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UNCOVERING THE POLITENESS STRATEGIES OF XAN AS THE MAIN CHARACTER IN THE NOVEL "THE GIRL WHO DRANK THE MOON" BY KELLY BARNHILL

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the politeness strategies used by Xan, the main character in Kelly Barnhill's The Girl Who Drank the Moon. Using a qualitative method, the data were taken from the novel's written dialogues and analyzed through Leech's (1983) six politeness maxims using Miles & Huberman's (1994) framework. The researcher identified 67 instances of politeness: Tact (13), Generosity (15), Approbation (15), Modesty (10), Agreement (8), and Sympathy (6). The findings show that Xan frequently employs positive politeness to build closeness, negative politeness to respect others' autonomy, and bald-on-record strategies in urgent moments. These strategies highlight Xan's wisdom and empathy and strengthen the novel's themes of love and human connection. The study demonstrates that Leech's maxims operate effectively in literary discourse and contribute to understanding character construction and conveyed social values. It also suggests that the novel can serve as a reference for character education and emphasizes the role of politeness in maintaining social harmony.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji strategi kesantunan yang digunakan Xan sebagai tokoh utama dalam novel The Girl Who Drank the Moon karya Kelly Barnhill. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan data berupa dialog tertulis dalam novel, dianalisis menggunakan enam maksim kesantunan Leech (1983) melalui kerangka Miles & Huberman (1994). Peneliti menemukan 67 data yang mencakup Maksim Kearifan (13), Kedermawanan (15), Pujian (15), Kerendahan Hati (10), Kesepakatan (8), dan Simpati (6). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Xan menggunakan strategi kesantunan positif untuk membangun kedekatan, kesantunan negatif untuk menghormati otonomi lawan tutur, serta strategi langsung (bald on record) dalam situasi mendesak. Temuan ini menegaskan karakter Xan yang bijaksana dan empatik sekaligus memperkuat tema cinta dan hubungan antarmanusia dalam novel. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa maksim Leech juga berfungsi efektif dalam wacana sastra dan membantu memahami

pembentukan karakter serta nilai sosial yang disampaikan pengarang. Novel ini juga berpotensi menjadi rujukan pendidikan karakter dan menegaskan pentingnya kesantunan dalam menjaga keharmonisan sosial.

INTRODUCTION

Politeness is rooted in social norms, noting that each society develops explicit and implicit rules that regulate behavior, establish order, and frame the interpretation of social contexts. (Leech in Djalilova & Obidovna Zarnigor, 2022). It has been widely recognized as a universal dimension of communication, central to the preservation of social harmony. Brown and Levinson (in Fathi, 2024), conceptualize that politeness is a universal strategy for conflict avoidance, stressing that every interaction has the potential to threaten an individual's "face," making politeness strategies essential for sustaining relationships. Leech (in Rini et al., 2023) asserts that communicative exchanges are governed by the Politeness Principle, which involves both interlocutors: The self and the other. These principles underscore the necessity of sustaining interpersonal harmony by regulating social interaction with attentiveness, empathy, and mutual consideration.

Systematically, Leech (in Taha, 2023) formulates them into six maxims such as Tact Maxim: It reduces cost to others and increases their benefit, showing the speaker's effort to avoid burdening the listener, Generosity Maxim: It minimizes self-benefit and maximizes self-cost, focusing on speakers offering help to others. (Leech in Purwanti & Herbianto, 2022), Approbation Maxim: It reduces criticism and increases praise, focusing on giving positive evaluations without hurting others. (Leech in Dewi et al., 2023), Modesty Maxim: It reduces self-praise and increases self-dispraise, focusing on humility and avoiding arrogance. Speakers downplay their effort to maintain good relations. (Leech in Nurdiyani & Sasongko, 2022), Agreement Maxim: It reduces disagreement and increases agreement, focusing on finding common ground and softening conflict. (Leech in Rini et al., 2023), and Sympathy Maxim: It reduces antipathy and increases sympathy, focusing on showing empathy and compassion. (Leech in Rachmawati & Al Arif, 2020). These maxims provide a framework for understanding and guiding polite behavior in communicative interaction.

