

# Politeness strategies in customer-company communication on social media in Turkish and in English

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**POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN CUSTOMER–COMPANY COMMUNICATION  
ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN TURKISH AND IN ENGLISH**  
**Graduation thesis**

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## **Abstract**

This paper deals with politeness strategies in both Turkish and English language in responses to complaints and compliments on two major airline companies' social media. The analysis is based on Brown and Levinson's view on politeness and their positive and negative politeness strategies. As their work does not cover all the possible strategies and is tailored for a specific context, I will expand my analysis by using ideas introduced by postmodern researchers, namely Spencer-Oatey, Decock and Depraetere.

The methodology consisted of gathering all the possible replies to compliments and complaints made by the customer-service agents of the said companies and analysing them in accordance with the strategies described by Brown and Levinson. After that I focused on the classification of compliments introduced by Decock and Depraetere, and Spencer-Oatey, respectively.

To finish off the analysis, I analysed the direct and indirect speech acts in the replies to complaints and saw that United Airlines has a more informal and friendly approach, while Turkish Airlines nurtures a more distant relationship with their customers.

The analysis leads us to conclude that Brown and Levinson's theory makes for a good base for research but needs to be supported by other theories and views on politeness.

**Key words:** politeness strategies, social media, Turkish, English, compliments, complaints

## **Sažetak**

Tema ovog diplomskog rada su strategije izražavanja uljudnosti u engleskom i hrvatskom jeziku na primjeru odgovora na komplimente i pritužbe dviju velikih svjetskih aviokompanija, United Airlinesa i Turkish Airlinesa. Primjeri za ovaj rad prikupljeni su na društvenim mrežama navedenih kompanija, odnosno na Facebooku i Instagramu tijekom 2021. i 2022. godine. U radu je korišteno ukupno 28 primjera pisanih od strane United Airlinesa i 29 primjera pisanih od Turkish Airlinesa. Od navedenih 28, odnosno 29 primjera, 14 je primjera za odgovore na komplimente i 14 za odgovore na pritužbe United Airlinesa te 14 odgovora na komplimente i 15 odgovora na pritužbe Turkish Airlinesa. Navedeni primjeri predstavljaju samo reprezentativni uzorak jer je tijekom analize ustanovljeno da se primjeri ponavljaju te su odabrani samo oni najčešće korišteni.

Rad se bazira na teoriji uljudnosti koju su postavili Brown i Levinson te na njihovim strategijama pozitivne i negativne uljudnosti. Brown i Levinson prilikom definiranja svoje teorije uljudnosti koriste primjere iz tri jezika, no njihov se pristup temelji na primjerima koji se ne podudaraju s onima korištenima u ovom radu, odnosno s primjerima u računalom posredovanoj komunikaciji. U radu sam analizirala pozitivne i negativne strategije uljudnosti Browna i Levinsona u primjerima odgovora na komplimente i pritužbe. Primijetila sam da se neke od njihovih strategija mogu pronaći i u primjerima koje sam proučavala, ali da njihove strategije ne pokrivaju sve instance uljudnosti te se treba osloniti i na druge teorijske okvire.

Prilikom analiziranja primjera odgovora na pritužbe, oslonila sam se na terminologiju koju su uvele Decock i Depraetere, koje smatraju da se pritužbe mogu generalno podijeliti na eksplicitne i implicitne. Nadalje, navode četiri konstitutivna elementa od kojih svaka pritužba sadrži minimalno jedan, a analizom primjera u ovom radu zaključila sam da se većina sastoji od najmanje tri elementa ili više.

U odgovorima na pritužbe se, za razliku od odgovora na komplimente, mogu pronaći primjeri pozitivnih i negativnih strategija uljudnosti prema teorijskom okviru Brown i Levinsona, ali ponekad je vrlo teško razlučiti radi li se o pozitivnim ili negativnim strategijama zbog nesukladnosti njihovih definicija s načinom na koji se strategije koriste u navedenim primjerima.

