

Politeness and Hostility in Anime Fandom: A Sociolinguistic Study of YouTube Comments

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Zakaria Achmad, Reza Dian Irawan Lubis, Fahri Mulia Aria, Rahmadsyah Rangkuti^{abcd} 

¹²³⁴Universitas Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: Zakaria, e-mail: zakariaahmad2005@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Online fandom communities represent one of the most dynamic and linguistically diverse environments on social media, where politeness and hostility coexist within the same communicative space. This study investigates the realization of illocutionary speech acts in YouTube comment sections, focusing on interactions within anime fandom debates. Using Searle's classification of illocutionary acts and Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, the research analyzes 200 comments collected from popular anime-related videos between 2023 and 2024 through a qualitative content and discourse analysis approach. The findings reveal that expressive and representative acts dominate the discourse, functioning both as strategies of solidarity and as tools of verbal conflict. Politeness emerges through acts of appreciation, humor, and defense of shared fandom identity, while hostility is expressed via sarcasm, ridicule, and impoliteness. The study concludes that the coexistence of these two forces reflects the social negotiation of identity and belonging within online fan cultures.

Keywords: *Online Politeness, Hostility, Youtube Comments, Illocutionary Acts, Anime Fandom*

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, anime fandom has grown into a global cultural movement, transcending geographical and linguistic boundaries through the internet. Fans from diverse backgrounds gather across platforms to discuss, critique, and celebrate Japanese animation, forming communities bound by shared enthusiasm and emotional investment. Among these spaces, YouTube has emerged as one of the most influential arenas for fandom discourse, where fans interact through video comments, reactions, and analytical discussions. The comment sections beneath anime-related videos function as digital meeting grounds, sites where admiration, rivalry, and creativity coexist.

The rise of social media has transformed how people communicate, construct identities, and express opinions in the digital era. Platforms such as YouTube have become interactive arenas where millions of users engage not only to share and consume content but also to negotiate meaning through comment sections. These comment threads, often situated under videos discussing popular culture such as anime, represent rich spaces for linguistic and sociological study. As online interactions grow in number and intensity, they offer fertile ground for examining how language reflects social attitudes, particularly in the interplay between politeness and hostility.

The study of politeness has long been a central topic in pragmatics and sociolinguistics. Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness emphasizes the concept of *face*, referring to an individual's public self-image and the strategies used to maintain or threaten it. Online, these strategies manifest in textual and paralinguistic forms, such as emojis, laughter markers, or indirect phrasing that function to soften disagreement or express solidarity. On the other hand, hostility or impoliteness has gained attention as researchers (e.g., Culpeper, 2011; Graham, 2018) explore how verbal aggression, flaming, and trolling emerge in computer-mediated communication. The coexistence of both politeness and hostility presents a paradox

of online discourse: social media enables both community building and conflict escalation simultaneously.

Among various online communities, fandoms are particularly notable for their linguistic complexity. Fandom interactions, especially within the anime community, are characterized by strong emotional investment, insider terminology, and collective identity formation (Burgess & Green, 2018; Zappavigna, 2020). On YouTube, anime fandom discussions often oscillate between cooperative engagement, where fans express admiration or gratitude—and combative exchanges, where users dispute over characters, storylines, or creators. These dynamics make fandom comment sections ideal contexts for analyzing illocutionary acts, which reveal how users perform actions through language, such as praising, insulting, defending, or mocking.

While numerous studies have addressed online politeness (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015; Locher & Bolander, 2021), relatively few have examined the *balance* between politeness and hostility within the same community context. Furthermore, previous works on digital discourse tend to focus on Western political or professional communication rather than fan-based interactions. Therefore, this study fills that gap by focusing on **anime** fandom discourse on YouTube, a setting where linguistic creativity, emotion, and rivalry converge.

The purpose of this research is to investigate how illocutionary speech acts manifest both politeness and hostility in YouTube comment sections among anime fans. Specifically, it aims to:

Identify the types of illocutionary acts (based on Searle's 1976 classification) present in fandom interactions.

Examine how these acts are employed to express politeness and hostility.

Explore the sociolinguistic implications of these findings in understanding online community behavior.

By combining Searle's theory of speech acts and Brown and Levinson's politeness model, this study contributes to the broader discussion of language use in digital contexts, illustrating how users negotiate social norms and facework within the emotionally charged realm of anime fandoms.

