite different from communication in everyday life, in the world of peer review, non-compliance with the recommended changes is not considered normal. Therefore, authors are expected to provide a written response which explains why they have not addressed the issues raised by the reviewers (Paltridge, 2015).

Recognizing the possibility of non-compliance with recommended changes, reviewers occasionally allowed authors in our corpus some flexibility to diverge from the suggestions. For example, in comments 14 and 15, this approach potentially fosters a welcoming environment of freedom and openness, differing from a rigid ‘you should have done it another way’ type of review (Gonzalez et al., 2022, p. 1):

- (14) I only have a few small points which the **authors might consider**.
- (15) I **suggest** to show the current H0 posteriors only with short GRB kilonovae. (**This is just a suggestion** that may be somewhat biased towards my opinion. **So please ignore this suggestion if the authors do not want to add**).

Revealing the reason behind a recommendation, that is, providing justification for a necessary change in a manuscript (example 16), makes it easier for authors to understand the recommendation and comply with the required change (Hagge & Kostelnick, 1989). The reviewers realized this persuasive function of language by giving a personal reference, referring to the target language or just expressing the reason:

- (16) **I would be more easily convinced** by an estimation of the probability of observing a transient liquid feature.
- (17) Bottom p. 6, I suggest adding ‘which are the Hall current peaks’ after ‘respectively’ **to explicitly tell the reader** the physical significance of the yellow bars.
- (18) LINE 148: **Since** the word correlation implies a relationship backed up by regression analysis results, the word correlation here **should be replaced** with relationship.

Reviewers employed many hedging techniques such as personal attribution hedges and epistemic words. These comments comprised approximately 20% of the critical comments, which broadly supports the findings of previous studies (see Hyland, 1998; Boncea, 2014). Being tentative about criticism, as can be seen in examples 19-21, softens its negative impact and contributes to the establishment of interpersonal communication by conveying politeness.

- (19) The biggest difficulty with the manuscript **appears** to be the complexity and novelty of the method.
- (20) I'm sorry, **I'm not sure** if this figure still needs improving more or not.
- (21) When discussing the effect of oxygen depletion (which **I consider to be quite likely**), **I find it somewhat** unclear to speak of a 0.5 or 5% difference in the sum of O₂ + CO₂.

Through hedging, reviewers not only take responsibility for their comments but also acknowledge that they might be mistaken, or that authors might have an alternative perspective (Zou & Hyland, 2020). Knowledge is the source of power and through hedging, reviewers reduce the breadth of their knowledge and thereby present a less powerful and authoritative picture (Johnson, 1992). Comments such as 20 and 21 can be attributed to the interactional aspect of self-deprecating hedging (Kim, 2014). Reviewers lower themselves to the level of authors by expressing doubt about their understanding. The frequent use of hedging devices demonstrates that reviewers try to develop a rapport with authors and thereby achieve interpersonal goals in the genre.

Using impersonal structures was another politeness strategy employed by the reviewers. To avoid direct reference to the author of the manuscript, reviewers impersonalize statements by using the following sub-strategies; *passive constructions, nominalization, non-human actors, indefinite pronouns*, such as *one* or *impersonal it* in their reports. They mitigate the force of the criticism and save the author's face through diverting the criticism from the author to a general agent. In this way, they create distance between the criticism and authors, thereby reducing the threat to face (Martínez, 2001). We posit that the minimal interpersonal function observed in comments lacking explicit agents can be attributed to the absence of agentive markers. These comments often employ impersonal structures, which contribute to the reduced interpersonal orientation (examples 22 and 23). The utilization of

these impersonal structures might allow for a more detached and objective tone, emphasizing the topic or action rather than the agent responsible. Hence, it can be inferred that the choice of these specific impersonal structures contributes to the diminished interpersonal function observed in the comments.

- (22) This bold **claim** is very hard to digest based on sparse afterglows data that **are not established** definitively as kilonovae.
- (23) **It is not sufficiently clear** how the viewing angles for the short GRB kilonovae **are chosen**.

Employing a strategy to boost the engagement between the parties involved, reviewers posed questions of several types, such as *direct* (example 24), *indirect* (example 25), and *rhetorical* (example 26) questions, in order that they could at least trigger some thought-provoking discussions for the betterment of the manuscripts being reviewed:

- (24) **How** did the authors come up with the estimate of the systematic error bars?
- (25) **I wonder whether** these are the highest resolution versions available.
- (26) Shouldn't it be a limit as is for the density contrast $\rho_{\text{ISM}}/\rho_{\text{jet}} > 11$ because β_{h} is only a limit?