U radu sam također analizirala i direktne i indirektne govorne činove te sam zaključila da United Airlines u svojim odgovorima koristi deset mogućih kombinacija govornih činova u odgovorima, dok ih Turkish Airlines koristi osam. Kako se većina odgovora na pritužbe sastoji od zahtjeva za više informacija, analizirala sam te zahtjeve i utvrdila da Turkish Airlines preferira direktne zahtjeve, a United Airlines indirektne.

## 1. Introduction

Social media sites are places where people can communicate with their friends and acquaintances easily and quickly, but in the recent years those sites have also become a platform where people can express their grievances and complaints related to any kind of experience they might have had, i.e. eating bad food in a restaurant, dissatisfaction with online shopping, or in this study, dissatisfaction with the airline they used. People are turning to online sites of various companies for help every day. While traditional ways for expressing complaints, such as phone calls, offer a chance to talk to an agent who might be able to solve the problem immediately, those calls take time some people do not have. Furthermore, many companies nowadays choose to employ fewer customer service agents which means that it could be difficult to reach them. Social media sites have emerged as a solution for this problem. They offer help in real time via chats, but people can also post a comment, which gives them a chance to get a helpful and human response to complaints and grievances.

A number of different social media sites, such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, have an open format which means that everyone can read conversations between individuals or between individuals and official accounts of different companies. It is in the best interest of companies to show the public that they communicate with their customers effectively and are doing their best to solve their problems because their image on social media and the willingness to solve problems is one of the factors for deciding to buy that company's products. Furthermore, public engagement of companies on social media can diffuse potential negative sentiment that could fester on social media platform, and in turn could promote a positive attitude toward the company's brand (Hu, Tafti and Gal, 2019:4466). Expressing opinions online, positive or negative, is encouraged because in that way companies can learn about customers' experience, restore satisfaction and strengthen business relationships.

While many companies do not actually solve the complaints and problems on public social media sites, but prefer to politely respond to their customers and refer them to other outlets, such as private messages, their public responses are very important because they show that the company is responsive and prepared to resolve problems and in that way they are building their image. Many researchers who have dealt with the issue of politeness on social media have concluded that online conversations often seem less polite than those conducted face-to-face (Brennan and Ohaeri: 1999; Ho: 2016; Gunarathne, Rui and Seidmann: 2017).

In this paper, I will deal with the politeness strategies customers and two major international companies use when responding to customer complaints on their official social media accounts on Facebook and Instagram. The languages this thesis deals with are English and Turkish, and therefore I chose two companies which, for most of the time, conduct their business in those languages. The said companies are Turkish Airlines (or Türk Hava Yolları, their official name) and United. While United uses only English as a means of communication with their customers, Turkish Airlines mostly uses Turkish and English, but German, French and Spanish, among others, may also be found on their social media sites.

My focus will be on positive and negative politeness strategies put forward by Brown and Levinson in their colossal work from 1978, *Politeness: Some universals in language use*. Brown and Levinson claimed their politeness theory can be applied to all languages, which they tried to prove by using examples from English, Tzetzal and Tamil. Also, I will examine if there are any differences in using these strategies seeing that I will be dealing with strategies used in two different cultures and if this brings about any misunderstandings. In her thesis, Suhan Akinci, who dealt with politeness in Turkish complaints, claims that Brown and Levinson's framework can be applied to Turkish "because of the fact that it was not difficult to group strategies as positive, negative, off-record, direct or silence forms, which leads to conclusion that the framework is universal" (1999:157).

Furthermore, even though Brown and Levinson's politeness theory has been criticized by many scholars, it is the only theory, alongside Leech's, that is explained in enough detail to be used on the examples from existing languages. Their hypothesis has also been described as "the best articulated politeness theory to date", (Kasper 2004:376).

## **2. Social media communication, online complaints and compliments**

Social media is a group of Internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Malthouse, Haenlein, Skiera, Wege and Zhang 2013). Under this term, we can find different sites on which the users can modify, create, comment and share different content. Boyd and Ellison define social network site as

"a web-based service that allows individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (as cited in Theodoropoulou 2015:24).

