

Gendered Politeness in Directive Speech Acts: Social Class Representation in Toer's *Bumi Manusia*

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of politeness strategies in directive speech acts in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Bumi Manusia*, focusing on how gender and social class shape their realization. Grounded in speech act theory and Brown and Levinson's politeness framework, the study analyzes directive utterances produced by male and female characters in the novel. The findings show that both genders predominantly employ mitigated directive forms, particularly negative politeness strategies such as permission-seeking expressions, interrogative structures, and politeness markers. While gender influences the stylistic realization of directives—male characters tending toward indirect, permission-based requests and female characters frequently combining mitigation with relational markers—these differences are not absolute. More importantly, social class and power relations play a decisive role in determining politeness strategy selection. Characters in subordinate positions consistently rely on indirect and deferential strategies, whereas those with higher social or economic authority are pragmatically licensed to issue more direct, though still polite, directives. The study concludes that in *Bumi Manusia*, directive politeness is primarily shaped by class-based hierarchy rather than gender alone, highlighting how colonial social structures are interactionally constructed through everyday speech.

Keywords: directive speech acts; politeness strategies; gender; social class

INTRODUCTION

Directive speech acts, utterances designed to get an interlocutor to do something, are among the most interactionally delicate moves in communication because they intrinsically involve imposition and thus carry a high potential to threaten face. Within speech act theory, directives include orders, requests, suggestions, advice, and prohibitions (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979). Because directives can constrain an addressee's freedom of action, speakers commonly manage them through politeness strategies: linguistic and pragmatic resources that mitigate imposition, display respect, or index solidarity (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech,

2014). In sociopragmatics, such mitigation is not random; it is patterned by social relations, particularly power, distance, and the perceived weight of the imposition, so that directive forms become reliable indicators of how hierarchy is enacted in interaction (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Gender has long been argued to influence politeness, often linked to expectations that women perform relational work and avoid overt imposition more than men (Lakoff, 1975; Holmes, 1995). However, contemporary politeness scholarship cautions against treating gender as a fixed explanatory variable; instead, politeness is increasingly understood as relational and evaluative, shaped by local norms and the moral order of a community (Mills, 2003; Spencer-Oatey, 2008; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2016). This shift is important for analyzing gendered politeness in contexts where class and institutional power strongly structure interaction. Recent empirical work continues to demonstrate that power position significantly predicts directness in requesting and other directive practices, while gender effects, when present, tend to be mediated by institutional hierarchy and other social variables (Hofweber & Jaworska, 2022). Such findings strengthen the argument that a robust analysis of “gendered politeness” must address the intersection of gender with classed power relations. Literary dialogue provides a productive domain for examining these sociopragmatic dynamics because fictional interaction often dramatizes—and pragmatically performs—social hierarchy through everyday speech. Recent work in literary pragmatics and (im)politeness research emphasizes that politeness frameworks can illuminate characterization and ideological positioning by showing how facework, indirectness, and imposition are distributed across characters and social relations (Kizelbach, 2023). From this perspective, directives in fiction are not merely narrative devices; they are interactional mechanisms through which authority is exercised, affiliation is negotiated, and resistance becomes legible at the micro-level of talk.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s *Bumi Manusia* offers a particularly rich setting for investigating directive politeness because the novel stages interactions inside a colonial social order structured by sharp inequalities of race, class, and gender. Characters operate within stratified positions—European colonizers, Indo-European elites, indigenous priyayi, and marginalized native subjects—where speaking rights, commanding rights, and the risk of sanction are unevenly distributed. In such a context, directives are expected to function as key sites where power becomes visible: who can issue bald imperatives, who must request indirectly, and how facework is mobilized to manage unequal relationships. At the same time, the novel’s female characters—most notably Nyai Ontosoroh—complicate simple assumptions that women’s speech is uniformly more indirect

or deferential, suggesting that social class, authority, and experience may reconfigure gendered expectations in directive interaction.

