


## Politeness Strategy and Mitigation in Food Evaluations of Nick DiGiovanni's YouTube Reviews

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\*Fanny Meilani NH, Dewi Kustanti, Toneng Listiani<sup>abc</sup>

<sup>123</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia.

Corresponding Author: [fannymeilani36@gmail.com](mailto:fannymeilani36@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

Digital communication has reshaped how evaluations are expressed in public platforms, particularly on YouTube, where food reviews combine entertainment and judgment. However, limited attention has been given to how reviewers balance criticism and politeness in such contexts. This study aims to examine politeness strategies and mitigation devices used in food review videos by Nick DiGiovanni. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the study applies Brown & Levinson's politeness theory and Fraser's mitigation framework to analyze evaluative utterances from selected videos published between 2024 and 2025. The findings reveal that negative politeness strategies are dominant and frequently combined with mitigation devices such as hedges, disclaimers, and parenthetical verbs. These features function to soften criticism, maintain audience engagement, and preserve the speaker's credibility. Overall, the study shows that politeness and mitigation play a crucial role in shaping evaluative discourse in digital media.

**Keywords:** *Politeness Strategies, Mitigation, Pragmatics, Youtube, Food Reviews*

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### INTRODUCTION

Digital communication today has significantly changed the way people express their opinions, especially in public or interactive spaces. One platform widely recognized as a hub of transformation is YouTube, where individuals can share reviews that are informative, persuasive, and entertaining (Hermawan, 2022). Among the vast array of content proliferating online, food review videos have gained widespread attention and popularity by blending personal experiences, expertise, and even audience engagement. In these videos, reviewers are not only expected to provide honest assessments of the food being reviewed but also to present their opinions in a manner that is acceptable to the broader audience watching. Furthermore, the reviewer's delivery is expected not to harm any party, whether the reviewer themselves or the owner of the food being reviewed. This expectation makes the selection of evaluative language in a digital context an intriguing subject for analysis in pragmatic studies.

Evaluation, by its very nature, often involves actions that have the potential to threaten face, especially when comments or reviews refer to negative aspects. Politeness, according to Brown & Levinson (1987) refers to strategies employed by speakers to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs) and maintain social harmony. They propose four main strategies: bald on-record (direct, no mitigation), positive politeness (emphasizing solidarity and approval), negative politeness (respecting autonomy through indirectness), and off-record (ambiguous expressions allowing plausible deniability). This framework posits that speakers calculate politeness based on three factors: social distance, power differential, and imposition rank. Complementing this, Leech (2014) Politeness Principle emphasizes maximizing agreement and minimizing disagreement, while Watts (2003) views politeness as a dynamic, context-dependent negotiation rather than universal rules. In the digital world, where communication is open and directed at the public as a broad audience, the need for politeness becomes

increasingly complex. Unlike face-to-face communication, which involves direct feedback, online communication lacks such immediate feedback, allowing speakers to anticipate potential interpretations and reactions from the audience (Dynel, 2024). Consequently, content creators must be careful in managing the opinions they convey, choosing words that are appropriate to avoid misunderstandings, backlash, or damage to their public image.

Another equally important linguistic aspect in managing evaluative discourse is mitigation. Fraser (1980) defines mitigation as a series of linguistic strategies used to soften or reduce the impact of a statement without altering its core meaning. Fraser (1980, as cited in Mansur, 2015) identifies several forms of mitigation strategies. These include: (1) Indirectness, where criticism or evaluation is conveyed through less direct structures; (2) Immediacy, which involves strategies that create interpersonal closeness to reduce social distance; (3) Disclaimer, where speakers soften a statement by preceding or following it with balancing remarks; (4) Parenthetical Verbs, such as "I think," "I guess," or "I believe," which frame evaluations as personal opinions rather than absolute judgments; (5) Tag Questions, which seek confirmation and reduce assertiveness; and (6) Hedges, including adverbial softeners such as "just," "a little," or "probably," that lower the intensity and certainty of an utterance. Previous studies have indicated that mitigation plays a crucial role in maintaining politeness and interpersonal relationships, particularly in contexts where evaluations are now shared publicly (Holmes, 2013).

Research on politeness and mitigation in digital discourse is indeed crucial in line with the times, and therefore research on this topic is increasing. This is because, in this increasingly modern world, information circulates more rapidly in the digital realm than through face-to-face interactions (Wang, 2024). Almost everyone in the world today uses digital media or social media to share information with one another, because these platforms make everything feel much easier compared to the old-fashioned, face-to-face approach when you have something you want to convey.