Using indirect questions helps us to sound more polite (Ardissono et al., 1999). It can be traditionally interpreted as a sign of courtesy in communication. Reviewers occasionally employ rhetorical questions to point out established principles and knowledge in the relevant field or an expected outcome, thereby prompting the authors to reflect on the problematic issues in the manuscript. The use of frequent and various forms of interrogatives highlights the interactional aspect of peer review (Yakhontova, 2019).

5.2. Positive politeness

Positive politeness strategies aim to maintain the positive face of the author(s) and convey approval, indicating a shared understanding between the reviewer and the author(s). In our analysis, positive politeness strategies were utilized in approximately 17% of all criticisms. One prominent positive politeness strategy observed in the reviewer reports is complimenting, which involves expressing a positive judgment about the research and

demonstrating the reviewer’s approval of the author(s)’ achievements and research skills (Johnson, 1992). We observed complimenting as the most noticeable positive politeness strategy as Table 3 shows.

	Raw Frequency	Relative Frequency (percentage)	Distribution
Compliments	986	0.16	208
Asking for a reason	26	0.004	25
Thanking	23	0.003	22

Table 3. Positive politeness strategies: frequency and distribution

As being the most salient positive politeness strategy in the reviewer reports, complimenting conveys a positive judgment about the research, namely the reviewer’s approval of the achievements of the author(s) and their research skills (Johnson, 1992). Complimenting could play a significant role in the peer review genre as it can foster social relationships and solidarity between reviewers and authors by conveying a shared perspective. It also serves to prepare authors for subsequent criticism that may appear in the review (Gea Valor, 2000). By recognizing and acknowledging the accomplishments (as in example 27) and research abilities of the author(s), complimenting is likely to contribute to a supportive and constructive review process.

(27) The authors **should** be congratulated for their **excellent** work!

(28) Figure S2. **Beautiful** image!

However, praise in reviewer reports could be a threat to reviewers’ negative face (Itakura, 2013). Praise creates potential impositions on their own ideas in the form of other reviewers’ possible critical comments on that evaluation. To protect their negative face, they may wish to withhold their commitment to their proposed evaluation through hedging devices as in examples 29 and 30:

(29) LINE 149 – 151: **I think** this is a **great** observation. **Interesting!**

(30) This manuscript **may** therefore provide a basic reference for expected future characterization studies of Neptune and Uranus.

It should be noted that a significant proportion of the compliments identified in our data were not expressed strongly as they were modified by words such as ‘likely’ and ‘appear’, which lessen their impact. This cautious approach in conveying compliments can be interpreted as an attempt by reviewers to

highlight that their evaluation is subjective and open to disagreement by other reviewers. By employing hedges, reviewers aim to present a less forceful and authoritative image, thereby protecting their negative face and avoiding potential conflicts or confrontations, as in 29 and 30 above.

Peer reviews serve as a platform for negotiating social interactions within the scholarly community, requiring a delicate balance between compliments and constructive criticism (Gosden, 2001). In our analysis of reviewer reports, we identified a common pattern known as the 'good news-bad news' strategy (Gosden, 2001; Paltridge, 2015; Yakhontova, 2019). This strategy involves reviewers offering compliments to the paper while simultaneously presenting criticisms in the same sentence, often using clauses of contrast. By employing this strategy, reviewers aim to acknowledge positive aspects of the work while highlighting areas in need of improvement. This interactive complexity of peer reviews could reflect the nuanced nature of scholarly discourse and facilitate the advancement of research:

- (31) There are many **fascinating** observations presented in the paper, **but** then there are some key **weaknesses** as presently developed.
- (32) The topic is very **interesting** and the **founding** is attractive. **However**, their materials are **already known ones** and their results do **not provide sufficient scientific insight**.

Another positive politeness strategy, although rarely used, is asking for a reason. Rather than pointing out the weaknesses or any potential issues in a manuscript, reviewers wonder about the reasoning of the authors. This also leads authors to reflect on their claims, which simply contributes to the continuity of communication between the reviewers and authors. It can also be read as an indirect suggestion for a justification as shown in example 33 below with which the reviewer indirectly requested a reason for a claim made in a manuscript:

- (33) **It is not clear to me why** this much effect cannot be distinguished from future seismic observations as claimed in the paper.

