

Negotiating Academic Legitimacy through Politeness and Authorship Ethics: A Micro-Analytic Study of Digital Academic Communication

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Abstract

This article examines a short digital interaction between an early-career researcher and a senior linguistics lecturer in order to explore how academic legitimacy, politeness, and authorship ethics are negotiated in everyday scholarly communication. Although the interaction takes place in an informal WhatsApp exchange, it reveals that linguistic choices are not merely interpersonal ornaments but also ethical and epistemic strategies within hierarchical academic relations. Using Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory together with COPE and ICMJE authorship principles, this study adopts a micro-analytic autoethnographic approach to examine how lexical mitigation, syntactic softening, and implied meanings work to manage face threats, defer premature authorship claims, and protect intellectual autonomy. The analysis suggests that politeness in this context functions as a practical ethical resource that helps regulate the pace of scholarly claims and maintain integrity in asymmetrical academic relationships.

Keywords: politeness theory, academic communication, authorship ethics, autoethnography, higher education

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1. Introduction

Academic communication has traditionally been associated with formal settings such as classrooms, conferences, and journal articles. However, contemporary scholarly interaction increasingly takes place in informal digital spaces, especially messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, where researchers seek supervision, exchange drafts, and negotiate collaborative possibilities. In Indonesian higher education, these interactions are often shaped by hierarchical relations and marked by strong expectations of politeness, deference, and relational sensitivity. Most existing studies on academic politeness in Indonesia focus on the descriptive function of language in maintaining harmony and managing hierarchy. While valuable, such studies often stop short of examining the ethical consequences of those linguistic choices. In particular, they rarely address how politeness may shape the negotiation of authorship, the refusal of honorary attribution, or the protection of a senior scholar's autonomy when collaboration has not yet been formally established. At the same time, authorship ethics literature, including COPE and ICMJE guidelines, generally operates at the level of policy and normative principle, with limited attention to how these rules are negotiated in actual message exchanges between junior and senior academics. This article seeks to bridge that gap by bringing together politeness theory and authorship ethics within a micro-analytic autoethnographic framework. Rather than treating politeness as a conventional expression of courtesy, the study proposes that it may also function as an ethical mechanism that regulates when, how, and under what conditions academic claims are introduced. The study asks three questions:

1. How do politeness strategies operate in asymmetric digital academic communication?
2. How is authorship negotiated ethically before formal collaboration is established?
3. How does language mediate power relations at the micro-level in short digital messages?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Politeness Theory in Academic Interaction

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory understands politeness as a set of strategies used to mitigate face-threatening acts. Their framework distinguishes between positive face, or the desire to be appreciated and approved of, and negative face, or the desire to remain free from imposition. In academic settings, face threats often emerge when junior researchers ask senior academics to read manuscripts, evaluate proposals, or consider collaboration. In this article, politeness is not treated simply as a marker of good manners. Instead, it is viewed as a communicative strategy that helps manage the tension between hierarchy and initiative. In such contexts, indirectness, hedging, honorifics, and conditional formulations can reduce pressure while still allowing the speaker to pursue an academic goal.

2.2. Academic Authorship Ethics

Authorship ethics require that an author's name on a scientific publication reflect substantial intellectual contribution. COPE and ICMJE guidelines reject honorary or gift authorship, meaning the practice of naming individuals who have not made meaningful scholarly contributions. These principles are especially important in hierarchical settings, where junior researchers may feel pressure to include senior figures prematurely or symbolically. In this article, authorship is understood not as a fixed entitlement but as a relational outcome that must be earned through contribution. This means that the language used to propose, defer, or condition authorship matters ethically, because it shapes whether the interaction remains open, respectful, and non-coercive.

2.3. Micro-Analytic Autoethnography

The study adopts a micro-analytic autoethnographic approach to examine a single episode of digital communication in detail. Unlike broader narrative autoethnography, which emphasizes long-term experience and identity formation, this approach focuses on a brief interaction as a site of linguistic and ethical negotiation. The researcher's own positionality as an early-career academic becomes part of the analysis, but the emphasis remains on the interaction itself, especially on how language choices structure meaning, hierarchy, and ethical possibility.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study uses a qualitative design grounded in micro-analytic autoethnography. The goal is not to produce statistical generalization, but to interpret how a short message thread functions as a meaningful academic event. Language is treated as the primary analytic data, and attention is directed toward lexical choices, syntactic structures, discourse markers, and pragmatic implications.

3.2. Data and Context

The data consist of a naturally occurring WhatsApp interaction between the researcher, acting as an early-career scholar, and a senior lecturer in linguistics. The exchange includes an initial greeting, a brief explanation of a lexicography manuscript related to animation and wayang, a request for review, and a tentative reference to possible co-authorship. All names and institutional identifiers have been anonymized to protect privacy.

3.3. Researcher Positionality and Project Trajectory

The interaction should be understood within the researcher's broader intellectual trajectory, including the *Architecture of Vision* project and the *Baby Zu: Cognitive Development in the Digital Era* research plan. The manuscript discussed in the exchange reflects an ongoing research orientation rather than an isolated or accidental draft. This positionality matters because it suggests that the interaction was not merely an ad hoc request, but part of a larger process of scholarly development and ethical negotiation.