Recent research extends this understanding beyond everyday conversation, appearing in literary works such as novels, reflecting cultural values and ethical orientations. The novels operate not only as artistic reflections of social realities but also as pedagogical instruments that cultivate emotional intelligence. In this digital era, fantasy fictions including Barnhill's novel The Girl Who Drank the Moon (2016) remain relevant because they teach universal values such as kindness, politeness, and solidarity. Barnhill's portrayal of Xan further underscores this significance, presenting her as a character whose politeness strategies embody empathy, compassion, and a sense of moral responsibility. Xan's politeness offers a compelling subject of analysis as it illustrates how children's literature conveys moral values through linguistic expression. Therefore, by examining these elements might reveal the broader function of novels as cultural lenses, which operate not merely as sources of fictional entertainment but as texts that encode social norms, ethical frameworks, and communicative practices.

It is crucial to examine the politeness strategies in this novel in order to understand how literature conveys values across generations. Without scholarly engagement, the

dimensions of politeness embedded in children's texts risk being disregarded, thereby diminishing literature's role in transmitting ethical and social principles. Moreover, overlooking politeness in literary studies may erode awareness of the ways language sustains cultural identity and social cohesion. Such neglect also risks producing academic stagnation, as pragmatics research would remain narrowly confined to spoken interaction, failing to recognize literature as a fertile domain for politeness strategies. This limitation ultimately constrains interdisciplinary dialogue among linguistics, literary studies, and education.

From these points of view, the researcher conducts this study. Tawakkal (2023) has previously examined politeness. However, her work concentrated on positive and negative politeness strategies in a different text of the novel The Chronicles of Narnia. Other researchers have also investigated Barnhill's novel, though with distinct emphases. For instance, Shintia (2020) explores the novel's fantasy elements, whereas Sagala et al. (2021) analyzes phrasal verbs and the translation techniques applied in rendering them into Indonesian. In light of these studies, the current research seeks to address an existing gap by focusing specifically on the politeness strategies embodied in Xan's character.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses qualitative methods. The researcher applies a pragmatic approach, especially Geoffrey Neil Leech's (1983) theory of politeness principles. The focus is on six maxims: Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy. This approach helps analyze the data in natural contexts and gives detailed explanations of politeness in characters' dialogues. The data are collected through documentation, referring to the written dialogues in Kelly Barnhill's novel The Girl Who Drank the Moon (2016). The analysis follows (Miles & Huberman 1994, in Ismail 2024) with three steps. First, data reduction: dialogues are examined, and irrelevant parts are removed to focus on politeness (Miles & Huberman 1994, in Monix 2023). Second, data presentation: findings are organized in tables with excerpts and interpretations (Miles & Huberman 1994, in Monix 2023). Third, conclusion drawing: after analysis, the researcher formulates the final conclusions (Miles & Huberman 1994, in Monix 2023).

RESEARCH FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

The researcher identifies 67 related to Leech's maxims politeness strategy in Barnhill's novel The Girl Who Drank the Moon (2016) as follow:

1. Tact Maxim

Dealing with this point, the researcher finds 13 pieces of data. One of them is discussed below:

Table 01. Leech's Maxims Politeness strategy: Tact Maxim

No.	Words/ Expressions	Data	Descriptions
1.	"*Please. I am counting on you*"	Data 01 Xan glanced at the sky. "I must fly, my dear. I'm	The utterances in data 01 are spoken by Xan to Glerk. In this case, she told it before she goes to save the baby that is going to be sacrificed by the protectorate.

		already late. *Please. I am counting on you.*" (P. 17)	The Tact Maxim is found in Xan's utterances: "*Please. I am counting on you*"

In Data 01, the tact maxim appears in Xan's words, "Please. I am counting on you." She says this to Glerk before leaving to rescue the baby meant for sacrifice by the protectorate. Brown and Levinson (in Terada et al., 2021) explain that politeness strategies are used to reduce or avoid threats to another's face when expressing intentions or demands. Similarly, Kingwell (in Wijayanti et al., 2025) emphasizes that communication is not only about conveying ideas effectively but also about preventing emotional harm to others.