The way some social media sites work changes every day as new updates are added. Many internationally renowned companies refrain from using some aspects of social media because it is very easy for their users to share unwanted content which in turn leads to bad business reviews and can even have an effect on their profit. However, social media offers many possibilities for companies, especially those who have to deal with their customers on a daily basis. Talking with customers on social media has replaced traditional ways of communication, such as phone calls and face-to-face communication. Social media offers customers a possibility to send a public or a private message to companies in real time, and there is no limitation when it comes to the shape of the message, the language used or the number of signs.

Furthermore, Gunarathne, Rui and Seidmann elaborate that customers are no longer limited to a passive role in their relationship with a brand because they are empowered by the popularization of social media (2015:3288). Customers can easily express and distribute their opinions or complaints publicly to a large audience in real time, significantly raising the bar of customer service in the age of social media. On social media there is no prerequisite or common practice for those messages to look and sound official, such is the case with e-mails. That is precisely the reason why some researchers would argue that conversations on social media often seem impolite. Many researchers who have dealt with the issue of politeness on social media have concluded that online conversations often seem less polite than those conducted face-to-face (Brennan and Ohaeri: 1999, Ho: 2016, Gunarathne, Rui and Seidmann: 2017). Brennan and Ohaeri in their analysis of electronic conversations concluded that, with the emergence of social media, “people are unfamiliar with conventions for etiquette and that people may focus on messages rather than their interlocutors; and since interlocutors are not present, people anonymous, which causes them to act inhibited” (1999:227). Furthermore, with the amount of interlocutors and the endless possibilities to communicate on social media, the boundaries between the strictly formal and the informal way of communication have become blurred. Relationships and social roles are nowadays not clearly defined, and as Deniz Zeyrek observes, “the subchanges in the society reflect in the linguistic performance of its members” (2001:60).

Conversation is a critical factor for the success of social media sites. People form social relationships through conversation, or rather through patterns of message construction, ways of putting things or simply language usage, as Brown and Levinson conclude in their book (1994: 55). Burke et al. argue that online communities must meet the needs of individual members in



order to survive and thrive, and that conversation is the mechanism through which that occurs (2007:2). They also argue that newcomers on social media determine through reading archived conversation whether they will benefit from their membership. That same analogy may be used in the case of possible customers who might decide on choosing a product by examining the relationship the company has with its current users and the way they communicate on social media. Conversation is also important for the companies because it gives them a chance to respond and to turn a dissatisfied customer into a loyal one or just resolve a possible issue by giving advice on the matter.

### 3. Politeness

What would be the first thing people thought of if we asked them about politeness and the definition of it? Would it be the politeness Brown and Levinson are talking about, the linguistic politeness, or would it be proper and polite behaviour toward others? Polite behaviour is in the very core of the traditional behaviour in Turkey whose people care a lot about tradition and carry it from one generation to another. In accordance with the definitions used by a great number of authors (e.g., Brown and Levinson, Holmes, Kadar etc.) conventional behaviour can be defined as a polite behaviour and it presupposes a common usage of expressions used to signify good wishes, gratitude, and congratulations. Turkish people care deeply about their tradition, especially when it comes to interpersonal relations, and people who behave in that way are considered polite and well-behaved, instead of old-fashioned. In my limited experience, I have noticed that Turkish people use an array of different polite expressions just to thank somebody, while Croatian and English-speaking people would use only expressions such as *thank you* or *thank you very much*, which I will also show further on in this thesis.

If we look up the term politeness in the Oxford Dictionary, we will see that politeness is “behaviour that is respectful and considerate of other people”. This is a definition of a common-sense notion of politeness, which is not that different to the linguistic notion.