3.4. Analysis Procedure

The analysis proceeded in four steps:

1. **Transcription and Segmentation:** The conversation was transcribed and divided into distinct speech units.
2. **Pragmatic Exploration:** Each unit was examined for pragmatic features such as face-threatening acts, mitigative language, and indirectness.
3. **Ethical Mapping:** The linguistic findings were mapped onto authorship ethics to identify how the interaction preserved or delayed claims of contribution.
4. **Autoethnographic Reflection:** The researcher reflected on the motivations and positionality behind the use of these strategies, with attention to how anxiety, respect, and scholarly caution shaped the utterance.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Face-Threatening Acts in Digital Academic Messages

The interaction contains at least three identifiable face-threatening moments: initiating contact, requesting manuscript reading, and mentioning the possibility of co-authorship. Each of these actions may impose on the lecturer's time, attention, and professional autonomy. In this sense, the exchange is not only informational but also relational, because it enters the lecturer's private digital space and carries an implied demand on scholarly labor. What makes the interaction significant is the way these threats are softened. The researcher does not present the request as an entitlement, but as a tentative opening. This helps transform what could have been a direct demand into a respectful and ethically cautious negotiation.

4.2. Negative Politeness Strategies and Autonomy Protection

The dominant strategy in the exchange is negative politeness. This appears in conditional formulations, cautious wording, and deferential language that allow the lecturer room to decline, postpone, or respond on their own terms. Such formulations are not only socially polite; they also function as ethical safeguards because they avoid pressuring the senior scholar into an immediate or symbolic commitment. This is particularly important in Indonesian academic culture, where hierarchy and *pekewuh* can make refusal socially uncomfortable. A highly direct or presumptive request might unintentionally create coercion. By contrast, a conditional expression such as "if you are willing" gives the interlocutor a clear exit and preserves the ethical quality of the interaction.

4.3. Off-Record Responses and Digital Materiality

The lecturer's brief and delayed response can be read as an off-record strategy enabled by the medium itself. WhatsApp's asynchronous structure allows users to delay commitment, give minimal replies, or maintain professional distance without producing a direct refusal. In this sense, silence and brevity are not empty forms; they are communicative acts shaped by digital affordances. The material structure of the platform therefore participates in meaning-making. The medium does not merely carry the conversation; it helps organize how face, authority, and obligation are negotiated. This makes digital academic communication an important site for pragmatic and ethical analysis.

4.4. Authorship as a Conditional Gesture

The mention of co-authorship is framed as a possibility rather than a claim. This is ethically important because it postpones entitlement and leaves authorship open to future contribution rather than presenting it as an automatic reward. The language used here reduces the risk of honorary authorship while still signaling scholarly seriousness and collaborative intent. In this respect, authorship appears as a conditional and relational gesture. It is not declared in advance, but held open until the extent of contribution becomes clearer. This language choice helps protect both the integrity of the project and the autonomy of the senior scholar.

4.5. Politeness as Ethical Technology

The analysis suggests that politeness in this case should be understood not only as social etiquette, but also as an ethical practice. The interaction shows that language can delay claims, protect boundaries, and preserve room for judgment before authorship is settled. Rather than treating politeness as a superficial softener, the article argues that it can operate as a practical means of maintaining academic integrity. This interpretation also has broader significance for academic literacy. To participate ethically in scholarly communication, early-career researchers must learn not only how to write formally, but also how to manage stance, deference, and contribution claims in real-time interactions. In that sense, politeness becomes part of the ethical competence of academic life.

5. Implications

Digital Spaces as Ethical Sites: Digital academic communication should be recognized as an ethical site in its own right. A short message can carry implications for authorship, hierarchy, and professional legitimacy, and therefore cannot be treated as merely casual interaction.

Balanced Communicative Competence: Early-career researchers need communicative skills that combine politeness with ethical awareness, especially when approaching senior scholars for reading, feedback, or collaboration.

Practical Ethics Training: Research ethics training should incorporate real examples of digital communication rather than relying only on abstract principles. Cases like this one show how ethical issues emerge in ordinary exchanges long before formal collaboration is finalized.

Recalibration of Local Values: The study suggests that local cultural practices such as *tepa selira* may be productively understood as resources for ethical negotiation rather than as obstacles to modern scholarly norms.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that a brief WhatsApp exchange between an early-career researcher and a senior lecturer can serve as a complex site of academic negotiation. By combining Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory with COPE and ICMJE authorship principles, the article shows that

politeness may function as an ethical resource that regulates the tempo of scholarly claims, protects autonomy, and guards against premature authorship attribution. At the same time, the findings should be read as a micro-level interpretation of a specific interaction rather than as a universal model of academic communication. The study's autoethnographic orientation makes reflexivity a strength, but it also requires careful attention to positionality and interpretive limits. The concepts of ethical technology, temporal compensation, and chronemic threat are useful as analytical prompts, but they would benefit from further operational refinement in future research. Despite these limitations, the article contributes to the study of digital academic communication by showing that local cultural resources, including indirectness and *tepa selira*, can support rather than undermine ethical scholarly practice. Rather than opposing modern academic ethics, such resources may help sustain respectful and integrity-oriented relationships in hierarchical academic environments. Future studies could expand the dataset, compare multiple digital platforms, and engage more fully with literature on rapport management, computer-mediated discourse, and contemporary authorship ethics.

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