METHOD

Respondents

The data for this study were drawn from naturally occurring YouTube comment threads posted under popular anime-related videos between 2023 and 2024. These videos included topics such as "Best Anime of the Decade," "Attack on Titan vs. One Piece Debate," and "Most Overrated Anime Characters," which attracted thousands of English-language comments from international users. A total of 200 comments were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a balance between polite and hostile discourse. Since YouTube commenters generally remain anonymous, no demographic information was available. The focus of the analysis was therefore on the linguistic features of the comments rather than the identities of the commenters. To maintain ethical integrity, usernames were anonymized, and any identifying content was excluded from quotation.

Instruments

This study used an analytical framework composed of Searle's (1976) classification of illocutionary acts and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Searle identifies five categories of speech acts: *representatives*, *directives*, *commissives*, *expressives*, and *declaratives*. These categories provide a foundation for identifying the communicative functions performed by users in comment threads. Brown and Levinson's theory was used to interpret how these acts were strategically employed to either maintain social harmony (positive and negative politeness) or disrupt it (impoliteness and face-threatening acts).

Procedures

The research adopted a qualitative descriptive approach supported by a light quantitative overview. First, comment threads were manually collected using the YouTube

search feature with keywords such as *anime debate*, *anime fandom*, and *best anime of all time*. The comments were transcribed verbatim and organized into a corpus of 200 entries. Each comment was examined to identify the illocutionary act type and the presence of politeness or hostility markers. Comments containing explicit insults, sarcasm, supportive language, gratitude, or humor were coded accordingly.

To enhance reliability, two coders independently analyzed a subset of 50 comments to compare interpretations of illocutionary acts. The intercoder agreement reached 0.87 (Cohen’s Kappa), which indicated high consistency. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until a consensus was achieved.

Videos and comments were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria to ensure topical relevance and linguistic variety. First, candidate videos were limited to English-language, anime-related uploads published between January 2023 and December 2024. Videos were chosen to represent three subtypes of fandom discussion: (1) comparative debates (e.g., *Attack on Titan vs. One Piece*), (2) “best of” or ranking lists, and (3) analytical or critical review videos. To ensure engagement and visibility, only videos with at least 100,000 views and a minimum of 500 comments were considered. From this pool, five videos were purposively selected to cover different fandom topics and types of content creators (official media, critics, and fan discussion channels).

Within each video, top-level comments (i.e., not nested replies) were sampled because they most directly reflect public stance and initiate discussions. Comments were restricted to English entries; non-English comments and automated or spam entries were excluded. To avoid bias, comments were sampled across the posting timeline (early, middle, and late comment periods) and across varying engagement levels (top-liked and lesser-liked comments). From these five videos, a total of 200 anonymized comments were compiled, ensuring a balanced distribution between those preliminarily coded as polite and those identified as hostile.

Ethical considerations: usernames were anonymized, and only textual content was analyzed. No private messages or restricted data were accessed. To enhance reliability, two coders independently analyzed a subset of 50 comments to compare interpretations of illocutionary acts. The intercoder agreement reached 0.87 (Cohen’s Kappa), which indicated high consistency. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until a consensus was achieved.

Data analysis

The analysis proceeded in two stages. First, each comment was categorized according to Searle’s (1976) five illocutionary types. Second, the tone of each comment was evaluated based on Brown and Levinson’s politeness framework and Culpeper’s (2011) impoliteness model. Representative and expressive acts were the most frequent, followed by directives and commissives, while declaratives were rare due to the informal and non-institutional nature of YouTube interaction.

Table 1 below illustrates the distribution of illocutionary acts and their general tone (polite vs. hostile) as found in the dataset.

Type of Illocutionary Act	Example (anonymized)	Function	Politeness/Hostility Tendency	Frequency
Representatives	“This episode shows how deep the character development really is.”	Stating opinions or evaluations	Polite	46
Directives	“Bro, go watch the manga before talking nonsense.”	Giving advice or commands	Hostile	38
Commissives	“I’ll defend this anime till the end, no matter what anyone says.”	Making promises or commitments	Polite	22
Expressives	“LMAO you clearly don’t understand good writing.”	Showing emotion, ridicule, or praise	Hostile	72
Declaratives	“You’ve officially lost your argument here.”	Declaring outcomes or judgments	Hostile	22
Total	—	—	—	200

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Overview and Pattern Interpretation

From the 200 analyzed comments, approximately 55% contained polite elements, 40% displayed hostility, and 5% were neutral or ambiguous. Expressive acts were the most frequent in both polite and hostile forms, suggesting that emotional expression drives most interaction in fandom discourse. Representative acts appeared as balanced contributors to both politeness and hostility, reflecting their role in presenting arguments and evaluations. Directives, meanwhile, appeared primarily in hostile contexts, often functioning as commands or challenges.