In his book *The Pragmatics of Politeness*, first published in 1983, Geoffrey Leech classified politeness in four different categories according to the inherent functions of communication acts. The convivial function of politeness manifests in cases when illocutionary and social communication aim coincide, and the examples include greetings, congratulations, offerings, invites etc. The collaborative function refers to contexts in which the illocutionary and

the social aim are independent of one another, when speakers declare, report, assert, announce, etc. The competitive function of politeness is realised in situations where the illocutionary goal competes with the social goal and speakers order, ask, demand, beg, etc. The conflicting function entails a conflict between the illocutionary and the social goal and occurs when speakers threaten, accuse and express negative feelings and reactions (1983:104).

Brown and Levinson define politeness as “face-saving behaviour”, or the employment of threat-minimising strategies (1994:59). To explain their definition, they use the term FTAs or face-threatening acts, which I will talk more about in the following chapters.

#### 4. Politeness theories

Studies carried out on politeness can be grouped into five different groups:

1. The social norm view
2. The conversational maxim view
3. The “face-saving” view proposed by Brown and Levinson
4. The conversational-contract view
5. Spencer-Oatey’s view

The first two groups, alongside the conversational-contract view, were proposed by Bruce Fraser in his *Perspective on Politeness* in 1990, while the fifth group was added by Helen Spencer-Oatey. Under the social norm view, as every society has its own social norms, politeness is the result of an action congruent with those norms, while impoliteness occurs when an action is not in harmony with social norms (Fraser 1990:2).

The conversational-maxim view is based on Grice’s cooperative principle, which Grice defined as “an idea that we all have expectations about the kinds of things people will say, how they will say things, how specific we need to be, the order in which things are said etc. when engaging in a conversation (1991:26). The basic notion of the cooperative principle is that one should say what one wants to say, when and the way one wants to do it. The cooperative principle is the cooperation between speakers in using the conversational maxims, and these are the maxims of quantity, quality, relevance and manner. The maxim of quality states that the speaker has to be sincere and genuine. The maxim of quantity means that the speaker must not say less or more than is required or supply the right amount of information, while the maxim of relevance states that the

speaker should say only that what is relevant. Finally, the maxim of manner means that the speaker must avoid ambiguity and obscurity or give out clear information.

The conversational-contract view was introduced by Fraser, who combined Grice's cooperative principle and Goffman's notion of face. The rationale behind this view is that "each party brings an understanding of some set of rights and obligations that will determine what the participants can expect from others" (1990:20). In other words, parties in a conversation are aware of the rules, terms and conditions at the time of the conversation, and politeness constitutes the behaviour which is in accordance with those terms.

Fraser came up with four conceivable perspectives on politeness. The social norm perspective presents politeness as socially appropriate conduct, while the conversational-contract perspective sets politeness through the frames of conversational contract and proposes its dependency on context understanding. The conversational-maxim perspective is based on the efficient conveying of messages, and the face-saving perspective sees politeness as a linguistic conduct whose goal is to maintain and/or promote one's face.

Fraser rejected the rules of politeness and stated that the context in which sentences are uttered makes the difference and therefore is the ground for politeness. Fraser's view on politeness depends on three factors, and these are: 1. Speakers' and hearers' expectations as built up by the participants, or the things we expect from a conversation; 2. The requirements the society brings to the culture, the requirements people must obey; 3. Politeness depending on context, power and status (ibid:21).

Helen Spencer-Oatey offers a modified framework for politeness through something she calls "rapport management" (the management of harmony and disharmony among people). Her notion of rapport management is based on three interconnected components, and those are the management of face, the management of sociality rights and obligations, and the management of interactional goals (2000:13). As for her definition of face, she sees it as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular context" (ibid:13). Sociality rights, obligations and goals are formulated by people based on their previous experience and knowledge from conversations and are derived from normative behaviour.

Instead of face-threatening acts proposed by Brown and Levinson, Spencer-Oatey suggests three ways people can be threatened in. Those are the face-threatening behaviour, the rights threatening behaviour and the goal-threatening behaviour (ibid:17). From her rapport management

perspective, not all FTAs are face-threatening, as Brown and Levinson claim. Some speech acts may be face-enhancing, while others can only be rights-threatening. For example, if a friend or a colleague requests help from us with something they haven't been able to solve, even though we repeatedly offered help, that would hurt our face as long as the friend does not accept the offered help. However, if and when the friend accepts our help, that would then enhance our face.