Food review content creates a unique communicative situation. On the one hand, reviewers are expected to be honest and at times critical. On the other hand, they are to maintain a positive image, engage their audience, and often work in partnership with brands or companies (Sang et al., 2024). This produces a tension between authenticity and politeness where too much direct criticism could harm the relationship while too much politeness could harm the credibility. As a consequence, the reviewers often employ a mixture of politeness strategies and mitigation devices to address this tension. Understanding how these strategies are employed can provide valuable insight into digital communication dynamics and the evaluative nature of discourse.

This study focuses on food review videos from the YouTube channel of Nick DiGiovanni, a popular content creator known for his engaging and evaluative culinary content. In addition to being a content creator, Nick DiGiovanni is also a chef who possesses a deep understanding of cooking and food. His videos serve as a rich source of data for examining how politeness strategies and mitigation devices function within naturally occurring digital discourse. By analysing evaluative speech in his video content, this study aims to identify the types of politeness strategies employed and the mitigation devices that support them in his review videos. Then, this study also aims to contribute to pragmatic studies, especially in understanding how classical theories of politeness and mitigation are applied in today's rapidly evolving digital context.

Overall, this study is expected to provide contributions both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, this study extends the application of Brown & Levinson (1987) politeness theory and Fraser (1980) mitigation devices to digital media. Practically, this study offers insights into how content creators can effectively balance honesty and politeness when making comments in public spaces.

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to examine politeness strategies and mitigation devices in evaluative utterances from Nick DiGiovanni's YouTube food review videos. A qualitative method was selected to enable in-depth interpretation of linguistic features within their natural digital context, prioritizing pragmatic meaning over statistical quantification (Creswell, 2014). This approach allows for a deep understanding of how language is used to make evaluations while maintaining politeness or interpersonal consideration within the context of digital discourse.

The data were drawn from 8 food review videos on Nick DiGiovanni's YouTube channel (36M+ subscribers), mirroring Fauzan et al. (2025) who selected *The Godfather* based on its rich social interactions. Videos were purposively selected based on three criteria: (1) explicit evaluative content (praise, criticism, comparison), (2) speech clarity, and (3) publication between 2024-2025. The selected videos had average durations of 9-25 minutes, ensuring manageable yet rich data for analysis. Instead of involving human respondents in the traditional sense, this study uses naturally occurring discourse as its primary data, which is a common practice in pragmatic and discourse analysis research (Al-Hindawi & Saffah, 2017).

The theoretical frameworks applied in this study include Brown & Levinson's politeness theory (1987) and Fraser's mitigation framework (1980). Brown & Levinson's model was used to identify types of politeness strategies, such as positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record strategies, and bald on-record. Meanwhile, Fraser's framework was used to identify mitigation devices, including hedges, disclaimers, non-continuity, and parenthetical verbs. These frameworks provide a systematic basis for analyzing how evaluative meaning is expressed and softened in discourse.

The data collection process involved several steps. First, the researcher selected relevant YouTube videos based on specific criteria, including the presence of evaluative content and speech clarity. Second, the selected videos were watched carefully, and the spoken utterances were transcribed into written form. Transcription was performed using an online transcription website, followed by manual review to ensure accuracy in capturing linguistic details, such as pauses, stress, and contextual expressions.

After transcription, the researcher identified utterances containing evaluative meaning, particularly those expressing opinions about food quality, taste, presentation, or the overall experience. These utterances were then selected as the primary data for analysis. To ensure consistency, only utterances that clearly reflected an evaluation were included, while irrelevant or purely descriptive statements were excluded.

Data analysis was conducted using a qualitative interpretive method. This process began with coding the selected utterances based on the type of politeness strategy, following the framework of Brown & Levinson (1987). Each utterance was categorized as positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, or off-record, depending on its linguistic characteristics and communicative function.

Next, the researcher identified mitigation devices present in each utterance using Fraser (1980) framework. These devices include softeners (e.g., a little, perhaps), disclaimers (e.g., the only problem is), verbs in parentheses (e.g., in my opinion, I think), and indirect expressions. This analysis focuses on how these devices function to reduce the evaluative force and make the utterances more socially acceptable.

