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Gender Differences in The Use of Politeness Strategies: A Pragmatic Analysis of Pahari Speech Acts

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: July 27, 2026 Revised: August 20, 2026 Accepted: August 28, 2026 Available Online: September 10, 2026 Keywords: Speech acts, politeness strategies, Pahari, gender-based variations, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, Searle's speech act theory. Corresponding Author: Dr. Inayat Ullah Email: inayatullah418@gmail.com	This paper aims to investigate gender-based variations in the use of politeness strategies in Pahari. Based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory and Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory, the study highlights how male and female Pahari speakers use different politeness strategies to perform different speech acts. The data was collected from 40 Pahari speakers through a discourse completion task (DCT) and interviews. A mixed method approach was used to analyse the politeness strategies used by each gender and to examine the frequencies of these types of strategies. Gender-based variations were found in the use of politeness strategies in Pahari across different speech acts. There was a significant use of bald-on-record politeness strategies by male participants in their responses. They prefer clarity and directness over politeness and pay less attention to softening their responses. Conversely, female participants use positive, negative politeness and off-record strategies frequently as compared to males. The findings confirm the traditional view of Pahari society regarding the role of gender, in which Pahari social and cultural values require the women to be accommodating and respectful while men are expected to be authoritative, assertive, and direct.

Introduction

The influence of gender on the use of language has been explored by various researchers in the field of linguistics. Different researchers carried out research to explore the differences in the use of language by men and women in different contexts. This interest in gender studies started in the 1980s when women's movements challenged male dominance and scholars began questioning gender roles in language use (Coates, 2013).

Researchers found clear gender-based differences in language use. According to Trudgill (1974), women use more formal language than men because formality helps signal their social class. Men, however, rely more on financial standing and abilities to indicate class, so they use less formal language. Brown (1980) further explained that men usually prefer informal language because they assume social equality in conversations and wish to preserve status. Women are more sensitive to social class and face-threatening acts (FTA), so they use formal language more frequently.

Researchers such as Engle (1980), West (1998), and Goodwin (1998) observed differences in directives. Men are generally direct, commanding, and blunt, while women soften requests, making them sound like suggestions. As a result, women's directives appear more refined. Holmes (cited in Ayubadiah, 2014) states that women use apologies more frequently because they express personal feelings and seek understanding. Men usually use brief apologies only to admit fault without seeking sympathy.

Research on gender and language emphasizes that second language learners need pragmatic competence to adjust to different contexts and avoid miscommunication. Factors such as gender, culture, location, and speech acts are important for successful communication (Tuncer & Turhan, 2019). Speech acts such as inviting, apologizing, greeting, complimenting, and refusing are common in daily communication (Yule, 1996). Successful communication depends on understanding the social context. Mills (2003) argues that women carefully select words to maintain social status, while men feel less pressure to follow politeness norms.

The Pahari Language

The term 'Pahari' comes from the Indo-Aryan word *pahar*, meaning 'hill' or 'mountain.' According to Grierson (1917), Pahari refers to languages spoken in the Himalayan and nearby hilly regions and is divided into Eastern, Central, and Western Pahari. It is spoken in northern Pakistan and parts of Jammu & Kashmir. In AJ&K, many communities use Pahari as their everyday language. It belongs to the northwestern Indo-Aryan group and shares features with Hindko and Punjabi.

According to Karnai (2007) Pahari has four dialects: Muzaffarabadi, Poonchi, Kotli, and Mirpuri. The current study focuses on the Poonchi dialect spoken in District Sudhnoti. According to the 1998 census, AJ&K had 2.973 million Pahari speakers, increasing to about 4.059 million by 2011 (Sarwar, 2014). Pahari is also widely spoken among immigrants in the UK, where around 600,000 people speak it (Lothers & Lothers, 2013).

Statement of the Problem

Pahari has a considerable number of speakers and is also considered a culturally rich language. However, the pragmatic and sociolinguistic domains of Pahari are largely unexplored, especially with respect to gender-based variations in politeness strategies. Thus, this study is an effort to fill this gap by providing a pragmatic analysis of speech acts in Pahari with a special focus on gender-based variations in politeness strategies.