#### 4.1. Brown and Levinson

To explain their politeness theory, Brown and Levinson start out by introducing a Model Person or an MP, which, as they say, has two special properties: rationality and face. The term *face* is especially important for their theory and they define it as “the want to be unimpeded and the want to be approved in certain aspects” (1994:58) or as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (1994:61). Brown and Levinson differentiate between two types of face, negative and positive face. While negative face is defined as “the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others”, i.e. freedom of action and freedom from imposition, positive face is “the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others”, (1994:62). Rationality denotes the ability of both the speaker and the addressee to achieve a certain goal.

As Brown and Levinson believe in the universality of both face and rationality, they also believe that certain acts intrinsically threaten one's face, especially those acts “that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker” (1994:65). The acts they have in mind are done by verbal or non-verbal communication. The acts they refer to are called FTAs or face-threatening acts and can be divided into acts that threaten one's negative or positive face. Negative FTAs obstruct the speaker's or the hearer's freedom of action and freedom from imposition, and positive FTAs inflict damage to one's face by denoting the interlocutor's lack of appreciation and/or approval for one's feelings, wants, desires, etc. (ibid).

Brown and Levinson enumerate those possible acts, which are: orders and requests, suggestions, advice, reminders, threats, warnings, dares, offers, promises, compliments, expressions of envy or admiration and expressions of strong negative emotions (1994:66-67). While orders, requests, suggestions, advice, reminders, threats, warnings and dares primarily threaten the addressee's negative face by indicating that the speaker does not intend to avoid impeding the addressee's freedom of speech, offers and promises predicate some positive future

acts of the speaker toward the addressee. Compliments, expressions of envy or admiration and expressions of strong negative emotions toward the addressee predicate some desire of the speaker toward the addressee or his goods.

Some FTAs may threaten the positive face by indicating that the speaker does not care about the addressee’s feelings, wants etc. Expressions of disapproval, criticism, contempt or ridicule, complaints or disagreements and challenges show that the speaker has a negative evaluation of some aspects of the addressee’s positive face. On the other hand, expressions of violent emotions, mention of taboo topics and irreverence show that the speaker does not care about the addressee’s positive face.

#### 4.1.1. Strategies for doing FTAs

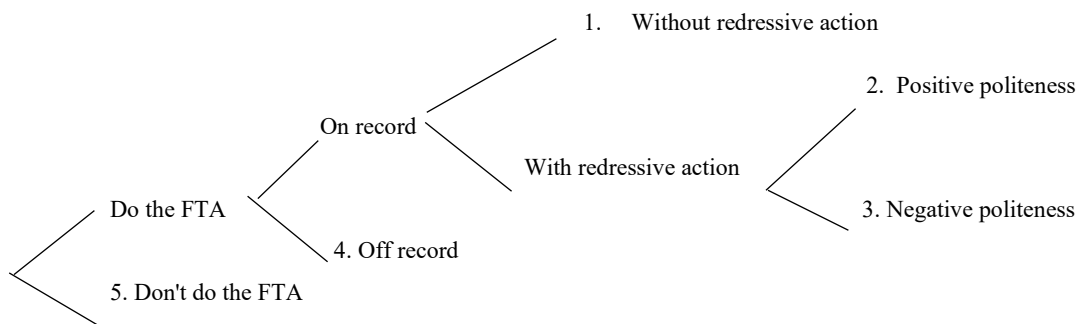


Table 1. Strategies for doing FTAs (Brown and Levinson 1994:68)

As is shown in Table 1., Brown and Levinson devised different strategies for doing the FTAs. An actor goes on record in doing an act A if it is clear to the participants what communicative intent led the actor to do A. If there is more than one unambiguous intention and the actor cannot commit to one particular intent, that means that he is using the strategy of going off record. The strategy of doing an act baldly and without redress means that the actor does it in the most direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way possible. This strategy is used in the situation where the speaker has nothing to lose and therefore is not afraid of the addressee because the speaker is superior to the addressee. Bald on record also follows the principle of Grice’s maxims, as explained above. One of the reasons the speaker will use this strategy is because his wants come first and are more important than satisfying the hearer’s face.