2. Generosity Maxim

In Generosity Maxim, the researcher finds 15 data. One of the data is explained below:

Table 02. Leech's Maxims Politeness strategy: Generosity Maxim

No.	Words/ Expressions	Data	Descriptions
1.	"*Bottle, You need a bottle.*"	Data 02 "*Bottle,*" Xan said, trying to ignore the harmonics ringing in her bones. "*You need a bottle.*" And she searched her many pockets to find a bottle of goat's milk, ready and waiting for a hungry belly. (P. 21)	The sentences in the data 02 are spoken by Xan to Luna after she carried her out. In this case Xan didn't care about her ringing bones. Xan is focused on searching for a bottle of goat's milk in her pocket. The Generosity Maxim is found in Xan's sentences: "*Bottle, You need a bottle.*"

In Data 02, Xan's words are classified under the Generosity Maxim, yet the interpretation is not straightforward. While she ignores her own pain to focus on Luna's needs, this act may also reveal the tension between genuine sacrifice and expected caregiving. Afriana (in Afriana et al., 2025) stresses that politeness functions as a pragmatic resource for social harmony, but here it risks being read as duty rather than pure generosity. Likewise, Thoits (in Sheeza Ashraf et al., 2025) highlights the role of social support in resilience, yet Xan's gesture shows how such support can blur into obligation. Thus, the utterance demonstrates both the strength and the limits of the Generosity Maxim.

3. Approbation Maxim

At this point, the researcher finds 15 pieces of data. One of the data is stated as follow:

Table 03. Leech's Maxims Politeness strategy: Approbation Maxim

No.	Words/ Expressions	Data	Descriptions
1.	"*Well, my love, Aren't you more troublesome*	Data 03	The utterances in the data 03 are uttered by Xan to the baby which is Luna after Xan accidentally makes Luna

	by half?"	Magical children were dangerous. She certainly couldn't leave the child with just anyone. "*Well, my love,*" she said. "*Aren't you more troublesome by half?*" The baby breathed deeply through her nose. A tiny smile quivered in the center of her rosebud mouth. Xan felt her heart leap within her, and she cuddled the baby close. (P. 24)	magicked. In this case Xan is carrying Luna to a safe place that can take care of her. But she changes her mind because she accidentally made Luna magicked so she wants to adopt her. The Approbation Maxim is found in Xan utterances: "*Well, my love, Aren't you more troublesome by half?*"

In Data 03, Xan's utterance is categorized under the Approbation Maxim, yet its politeness is questionable. While the affectionate address "my love" softens the remark, the phrase "troublesome" risks sounding critical rather than praiseful. Fukushima & Sifianou (in Sejati et al., 2025) argue that verbal empathy is expressed through polite language, but Xan's words blur empathy with mild reproach. Similarly, Studer et al. (in Sejati et al., 2025) note that politeness strategies are often used in delivering bad news, since such contexts are sensitive. Xan's utterance reflects this tension: it attempts to cushion negative evaluation, yet still exposes the recipient to potential emotional discomfort.

4. Modesty Maxim

In Modesty Maxim of Leech's six maxims of Politeness strategy, the researcher finds 10 data. The descriptions are below:

Table 04. Leech's Maxims Politeness strategy: Modesty Maxim

No.	Words/ Expressions	Data	Descriptions
1.	"*I did not see you lying there!*"	Data 04 But when the child opened its throat into a full-fledged wail, Xan woke up with a start. "Oh my precious stars!" she said in her craggy, barky, leafy voice, for she had not yet un-transformed. "*I did not see you lying there!*" The baby was not impressed. She continued to kick and flail and howl and weep. (P. 20)	The utterances in the data 04 are uttered by Xan to the baby which is Luna after she woke up from her nap. In this case after Xan goes through the forest, she feels tired and decides to transform into craggy trees and take a nap to restore her energy. While she was napping, she did not know that the people of the protectorate had already sacrificed the baby by abandoning it in the middle of the dangerous forest. Until the baby which is Luna full-fledged wail and wake her up. The Modesty Maxim is found in Xan's utterance: "*I did not see you lying there!*"

In Data 04, Xan's utterance is linked to the Modesty Maxim, yet its politeness is debatable. She directs these words to Luna after waking from her nap, unaware that the protectorate had abandoned the baby in the dangerous forest. While the utterance

downplays Xan's responsibility, it may also reflect avoidance rather than humility. Thomas (in Omotola, 2024) defines politeness as showing awareness of another's face, but Xan's words risk minimizing accountability instead of protecting Luna's self-image. Riekkinen (in Omotola, 2024) adds that politeness is universal though context-dependent, and here the utterance illustrates how modesty can blur into deflection, raising questions about whether it truly sustains interpersonal harmony.