Research Objectives

This study is carried out with following objectives:

- To explore gender-based variations in the use of politeness strategies across different kinds of speech acts in the Pahari language.
- To investigate the influence of education on the choice of politeness strategies among Pahari speakers.
- To compare the frequency and distribution of politeness strategies across genders.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- What are the gender-based variations in the use of politeness strategies across different types of speech acts in the Pahari language?
- How does level of education interact in influencing the choice of politeness strategies among Pahari speakers?
- What types of politeness strategies are most frequently used by male and female Pahari speakers?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the field of pragmatics by examining the ways of using speech acts by Pahari speakers and by investigating gender-based variations in politeness strategies within the Pahari language an under-researched regional language. The findings benefit researchers working in pragmatics and Pahari language documentation. The study not only enhances the understanding of gendered communication patterns but also assists in preserving and documenting pragmatic aspects of the Pahari language for future linguistic exploration.

Literature Review

People need language to communicate, cooperate, and show their intentions. Language is the medium of interaction and the source of communication. Functionally, language carries various communicative functions. According to Jakobson (1960), language has six functions: referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and poetic. These functions show that language is not limited to an informational role.

There is a close relationship between language and gender. Men tend to use more direct, commanding, and authoritative language and are often viewed as decision-makers (Tannen, 1990). Conversely, women use more indirect, polite, and courteous language. They use hedges and tag questions to soften demands, maintain social harmony and preserve interpersonal relationships (Holmes, 1995).

Speech acts are utterances that perform actions because people do not only produce words but also do things through their words (Austin, 1962). He explained that every utterance can be analyzed at three levels:

1. **Locutionary Act:** The act of making a meaningful utterance. Example: Dwari band kari shora han 'Close the window'.
2. **Illocutionary Act:** The intention behind the utterance. In the above example, the speaker is requesting the listener to close the window.
3. **Perlocutionary Act:** The effect of the utterance on the listener. In this case, the listener closes the window.

John Searle (1969) classified speech acts into five major types:

1. **Assertives:** They are used for stating, reporting, or describing. For example: I mosum boon thanda da 'Today, the weather is very cold'.
2. **Directives:** These are used when the speaker wants the listener to do something. For example:
 - Kajya kari ta pit band kri shor han 'Please close the door'.
 - Classa ech rola na bao 'Do not make noise in the class'.
3. **Commissives:** These commit the speaker to a future action such as promising, offering, threatening, or guaranteeing. Examples:
 - Mn twari kal madad karsan 'I will help you tomorrow'.
 - Main pakka wada karnes ka yo galti ti bad kada ve nes karna 'I promise that I shall never make this mistake'.
4. **Expressives:** These express feelings, emotions, or psychological states such as thanking, apologizing, congratulating, or expressing sorrow. Examples:
 - Maafi chanes, dair hoi gae 'I apologize for being late'.
 - Tu pass hoi gyaeyn, markh wae 'Congratulations, you have passed'.
5. **Declarations:** These bring changes in the external world through the utterance itself. The speaker must possess authority and power. For example:
 - Adalat mulzam ki ba-qasoor manya 'The court declared the accused innocent'.
 - Tuki is school echa kadi shorya 'You are expelled from this school.'

Politeness refers to the tactical use of language for expressing respect, maintaining social harmony, and promoting mutual understanding in communication (Yule, 1996). According to Goffman (1967), face is the public self-image a person wants to maintain during communication. Brown and Levinson (1987) explained two types of face:

- **Positive Face** – the desire to be liked, appreciated, and respected.
- **Negative Face** – the desire for freedom, autonomy, and freedom from imposition.

To maintain these faces, Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed four politeness strategies:

1. **Bald-on-record:** Direct and clear speech without softening. Used in urgent situations or among close friends. For example: Pit band kr 'Shut the door'.
2. **Positive Politeness:** Used to express friendliness and solidarity through compliments and informal expressions. For example: Tuss boo changa dao, mri madad kari shoro na 'You are very nice; please help me.'

3. Negative Politeness: Used to respect the listener's autonomy and reduce imposition through indirect language and polite markers. For example: Agr tuss bura na mano ta thori dair asta pit kholi saknao? 'If you don't mind, could you open the door for a little while?'
4. Off-record: Indirect hints and vague statements that allow the listener to infer the meaning. For example: Kamra ech boo sardi di, hn na? 'It is very cold in the room, isn't it?'