Although scholarship on *Bumi Manusia* has extensively addressed colonial ideology, social injustice, and cultural representation, pragmatic analyses that systematically connect directive speech acts, politeness strategies, gender, and social class remain relatively limited. Where pragmatics-oriented studies do appear, they often focus on translation and face-related phenomena rather than mapping directive politeness across gendered and classed relations inside the original narrative. For example, a recent proceeding study examining positive face-threatening acts in the English translation of *Bumi Manusia* demonstrates that power, distance, and rank of imposition are operationally relevant for analyzing face phenomena in the text, but it does not specifically foreground gendered directive patterns across social class positions (Susanto et al., 2025). This indicates a clear opportunity to extend existing work by focusing on directive speech as a privileged locus for examining how gendered interactional expectations intersect with class hierarchy in the novel.

Therefore, this study investigates (1) how male and female characters in *Bumi Manusia* employ politeness strategies when performing directive speech acts, and (2) how differences in social class shape these gendered uses of directive politeness. The analysis is grounded in speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979) and classic politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), while also drawing on post-classical perspectives that treat politeness as relational work and rapport management rather than a fixed set of universal strategies (Leech, 2014; Mills, 2003; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). By integrating gender and social class as intersecting sociological variables, this paper contributes to literary pragmatics by showing how Pramoedya's representation of colonial society is interactionally constructed through the distribution of directive forms and the strategic management of face.

METHOD

This study adopts a **descriptive qualitative approach** to examine politeness strategies in directive speech acts in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Bumi Manusia*. The data source is the novel itself, while the data consist of selected dialogue utterances containing directive speech acts produced by male and female characters. The data were obtained through close reading and purposive selection, focusing on utterances that reflect variations in gender and social class relationships.

Data analysis involved three main steps. First, the identified utterances were classified as directive speech acts based on speech act theory. Second, each directive was analyzed using Brown and Levinson's politeness framework to

determine the politeness strategy employed. Third, the directives were interpreted in relation to the speaker's gender and social class to address the research questions. The findings were then described qualitatively to reveal patterns of gendered politeness and the influence of social hierarchy in the novel.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data show that both male and female characters in *Bumi Manusia* employ a range of politeness strategies when performing directive speech acts, indicating that gendered patterns of politeness are present but not uniform.

Directive Speech Acts by Male Characters

Minke → Nyai

"Nyai, bolehkah saya melihat ruangan itu?"

This utterance is a directive speech act in the form of a request, realized through a negative politeness strategy. The modal expression *bolehkah* ("may I") signals conventional indirectness and minimizes the imposition on the addressee by acknowledging her authority to grant or deny the request. The address term *Nyai* further indexes respect and deference. Although produced by a male character, the directive avoids directness, indicating sensitivity to face concerns and situational power.

Minke → Annelies

"Tolong, Annelies, ambikan saya pena itu."

This directive takes the form of a mitigated imperative, softened by the politeness marker *tolong* ("please"). While imperatives are inherently face-threatening, the use of *tolong* functions as a negative politeness device, reducing coerciveness and appealing to the addressee's willingness. This shows that male characters may employ softened imperatives in relatively close or equal relationships.

Jean → Minke

"Kalau boleh, saya ingin kau menulis tentang kejadian ini."

Jean's utterance is a directive request framed through a conditional clause (*kalau boleh*), which mitigates the directive and respects the addressee's autonomy. The structure avoids a direct command and aligns with negative politeness, indicating restraint despite Jean's institutional authority. This reflects an orientation toward polite negotiation rather than overt control.

Minke → Jean

"Bolehkah saya menulisnya dengan gaya saya sendiri?"

This directive is realized as a request for permission, employing negative politeness through interrogative form and modal expression. By asking permission, Minke minimizes the imposition and positions himself as respecting Jean's authority, reinforcing the pattern that male characters often choose indirect, face-saving strategies in directive speech.

Male characters predominantly use negative politeness strategies, particularly permission-seeking and mitigated forms, rather than bald-on-record directives. This suggests that male directive speech in *Bumi Manusia* is not uniformly authoritative but is shaped by relational and contextual considerations.

Directive Speech Acts by Female Characters

“Kamu bisa bantu Ibu urus surat-surat itu besok pagi?”

This utterance constitutes a directive request framed as an interrogative. The question form reduces imposition and reflects a negative politeness strategy, while the kinship term *Ibu* simultaneously invokes relational closeness, aligning with positive politeness. Nyai combines authority with interpersonal sensitivity.