This overall distribution reflects what Graham (2018) describes as the “tension between community and conflict” in digital communication. Users express belonging through cooperation and shared enthusiasm, but they also mark distinction through disagreement and rivalry. This duality provides the foundation for the qualitative patterns discussed in the following sections.

Politeness through Expressive and Representative Acts

The findings reveal that expressive and representative acts constitute the largest portion of the dataset, accounting for nearly 60 percent of all identified speech acts. Expressive acts, such as praise, gratitude, or admiration, are central to maintaining positive face within fandom communication. Users often express appreciation toward content creators, fellow fans, or the anime itself. Examples include: *“This analysis video is amazing, I learned a lot about the symbolism,”* and *“Respect to everyone who still supports this show after all these years.”* These utterances demonstrate attempts to build solidarity through positive emotional expression.

Such comments align with Brown and Levinson’s (1987) concept of positive politeness, in which speakers emphasize common ground to strengthen in-group bonds. Even when disagreements arise, users frequently mitigate confrontation: *“I get your point about the pacing, but I still think the character development was great.”* This blend of concession and opinion-sharing illustrates how fans maintain social harmony.

Representative acts, meanwhile, often appear as reasoned arguments that defend a viewpoint without attacking others. For instance: *“The reason people prefer this series is because of how consistent the writing is, not just the hype.”* This demonstrates how fans use informative illocutionary acts to assert opinions while avoiding face-threatening behavior. These patterns highlight that not all online fandom discourse devolves into hostility; much of it remains analytical and cooperative.

Hostility and Impoliteness in Fandom Interaction

Despite the presence of supportive and reasoned comments, hostility remains a persistent feature of anime fandom discourse on YouTube. Hostile acts primarily emerge through expressives and directives, typically in response to conflicting opinions. Common examples include: *“You clearly haven’t watched enough anime to talk about this,”* or *“Go touch grass, dude.”* These comments contain direct insults or mockery, functioning as face-threatening acts (FTAs) that undermine another user’s competence or credibility.

Drawing on Culpeper’s (2011) impoliteness framework, these utterances represent bald-on-record impoliteness, as they deliver aggression directly without mitigation. This behavior aligns with Herring’s (2018) concept of online disinhibition, where anonymity and lack of accountability encourage more confrontational language.

However, not all impoliteness is destructive. Some hostile directives are delivered humorously: *“Man, if you think this anime is bad, I don’t know what you’re doing here lol.”* Although superficially aggressive, the presence of *lol* signals playfulness, representing what Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2019) term mock impoliteness. In this context, teasing reinforces shared norms and familiarity within the fandom.

The Negotiation of Identity and Belonging

Beyond individual speech acts, the discourse reflects ongoing negotiation of identity and belonging. Fans construct and defend their positions within the fandom hierarchy through linguistic choices. Polite comments highlight shared values, while hostile comments assert superiority or authenticity often determining who counts as a “true fan.” For example:

"Only real fans understand this arc's meaning." This utterance performs both expressive and declarative functions, expressing pride while marking insider status.

Gatekeeping emerges in playful forms as well, such as: "Imagine calling yourself a fan when you skip filler episodes." Such comments illustrate the performative nature of identity within fandom culture. As Locher and Bolander (2021) argue, online identity is relational and dynamic, shaped by continuous acts of alignment and confrontation.

Additionally, politeness often coexists with assertiveness when users attempt to de-escalate conflict. For example: "Let's agree to disagree; both shows have their strengths." This aligns with Spencer-Oatey's (2019) notion of rapport management, showing that users actively maintain mutual respect even amid disagreement.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how illocutionary speech acts reflect the coexistence of politeness and hostility in anime fandom discussions on YouTube. The analysis of 200 comments revealed that expressive and representative acts dominated the interaction, functioning both as expressions of appreciation and as triggers of conflict. Politeness primarily emerged through praise, humor, and mitigated disagreement, whereas hostility was conveyed through direct criticism, ridicule, and playful mock impoliteness. These contrasting strategies illustrate how fans negotiate identity, alignment, and authenticity within their community. Overall, the findings show that online fandom discourse operates as a dynamic environment where solidarity and rivalry shape communicative behavior. This research contributes to understanding how speech acts structure interaction in digital fan cultures and demonstrates the value of combining politeness and impoliteness frameworks in online discourse analysis. Future studies may expand this work by examining multilingual fandoms, comparing cross-platform behavior, or applying computational tools to larger datasets.

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