Politeness strategies have been widely studied in syntax, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and second-language acquisition. Lakoff (1975) argued that women use politer, soft, and indirect language than men. Kachru (1990) found similar patterns in Hindi, where women preferred polite pronouns, hedges, and respectful expressions, while men used more direct forms. Tannen (1990) explained that women use language to maintain relationships, whereas men use it to show power and dominance. Janet Holmes (1995) observed that women apologize more, use polite expressions, and show greater concern for others' feelings, while men are generally more straightforward. Majeed and Janjua (2014) found that female Urdu speakers in Pakistan used longer and more elaborate apology strategies than men, emphasizing politeness and face-saving in communication. Bashir and Asif (2020) found Punjabi women prefer Urdu/English and use more politeness markers than men. Ayesha (2022) found female teachers use more politeness strategies than male teachers. Saritza and Natsir (2023) stated women seek social connection while men focus on information. Younas et al. (2024) found Pahari speakers are more direct than English speakers, and English speakers use more politeness markers.

Thus, the existing literature indicates that despite the considerable number of studies investigating the use of politeness strategies. However, no study has been conducted on this topic in the context of AJ&K. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by investigating 'Gender Differences in the Use of Politeness Strategies: A Pragmatic Analysis of Pahari Speech Acts.'

Methodology

This study uses a mixed-method approach to describe politeness strategies used by Pahari male and female speakers. Population consists of native Pahari speakers residing in Tehsil Trarkhal, District Sudhnoti, AJ&K. A stratified purposive sampling technique was used to select 40 native Pahari speakers (20 males, 20 females), with 10 literates and 10 illiterate participants in each group. Data were collected using Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) and structured interviews. Literate participants completed DCTs themselves, while illiterate participants responded through structured interviews. A systematic procedure was used for data collection. Participants were informed about the study and consent was obtained. DCTs were given to literate participants. Structured interviews were conducted with illiterate participants, where situations were read in simple Pahari and responses were recorded. Data were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. In qualitative analysis, DCT and interview responses were organized into themes using Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory and Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. Quantitative analysis involved coding and counting responses to measure frequency of politeness strategies in different speech acts.

Results and Discussion

Politeness Strategies Used by Male Pahari Speakers in Different Speech Acts

Politeness Strategies for Invitation

This strategy shows how male speakers make invitations/requests according to social power and distance.

Situation: Asking younger brother for a glass of water.

Example:

- **Literate Male:** "Yara maki pani na glass ik ni ani dena?"
(‘Buddy, wouldn't you bring me a glass of water?’)
- **Illiterate Male:** "Maki pani na glass ik ani dae shorr."
(‘Bring me a glass of water.’)

The literate speaker used positive politeness through the friendly word "Yara" and indirect question form. The illiterate speaker used a bald-on-record direct command without softening.

Politeness Strategies for Apology

This strategy shows how male speakers apologize to maintain social harmony.

Situation: Arriving late to meet a friend.

Example:

- **Literate Male:** “Mazrat, aj maki boo dair hoi gae.”
(‘Sorry, today I am very late.’)
- **Illiterate Male:** “Meki aj ashnyain ashnyain boo dair hoi gae.”
(‘I got too late today.’)

The literate speaker used positive politeness with an apology marker “Mazrat”. The illiterate speaker used a direct statement without apology, showing bald-on-record strategy.

Politeness Strategies for Refusal

This strategy shows how male speakers refuse politely using explanations and indirectness.

Situation: Refusing neighbor’s tea invitation because of exams.

Example:

- **Literate Male:** “Aaj neso achi sakna, kian ka kal mara paper da ta ma parnes.”
(‘I cannot come today because I have an exam tomorrow.’)
- **Illiterate Male:** “Main masroof deso; main naso achi sakna.”
(‘I am busy; I cannot come.’)

The literate speaker softened refusal with explanation, showing positive politeness. The illiterate speaker used direct refusal with bald-on-record strategy.

Politeness Strategies for Suggestions

This strategy shows how male speakers give suggestions with different levels of directness.

Situation: Suggesting cousin to take rest after work.

Example:

- **Literate Male:** “Lagataar kaam krnae us wela na; un bus kar ta thora aram kari en.” (‘You have been working continuously; now stop and rest.’)
- **Illiterate Male:** “Bus kar na un aram kri en.” (‘Stop now and take rest.’)

Both speakers used bald-on-record strategies. The literate speaker added background explanation, while the illiterate speaker remained short and direct.

Politeness Strategies for Commands

This strategy shows how male speakers issue commands.

Situation: Asking brother to pass salt in the kitchen.