Annelies → Minke

“Tolong hapus catatan itu dari naskah.”

This directive is a softened imperative, mitigated by the politeness marker *tolong*. The strategy minimizes face threat and appeals to cooperation rather than authority, reflecting a preference for indirectness and relational harmony in female directive speech.

Nyai → Annelies

“Silakan panggil Minke untuk membantu Ibu.”

This utterance represents a polite directive, using *silakan* (“please/go ahead”) to soften the command. While Nyai clearly exercises authority, the politeness marker frames the directive in a courteous manner, balancing control with face consideration. This indicates controlled but polite directive behavior.

Annelies → Jean

“Tolong ambilkan saya secangkir teh.”

This directive is again a mitigated imperative, employing *tolong* to soften the request. The strategy reduces imposition and emphasizes goodwill, demonstrating consistent use of politeness markers in female directive speech across different interlocutors.

Female characters consistently avoid bald-on-record directives and favor mitigated forms combining negative and positive politeness strategies. Their directives emphasize cooperation, relational closeness, and face maintenance, even when the speaker holds situational authority.

The Influence of Social Class on Politeness Strategies in Directive Speech Acts

The analysis demonstrates that social class and power relations significantly influence the choice of politeness strategies in directive speech acts in *Bumi Manusia*, frequently outweighing gender as a determining factor. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), the realization of directives is closely tied to relative power between interlocutors, and the data from the novel strongly support this

claim. Characters with lower social or institutional status consistently employ negative politeness strategies, such as permission-seeking and indirect questions, to minimize imposition and protect the addressee's negative face. For example, Minke's directives toward Nyai and Jean are framed through interrogatives (*bolehkah*) and conditional clauses (*kalau boleh*), reflecting his subordinate position within both colonial and social hierarchies, despite his male gender.

Conversely, characters who occupy higher social or economic positions demonstrate greater pragmatic license to issue directives, though these are often softened through polite lexical markers rather than delivered bald-on-record. Nyai Ontosoroh's directives exemplify this pattern. As a woman who holds economic authority and managerial control, Nyai is able to direct both Minke and Annelies, employing forms such as interrogatives (*kamu bisa...?*) and polite imperatives (*silakan*). This supports post-classical politeness perspectives which argue that authority does not necessarily lead to impoliteness, but rather to strategic politeness that balances power with social legitimacy (Spencer-Oatey, 2008; Leech, 2014).

In interactions involving relatively equal or intimate social relations, directives are commonly realized through mitigated imperatives using markers such as *tolong*. These occur across genders, as seen in exchanges between Minke and Annelies or Annelies and Jean. Such patterns align with Mills' (2003) argument that politeness should be understood as relational work rather than a fixed property of gendered speech. The recurrence of mitigation in these contexts suggests that speakers orient toward cooperation and harmony when class-based power asymmetries are less salient.

Overall, the findings indicate that social class functions as a primary organizing principle in the use of politeness strategies in directive speech acts in *Bumi Manusia*. Gender influences stylistic choices, but class-based authority determines whether a speaker must defer, may negotiate, or can legitimately direct others. This supports recent sociopragmatic research emphasizing that politeness emerges from the intersection of gender, power, and social hierarchy rather than from gender alone (Hofweber & Jaworska, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the use of politeness strategies in directive speech acts in *Bumi Manusia* is shaped by the interaction between gender and social class, with social class emerging as the more influential factor. Both male and female characters predominantly employ mitigated directive forms, particularly negative politeness strategies such as indirect questions, permission-seeking expressions, and politeness markers, indicating a strong orientation toward face-

saving practices. While gender influences the stylistic realization of directives—male characters often relying on permission-based mitigation and female characters combining mitigation with relational markers—these patterns are not consistent across all interactions. Instead, the analysis shows that characters' relative social and institutional positions largely determine whether directives are delivered indirectly or with greater pragmatic authority. Consequently, politeness in directive speech acts within the novel functions less as a reflection of inherent gendered linguistic behavior and more as an interactional response to class-based power relations embedded in the colonial social structure.

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