Finally, the results are interpreted by analysing the relationship between politeness strategies and mitigation devices. This step aims to uncover patterns of how these two elements work together in shaping evaluative discourse. The findings are then analysed in relation to existing theories and previous studies in pragmatics and digital communication, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the research findings and discusses them in relation to the research questions. This analysis focuses on how politeness strategies and mitigation devices are used in evaluative speech within food review videos on YouTube. The findings are organized according to the research questions, followed by an in-depth discussion that relates these results to the relevant theoretical framework.

### Politeness Strategies in Nick DiGiovanni's YouTube Food Review Videos

This study reveals that politeness strategies play a significant role in shaping how food reviewers express their evaluations on public digital media platforms. The first research question examines the types of politeness strategies used in evaluative speech, specifically within Nick DiGiovanni's YouTube channel. Based on the analysis, three main strategies were identified: positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. These three types were included in the analysis because the comments made in the YouTube content were mostly expressed indirectly, unlike the "Bald on-record" type, which is a form of politeness defined as "direct" (Brown & Levinson., 1987). Furthermore, based on the analysed data, it is evident that the speaker consistently employs various strategies to maintain interpersonal harmony while still conveying critical evaluations. The findings indicate that negative politeness emerges as the most dominant strategy, followed by positive politeness, with the off-record strategy appearing only occasionally. This distribution reflects a strong tendency to minimize face-threatening actions (FTA), particularly when criticism is involved.

The dominance of negative politeness can be observed in expressions such as "I'd prefer if this dish were cooked a little longer" and "It doesn't taste bad, but I probably wouldn't order it again." These expressions demonstrate how reviewers avoid direct criticism by framing it as a subjective preference rather than an objective judgment. These patterns align with the idea that negative politeness is generally used to respect the listener's autonomy and reduce coercion (Brown & Levinson., 1987). In the context of food reviews, the "listener" may not be physically present, but the implied audience such as the chef, restaurant owner, and diners – still requires careful linguistic management.

Furthermore, the frequent use of positive politeness strategies indicates that reviewers are equally concerned with building positive relationships and maintaining a friendly tone. Expressions such as "Honestly, this might be my favourite taco ever" and "I think that might be one of the best bites of fish and chips" highlight how praise is often softened through the use of qualifying words, which, paradoxically, actually strengthens credibility. Positive politeness, in this context, serves to create a sense of shared experience and mutual appreciation, which is crucial in digital content creation where audience engagement is key (Dynel, 2024).

Interestingly, the off-record strategy is used sparingly yet effectively, particularly in humorous or indirect criticism. For example, the phrase "I don't know which is worse: us or the food" illustrates how humour can be used to convey criticism without explicitly targeting the subject. This finding supports previous research suggesting that indirectness allows speakers to avoid accountability while still conveying evaluative meaning (Haugh & Chang, 2019).

To provide a clearer understanding, the following table presents the distribution of politeness strategies:

Table 1. The Types of Politeness Strategy

Politeness strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Negative politeness	37	74%
Positive politeness	12	24%
Off record	1	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Mitigation Devices in Nick DiGiovanni's Youtube Food Review Videos**

In addition to politeness strategies, this analysis also highlights the important role of mitigation devices, which are indeed crucial in evaluative speech. These devices function as linguistic tools that soften the impact of a statement, making it sound less direct and, of course, more socially acceptable. The data shows that hedges and disclaimer are the most frequently used mitigation devices, followed by, parenthetical verb while tag questions and indirectness appear less frequently in the collected data. Hedges, such as "a little bit," "probably," "might," and "slightly," appear consistently across various contexts. For example, in the expression "It is a little bit spicy," the phrase "a little bit" reduces the intensity of the evaluation, thereby minimizing the potential to offend. Similarly, the utterance "This will probably be the messiest burger" demonstrates how the use of "probably" avoids an absolute statement. This finding aligns with the assertion that the use of softening words is crucial for expressing uncertainty and maintaining politeness in evaluative discourse (Boginskaya, 2023).

Another prominent feature in the data is the use of disclaimers, which appear as one of the dominant mitigation devices alongside hedges. These expressions function to balance evaluations by combining criticism with positive remarks, thereby reducing the potential face-threatening impact of negative judgments. For example, in the statement "The chicken is definitely overcooked, but the flavor is amazing," the speaker softens the criticism by immediately pairing it with praise. In the context of Nick DiGiovanni's YouTube food review videos, this pattern reflects a deliberate strategy to maintain fairness and positivity while still delivering honest evaluations. By structuring comments in this way, the speaker avoids sounding overly harsh and instead presents a more balanced and nuanced opinion. This supports previous research suggesting that combining positive and negative elements within a single utterance is an effective strategy for maintaining politeness in evaluative discourse (Placencia & Lower, 2017).