Example:

- **Literate Male:** “Ali, jaldi uth yara, ta maki loon porae shoor.”
(‘Ali, get up quickly, buddy, and give me the salt.’)
- **Illiterate Male:** “Jaldi uthi ta meki loon ane da.”
(‘Get up quickly and bring me the salt.’)

Both speakers used bald-on-record commands. The literate speaker added the friendly word “yara”, but both responses remained direct and authoritative.

Politeness Strategies Used by Female Pahari Speakers in Different Speech Acts

Politeness Strategies for Requests

These strategies show how female speakers formulate requests within the sociocultural norms of Pahari interaction.

Situation: Tuss kara ech dao ta tussain tray lagi ne ta tuss chanao ka tussain na nika pra tussain ki pani na ik glass ane da. Tuss keh akhso?

‘You are at your home, feeling thirsty, and want your younger brother to bring a glass of water for you. How would you ask him for water?’

a) Kada ik glass pani na ani dae shoran ta tuki boo sawab hosi. (Female Literate)

‘If you bring a glass of water for me, you will get a great reward.’

b) Maki k glass pani na ni ani dana yara? (Female Illiterate)

‘Couldn’t you bring a glass of water for me, buddy?’

Different types of politeness strategies were employed by the female speakers in these responses. The literate female prefers indirect speech style, while the illiterate female express warmth and familiarity to keep harmony.

Politeness Strategies for Apologies

These strategies show how female speakers formulate these strategies to maintain social harmony within the Pahari speech community.

Situation: Tussa apnay dost sung mila joga sa, lekin tuss dair sung pochayo. Tuss kis tarah maafi mangso?

‘You were supposed to meet your friend on time, but you arrived late. How would you apologise?’

a) Bht mazrat, rasta ech aj boo zada traffic si, is gala dair hoi gae. (Female Literate)

‘I’m really sorry, there was a lot of traffic on the way today, so I got late.’

b) Maafi chaneous, boo late hoi gaeous (Female Illiterate)

‘I apologize, I’m very late.’

Both female speakers display politeness to maintain social harmony. The literate female’s expression conveys friendliness and reduces the force of the apology. The illiterate female’s response shows respect and acknowledgment of fault. Such forms not only perform the expressive act of apology but also restore social equilibrium.

Politeness Strategies for Refusals

These strategies show how refusals are carefully framed to preserve respect and interpersonal relationships.

Situation: Ik prosi tussain ki chai peeta te bolana, lekin tussain imtihan asta para joga. Tuss kis tarah inkaar karso? ‘A neighbour invites you for the tea, but you have to study for an exam. How would you refuse?’

a) Mazrat Anti, mara paper da, para joga, fir kuta aesa, In Sha Allah (Female Literate)

‘Sorry, Aunt, I have an exam, and I need to study. I’ll come some other time, if Allah wills’

b) Mara paper da ta us ne tyri krneous; paper dae na ta frr peesan chaa (Female Illiterate)

‘I have an exam; I’m preparing for it. After the exam, we’ll have tea together.’

The literate female participant used a negative politeness strategy to soften her refusal. She provided a reason for his refusal and used a conditional phrase, In Sha Allah, to protect the listener’s face. However, the response of the illiterate female participant was less mitigated and more spontaneous.

Politeness Strategies for Suggestions

These strategies illustrate how female speakers convey suggestions in a cooperative and non-authoritative manner.

Situation: Tussa na cousin kaam kita te baad thaki gaya. Tuss uski mashwara danao ka thora araam kro. Tuss keh akhso?

‘Your cousin is feeling tired after work. You want to suggest that she take some rest. What would you say?’

a) Oh ho! Lagna boo katti gao, thori dair aram kari na, frf kaam krya (Female Literate)

‘Oh! It seems you’re very tired. Take some rest and then continue your work.’

b) Katti gao? Thora aram kri ena (Female Illiterate)

‘Are you tired? Take some rest.’

Both literate and illiterate female participants used positive politeness strategy in their responses to protect the listener’s face. Their polite expressions show care and empathy, reflecting their concern for the listener’s feelings.

Politeness Strategies for Commands

These strategies show how female speakers negotiate authority while maintaining politeness within the cultural framework of Pahari interaction.

Situation: Tuss bawarchi khana ech ech madad karnao ta apnay prao kola jaldi loon mangnay chanao. Tuss keh akhhso?