5. Agreement Maxim

In Leech's six maxims of Politeness strategy, Agreement Maxim, the researcher finds 8 data. The explanations are below:

Table 05. Leech's Maxims Politeness strategy: Agreement Maxim

No.	Words/ Expressions	Data	Descriptions
1.	"*I cannot think what any poet might say about babies or witches, but I have no doubt that it is marvelously insightful.*"	Data 05 Glerk: Glerk grunted in frustration. "Do you know what the Poet says about witches raising children?" he asked. Xan: "I cannot think what any poet might say about babies or Witches, but I have no doubt that it is marvelously insightful." (P. 28)	The words in the data 05 are told by Xan to Glerk when they are debating about Luna. In this case Xan is trying to avoid all fights. The Agreement Maxim is found in Xan's words: "*I cannot think what any poet might say about babies or Witches, but I have no doubt that it is marvelously insightful.*"

In Data 05, Xan's words are linked to the Agreement Maxim. She directs this to Glerk during their debate about Luna, aiming to avoid conflict. Yet the utterance raises questions: while it signals agreement, it may also function as a strategy to deflect tension rather than engage meaningfully. Pincus et al. (in Arellano-Véliz et al., 2024) note that agreeableness reflects sympathy and cooperation, but Xan's response risks sounding superficial. Grice (in Wang, 2025) emphasizes the Cooperative Principle, requiring contributions to align with conversational goals. Xan's words illustrate this principle, though they also reveal how agreement can be used to sidestep deeper discussion, showing both the strength and limitation of the maxim.

6. Sympathy Maxim

In Leech's six maxims of Politeness strategy, Sympathy Maxim, the researcher finds 6 data. The explanations are below:

Table 06. Leech's Maxims Politeness strategy: Sympathy Maxim

No.	Words/ Expressions	Data	Descriptions
1.	"*Luna? Are you well? Are you hungry? Luna?*"	Data 06 But Luna did not see. Her eyes were blank. Her face was blank. She looked as though her soul had gone dormant, like a tree in	The sentence in the data 06 is spoken by Xan to Luna after Xan gives Luna her first lesson to control her magic. In this case Xan is panicked because Luna has gone blank after receiving her first lesson.

		winter. Xan gasped. "*Luna?*" she said. "*Are you well? Are you hungry? Luna?*" There was nothing. Blank eyes. Blank face. A Luna-shaped hole in the universe. Xan felt a rush of panic bloom in her chest. (P. 81)	The sympathy Maxim finds in Xan's sentence: "*Luna? Are you well? Are you hungry? Luna?*"

In Data 06, Xan's words are linked to the Sympathy Maxim, yet their function is layered. She speaks in panic after Luna blanks out during her first magic lesson, showing concern but also anxiety. Wispé (in Aldrup et al., 2022) defines empathy as the ability to grasp others' feelings through perspective-taking and nonverbal cues, which Xan attempts here. However, her repeated questioning may reveal more of her own fear than Luna's needs. Vignemont and Singer (in Vallette d'Osia & Meier, 2024) argue that affective empathy involves mirroring pain and fostering care, yet Xan's utterance illustrates how empathy can blur into self-driven worry, raising doubts about whether the maxim fully sustains relational harmony.

KESIMPULAN

From the findings, the researcher identifies 67 instances of Leech's six maxims of politeness in Xan's attitudes in Barnhill's novel: Tact (13), Generosity (15), Approbation (15), Modesty (10), Agreement (8), and Sympathy (6). Several conclusions emerge such as: First, examining politeness in this novel highlights literature's role in transmitting ethical values, as Xan's strategies embody empathy, care, and responsibility. Second, applying Leech's principles enriches pragmatic studies by showing how politeness operates in literary discourse, not only daily speech. Third, the analysis underscores the educational value of children's literature in shaping emotional intelligence and ethical awareness. Finally, the critique warns that neglecting politeness strategies risks moral decline, cultural erosion, and academic impoverishment, revealing both the necessity and fragility of these principles in social and literary contexts.

As the implications, this study demonstrates that Leech's politeness maxims are not only relevant in everyday communication but also operate meaningfully within literary discourse, as seen in Xan's speech in the novel. The findings enrich pragmatic research by showing how politeness shapes character, relationships, and emotional dynamics in fiction, while also affirming the value of children's literature as a source for linguistic inquiry. Practically, the novel offers educators a model for teaching empathy, respect, and solidarity, integrating literature into character education and emotional intelligence development.

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