Furthermore, the analysis also shows that the use of parenthetical verbs plays a significant role in the context of evaluative discourse in the video review content on Nick DiGiovanni's YouTube channel, particularly in balancing positive and negative comments. These expressions, such as "I think," "I guess," and "I would say," serve to frame personal, rather than objective, statements. For example, the phrase, "I think this is one of the top three drinks I've ever had," positions evaluation as subjective, thus reducing the risk of disagreement. This aligns with recent research showing that subjectivization is a key strategy in digital communication, allowing speakers to express their opinions without imposing them on others. Additionally, the analysis results also indicate that disclaimers play a significant role in the evaluative discourse context within review videos on the YouTube channel Nick DiGiovanni, particularly in balancing positive and negative comments. For instance, the statement "The chicken is definitely overcooked, but the flavour is amazing" illustrates how criticism is often combined with praise. This pattern reflects what has been described as a "praise-criticism" structure, which helps maintain politeness while still conveying honest feedback.

On contrast, indirectness and tag questions are used less frequently, suggesting that the speaker does not rely heavily on highly implicit strategies. Instead, Nick DiGiovanni tends to deliver evaluations in a relatively clear manner while softening them through hedges and subjective markers. This indicates a preference for maintaining clarity and engagement, while still ensuring that the evaluations remain socially appropriate and considerate of audience perception.

The following table presents the mitigation strategies identified in the data:

Table 2. The Types of Mitigation Device

Mitigation Device	Frequency	Percentage
Hedge	28	50%
Parenthetical verbs	10	18%
Disclaimer	11	20%
Indirectness	5	9%
Tag question	2	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>100%</b>

The dominance of hedging indicates that reviewers prioritize flexibility and nuance in their language. Rather than making definitive statements, they opt for expressions that allow room for interpretation. This finding supports the argument that mitigation is not merely a linguistic feature but a strategic choice influenced by social and contextual factors (Albawardi & Alqahtani, 2022).

## Discussion

Further analysis reveals that politeness strategies and mitigation devices are closely interconnected in evaluative utterances. Rather than functioning independently, these two elements frequently co-occur within the same utterance, forming a layered pragmatic structure. This indicates that speakers do not rely on a single strategy to manage face concerns; instead, they combine several linguistic resources simultaneously to achieve a more nuanced and socially acceptable evaluation.

For example, in the utterance "I think it's a little bit too salty," Nick DiGiovanni combines negative politeness with multiple mitigation devices, including a parenthetical verb (I think) and a hedge (a little bit). The parenthetical verb functions to frame the statement as a personal opinion rather than an objective judgment, thereby reducing the speaker's level of commitment to the proposition. At the same time, the hedge minimizes the intensity of the criticism, making it less direct and less likely to threaten the positive face of the addressee. This layered structure demonstrates how speakers strategically soften their evaluations to reduce potential face threat while still conveying a clear message. In other words, the utterance operates on both interpersonal and propositional levels, balancing clarity with politeness.

This pattern is not an isolated case but occurs consistently across the dataset. Many utterances show a similar tendency to combine two or more mitigation devices within a single politeness strategy. This suggests that mitigation operates as a supporting mechanism that enhances the effectiveness of politeness strategies, rather than functioning as a separate or optional feature. The co-occurrence of these elements reflects speakers' awareness of the potential risks associated with direct evaluation, particularly in public and highly visible contexts such as online food reviews.

Similarly, in the statement "The flavor is great, but it's probably missing some texture," positive and negative elements are combined with mitigation. The initial positive evaluation ("The flavor is great") serves as a face-enhancing move, which is then followed by a mitigated criticism ("probably missing some texture"). The use of the hedge "probably" reduces the certainty of the negative claim, making it less confrontational. This pattern reflects a balancing strategy, where praise is used to offset criticism, allowing the speaker to maintain politeness while still providing an honest evaluation. Such a structure is particularly important in evaluative discourse, where speakers must navigate the tension between expressing genuine opinions and maintaining social harmony. As noted by Leech (2014), politeness often involves the strategic management of competing communicative goals, including clarity, sincerity, and interpersonal sensitivity.