By going on-record, a speaker can gain different advantages. He can enlist public pressure against the addressee and he can avoid the danger of being misunderstood. On the other hand, by going off-record, the speaker can get credit for being tactful and he can avoid responsibility for the potentially face-damaging interpretation. Brown and Levinson write that the “prime reason for bald-on-record usage may be stated simply: whenever speaker wants to do the FTA with maximum efficiency more than he wants to satisfy addressee’s face, he will choose the bald-on-record strategy” (1994:95). Off-record utterances can be constructed using a number of strategies: through inviting conversational implicatures (strategy 1-10); by being vague or ambiguous through the violating of the maxim of manner (strategy 11-15) (ibid. 211-227).

Strategy 1: Give hints

Strategy 2: Give association clues

Strategy 3: Presuppose

Strategy 4: Understate

Strategy 5: Overstate

Strategy 6: Use tautologies

Strategy 7: Use contradictions

Strategy 8: Be ironic

Strategy 9: Use metaphors

Strategy 10: Use rhetorical questions

Strategy 11: Be ambiguous

Strategy 12: Be vague

Strategy 13: Over-generalize

Strategy 14: Displace H

Strategy 15: Be incomplete, use ellipsis

Negative politeness consists of a strategy in which the speaker is aware of the addressee’s negative-face want, which means that the speaker will not interfere with the addressee’s freedom of action. Linguistic realizations, as explained by Brown and Levinson (ibid. 130), are: conventional indirectness, hedges on illocutionary force, polite pessimism and the emphasis on addressee’s relative power. Furthermore, negative politeness can be realized in a number of ways: through being direct (strategy 1); by not presuming/assuming (strategy 2); by not coercing with H (strategy 3-5); by communicating S’s want to not impinge on H (strategy 6-9); by redressing other wants of H’s (strategy 10) (ibid. 129-210).

Strategy 1: Be conventionally indirect

Strategy 2: Question, hedge

- Strategy 3: Be pessimistic
- Strategy 4: Minimize the imposition, Rx
- Strategy 5: Give deference
- Strategy 6: Apologize
- Strategy 7: Impersonalise S and H
- Strategy 8: State the FTA as a general rule
- Strategy 9: Nominalize
- Strategy 10: Go on record incurring a debt, or as not indebting H

Positive politeness, on the other hand, is the positive self-image that the speaker claims for himself (1994:71). Positive politeness is a strategy designed to increase the closeness and the solidarity between the speaker and the addressee, while negative politeness is used in a situation when the speaker wants to be at a distance from the addressee. Positive politeness can be gained in a number of ways: through claiming common ground (strategy 1-8); conveying that S and H are cooperators (strategy 9-14); by fulfilling H's wants for some X (strategy 15) (ibid. 101-129)

**Claiming common ground:**

- Strategy 1: Notice, attend to H (his interests, wants needs, goods)
- Strategy 2: Exaggerate (interest, approval sympathy with H)
- Strategy 3: Intensify interest to H
- Strategy 4: Use in-group identity markers
- Strategy 5: Seek agreement
- Strategy 6: Avoid disagreement
- Strategy 7: Presuppose/raise/assert common ground
- Strategy 8: Joke

**Convey that S and H are coopeators:**

- Strategy 9: Assert or presuppose S's knowledge of or concern for H's wants
- Strategy 10: Offer, promise
- Strategy 11: Be optimistic
- Strategy 12: Include both S and H in the activity
- Strategy 13: Give (or ask for) reasons
- Strategy 14: Assume or assert reciprocity

**Fulfill H's want for some X:**

- Strategy 15: Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)

Where Brown and Levinson use the term positive and negative politeness, Geoffrey Leech uses pos-politeness and neg-politeness. Furthermore, he writes that "neg-politeness is generally

more important than pos-politeness because failure to show enough neg-politeness is likely to leave the other person with a sense of grievance (taking offence), while the failure to show an adequate degree of pos-politeness is likely to have less disruptive consequences” (2014:12).