A small number of reviewers employed thanking as an opening strategy in the second or third round of the reviewing process, as exemplified in 34 and 35. They expressed their gratitude to the authors for implementing the suggested changes and improving the paper, which reflects the interpersonal dimension of the communication in TPRs as in the examples below:

- (34) This reviewer **thanks** the authors for their reply and detailed explanation to the requested revision.
- (35) Error calculations are a lot clearer now, **thank you!**

An interesting finding about thanking is that reviewers employed a number of expressions ranging from ‘I appreciate’, ‘I would like to thank’ and ‘congratulations’ to noun phrases accompanying the thanking as reasons for thanking, such as, ‘thorough response’ and ‘beautiful manuscript’. In the peer review genre, authors are expected to care about critical comments and make the necessary changes to improve the quality of the paper, but even so, reviewers feel the need to express their gratitude for authors’ actions despite the power relations between them. With this in mind, we suggest that reviewers considerably appreciate the idea that authors found their advice important and valuable, and thus attempted to address all the issues which were mentioned in the first round, which triggers a ‘thank you’ note in return.

6. Conclusion

Investigating a previously occluded genre in academic discourse, this paper has offered a comprehensive analysis of interpersonal communication established by reviewers through a range of politeness strategies such as hedging and complimenting in TPR. Despite being an indispensable part of publishing and scientific advancement, to date, peer review process has received relatively less exploration because of its occluded status, with confidential comments being conveyed privately to editors and authors. However, as reviewer reports are easily accessible now with the introduction of transparency in review reports by journals like *Nature Communications*, we assumed that exploring the transparent communication between authors and reviewers would offer valuable insight for all the parties involved. In line with the nature of peer review and earlier research on traditional single- or double-blind reviewing (Kourilova, 1998; Fortanet, 2008; Silbiger & Stubler, 2019; Dynel, 2020; Hyland & Jiang, 2020), a high level of criticism can be expected. However, we conjectured that a high level of politeness would dominate reviewer reports, relying on the findings reported by Nobarany and Booth (2015) on open, signed peer review, which can be considered as a transparent approach.

In this paper, we have explored how reviewers mitigated criticism and established interpersonal communication through politeness strategies. We identified a high frequency and wide variety of politeness strategies in transparent reviewer reports, predominantly negative politeness strategies. Reviewers seemed to uphold the golden rule of peer reviewing—“review for others as you would have others review for you” (McPeck et al., 2009, p. E155)—and thereby ensure that authors are not discouraged from moving on, which confirms Gosden’s (2003) argument about the interpersonal role of peer review discourse. Pointing out to authors the weaknesses of their manuscripts in, for example, their research methodology, findings, and language could be the primary concern of reviewers; nevertheless, for the sake of giving constructive feedback, reviewers could be expected to sound critical yet mitigated and polite in order to establish a substantial interpersonal relationship with an author. Dynel (2020, p. 514) argued that reviewers might act with “impunity” as long as they know that they will remain anonymous. Through the findings presented above, we are likely to gain a better understanding of the peer review process and how reviewers convey criticism politely without imposing, probably due to the transparency of the reviewing reports. Over twenty-five years ago, Kourilova (1998) clearly pointed out that the anonymity of reviewers was likely to cause potential unbalanced power relations, which might also be escalated by the unavailability of the content of their reviews of a manuscript for a wider community beyond the editor(s) and the author(s) of that particular manuscript. The findings of this study, however, are promising in that a great number of politeness strategies were found to have been employed by reviewers not just for establishing a healthier communication with authors but also for sounding more encouraging and constructive. Thus, if the peer review process faces relative systemic challenges (Allen et al., 2022), bringing transparency via TPRs as adopted by some publishers could remarkably offer systemic solutions, open up new opportunities for the parties involved and reduce the level of unprofessionalism in reviewers’ comments as postulated in previous research. We hope that the findings of our study will provide educational insights for researchers, especially novice ones who are less familiar with the “institutionalized process” (Gonzalez et al., 2022, p. 1) of peer review. The findings are also of paramount importance for reviewers who may need guidance in writing encouraging, constructive and polite reports in English (Chong, 2021).

Limitations of the present research must be recognized. The reports compiled for the study were submitted to a high-impact journal which meticulously chooses reviewers for peer review. The case might be different if reports submitted to different journals in different fields and languages are investigated. The findings therefore cannot be generalized beyond the parameters set for the study. Further work might explore how reviewers express and mitigate criticism in different journals. This study also explored reviewer reports from the perspective of reviewers; it focused on reviewer comments and how they mitigated criticism. How authors interpreted the comments and responded was not assessed. A corresponding in-depth study is therefore needed on the responses of authors to reviewer comments.

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