‘You are helping in the kitchen and want your brother to quickly pass you the salt. What would you say?’

a) Marya praou, meki jldi nimak porayain, please (Female Literate)

‘My brother, pass me the salt quickly, please.’

b) Jaldi kr nimak porae shor (Female Illiterate)

‘Quickly pass me the salt.’

The use of ‘please’ functions as a mitigating marker, softening the directive and showing respect for the addressee’s cooperation. Conversely, the illiterate female participant used bald-on-record strategy, reflecting directness rooted in familiarity rather than impoliteness. This response is direct and concise, lacking kinship terms or mitigating expressions.

Frequency and Distribution of Politeness Strategies across Genders

The frequency and distribution of politeness strategies across genders in conversations among Pahari speakers are given in the following table.

Table 1. Frequencies of politeness strategies by male and female Pahari Speakers

Politeness Strategy	Male (count)	Male (%)	Female (count)	Female (%)
Bald-on-Record	183	61%	51	17%
Positive Politeness	75	25%	114	38%
Negative Politeness	30	10%	90	30%
Off-Record	12	4%	45	15%
Total Responses	300	100%	300	100%

The above table illustrates the distribution of politeness strategies by male and female Pahari speakers. The bald-on-record strategy was most often used by male participants. Male participants produced 183 responses (61%), while female participants used this strategy only 51 times (17%). This demonstrates that male Pahari respondents preferred unmitigated and direct expressions. Female participants used the positive politeness strategy more frequently than male participants. Females produced 114 responses (38%), while males produced 75 responses (25%). This indicates that female participants prefer to preserve harmony in relationships and address face-threatening behaviour through friendly and supportive words. Male participants applied this strategy less frequently and preferred a more direct speech style. Female participants generated 90 responses (30%), while male participants generated 30 responses (10%). This proves that women more frequently employ language tools that alleviate social tension and preserve the face of the addressee through hedging, apologizing, or indirectness. Males are less dependent on such strategies and communicate more directly. The off-record strategy was the least used by both genders, but females still used it more than males. Female participants produced 45 responses (15%), whereas male participants produced only 12 responses (4%). This reflects that women tend to employ indirect hints and implied meanings to maintain social harmony and avoid conflict. Men rarely used the off-record strategy and mostly preferred direct communication.

Conclusion

This study explored the use of politeness strategies used by both male and female speakers of the Pahari language. The study examined how gender influences the use of language in executing various speech acts, including requests, apologies, refusals, suggestions, and commands.

The research findings indicate substantial gender differences in the use of politeness strategies among speakers of the Pahari language. Male respondents tended to use direct the bald-on-record strategies. Conversely, female respondents consistently employed indirect, courteous, and softened language, frequently incorporating positive and negative politeness strategies. Educational attainment also influenced the recognition and deployment of these strategies. Educated females showed a broader repertoire of nuanced expressions and greater sensitivity to face-saving conventions. Sociocultural factors also influenced linguistic practices, with politeness closely connected to social hierarchy, gender expectations, and ethical principles. Moreover, the study confirms that the use of the Pahari language is strongly shaped by social and cultural factors, with gender, education, and culture influencing the selection of politeness strategies. Literate male participants occasionally used polite expressions such as *meharbani hosi* 'please,' although their speech remained direct. Literate female participants employed more polite and mitigated language and often used religious or cultural phrases like *Insha Allah* 'if Allah wills' and *Khuda na wastae* 'for God's sake.' Religious expressions such as *Insha Allah* 'if Allah wills' were common in the responses of both sexes, indicating that politeness in Pahari culture is closely linked to Islamic values and moral behavior.

The findings highlighted significant gender-based differences in politeness strategies across different speech acts in Pahari. Male participants predominantly adopted the bald-on-record strategy, while female participants frequently used positive and negative politeness strategies along with off-record expressions. Moreover, male participants preferred direct and assertive communication, while female participants relied more on indirectness and polite markers. Female speakers also used off-record strategies more frequently than males. Male participants employed fewer face-saving strategies, whereas female participants consistently used indirect and mitigated forms to preserve interpersonal harmony.

Future studies may expand this research by including participants from different Pahari-speaking regions and socio-economic backgrounds. Comparative studies between Pahari and related languages such as Urdu, Punjabi, Hindko, and Kashmiri can further explore cultural differences in politeness strategies. Researchers may also examine politeness in digital communication, including social media and text messaging, to understand changing politeness norms in modern contexts.

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