Another important observation is that the interaction between politeness strategies and mitigation devices often results in graduated evaluations, rather than absolute judgments. Instead of stating that something is simply "bad" or "good," speakers tend to position their evaluations along a spectrum, using linguistic markers to indicate degrees of certainty, intensity, and subjectivity. For instance, expressions such as "a bit," "slightly," "maybe," and "I would say" allow speakers to fine-tune their statements, making them more adaptable to different interpretive contexts. This gradability is crucial in digital discourse, where utterances can be interpreted by diverse audiences with varying expectations and sensitivities.

This interaction also highlights the role of audience design and audience awareness in shaping linguistic choices. Unlike face-to-face interaction, YouTube content is directed toward a broad and heterogeneous audience, including viewers from different cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds. As noted by Dynel (2024), speakers in digital contexts must anticipate a wide range of interpretations and potential reactions, which encourages the use of more

cautious and strategically mitigated language. In this sense, mitigation devices function not only as politeness markers but also as tools for managing uncertainty and interpretive variability.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that mitigation contributes to the construction of a credible and relatable speaker identity. By avoiding overly strong or absolute claims, speakers present themselves as reasonable, reflective, and open-minded. This is particularly important in the context of online reviews, where credibility plays a crucial role in audience trust and engagement. The frequent use of expressions such as “I think,” “probably,” and “I would say” signals that the speaker is aware of the subjective nature of their evaluation, which in turn enhances their authenticity.

The findings also suggest that mitigation is not merely an optional feature, but an integral part of politeness strategies. Without mitigation, many of the identified utterances would appear too direct, overly assertive, or even impolite. For example, removing hedges and parenthetical verbs from the utterance “I think it’s a little bit too salty” would result in “It’s too salty,” which carries a significantly stronger and more potentially face-threatening force. This contrast clearly demonstrates how mitigation devices function to regulate the strength of speech acts. This reinforces Fraser (1980) view that mitigation is essential in managing the force of speech acts and maintaining interpersonal balance in communication.

In addition, the consistent co-occurrence of politeness strategies and mitigation devices suggests that these elements should be understood as part of a unified pragmatic system, rather than as separate analytical categories. Their interaction reflects the dynamic nature of language use, where speakers continuously adjust their expressions to accommodate social norms, contextual constraints, and communicative goals. This perspective aligns with more recent approaches in pragmatics, which emphasize the fluid and context-dependent nature of meaning-making in discourse.

Overall, the interaction between politeness strategies and mitigation devices demonstrates the complexity of evaluative language in digital contexts. It reveals that effective communication is not simply a matter of what is said, but also how it is said. By combining multiple strategies and devices, speakers are able to navigate the delicate balance between honesty and politeness, ensuring that their evaluations are both informative and socially appropriate.

Table 3. Interaction between Politeness Strategies and Mitigation Devices

Utterance example	Politeness strategy	Mitigation device
"Literally, my only commentary about the lasagna is that I wish it was just a little bit hotter."	Negative politeness	Parenthetical Verb
"The chicken is definitely overcooked, but the flavor is amazing."	Negative politeness	Disclaimer
"I mean, we both keep eating it, so it must be pretty good, right?"	Positive Politeness	Tag Question
"I'm a little confused on this dish."	Positive politeness	Hedge
"I can't tell what looks worse: us or the food."	Off Record	Indirectness

## CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how politeness strategies and mitigation devices are used in evaluative utterances in food review videos by Nick DiGiovanni on YouTube. The findings show that evaluative language is carefully constructed to balance honest opinions with interpersonal sensitivity. Negative politeness strategies were the most dominant, as the speaker frequently used subjective and tentative expressions such as “I think” and “I would say” to soften criticism and avoid threatening others’ social image. Positive politeness strategies were also used to maintain rapport with viewers through praise and appreciation. The study further found that mitigation devices, especially hedges and disclaimers, play an important role in reducing the intensity of evaluations and making them sound less forceful.

Balanced evaluations combining praise and criticism were also common, reflecting fairness and objectivity. Overall, politeness and mitigation work together as interconnected strategies shaped by the public and interactive nature of digital media. These strategies also help construct the speaker's identity as thoughtful, credible, and considerate. Despite being limited to food review content, this study contributes to understanding how evaluative language functions in digital communication and highlights the importance of pragmatic choices in maintaining audience engagement and social harmony.

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