As it could be presumed that the majority of the customer-company communication on social media is about complaints and requests, and only a smaller amount is to do with compliments, I will be focusing on negative politeness, especially when it comes to company communication. Companies in their answers use strategies for negative politeness to reduce the damage and give deference, especially when it comes to Turkish. In their article on politeness in Turkish, Abadžić-Navaey and Bakšić write that Turkish society can be described as a society of marked positive politeness as there are many politeness strategies speakers use in order to minimize threats to the addressee’s face, such as fixed idiomatic phrases used for starting or closing dialogues, compliments, expressions of good wishes and blessings (2018:4). Not many papers have been written on the subject of positive and negative politeness in Turkish, so this thesis may be seen as a continuation of Abadžić-Navaey and Bakšić’s research, but seeing that it deals with examples where both positive and negative politeness can be observed, it will offer a new perspective on politeness in Turkish.

#### 4.2. Postmodern research

Postmodern or discursive researchers differ from Brown and Levinson in that they focus on longer fragments of utterances, and in the fact that they are interested in both the speaker’s and the hearer’s production of utterances. As I stated before, it often seems that Brown and Levinson focused on examples which easily fit their description of politeness and FTAs. As discursive perspective focuses on both the interactants’ and researchers’ interpretation of politeness, this view differentiates between ‘first-order’ and ‘second-order’ politeness. ‘First-order’ politeness deals with the interactants’ interpretation, while the ‘second-order’ deals with the researchers’. Postmodern researchers believe researchers of politeness are under the influence of their own experience, beliefs, knowledge and sometimes prejudices when analysing examples. This aspect is especially important when researchers do not focus on the ‘lay’ interpretation of politeness, but rather use their own understanding of politeness and thus avoid noticing important contributions to their research. In their thesis on politeness research in and across cultures, Kádár and Bargiela-Chiappini argue that ‘in order to promote a more comprehensive and sophisticated interpretation



of situated politeness, researchers need to focus on lay interpretations by exploring hearer's and speaker's evaluations in longer fragments of discourse and furthering second-order politeness understanding' (2011:5).

Even though many researchers believe Brown and Levinson's theory is not universal and that it lacks diversity when it comes to the examples used for their research, their view on politeness will be the starting point for this paper. I have chosen to focus on their examples because I wanted to find out how many of their FTAs can be found in computer-mediated communication, and because this communication could be perceived as a one-way street if we perceive that most comments made by companies are pre-written and formulaic.

Having stated that, I do realize that Brown and Levinson's theory might not be enough to account for all instances of politeness. Therefore, I plan on incorporating different takes on politeness into my research, namely the ideas of Helen Spencer-Oatey and the postmodern researchers.

## **5. Research**

For the purpose of this master thesis, I tried to find as many examples of different answers to customers' comments online on Facebook pages of both Turkish Airlines and United Airlines. The idea is to see what the customer service looks like online, especially in these times when most of the airlines are struggling to make ends meet and therefore had to let go many of their agents in call centres, but also due to the fact that people may prefer to communicate with customer service via Facebook, Instagram or Twitter accounts as it saves time, leaves written record and provides assistance without having to wait for an agent to pick up the phone.

While I have seen that Turkish Airlines uses different languages to answer their clients, starting from Turkish and English, to Russian, Spanish, German, Azeri and so on, the official account of United Airlines is operated only in English and therefore they only answer to English-speaking customers. The examples were collected over a longer period of time and under different posts as I tried to find as many different examples as I could. In the end, I used 28 examples written by United, 14 for answers to compliments and 14 for answers to complaints, and 29 examples written by Turkish Airlines, 14 for answers to compliments and 15 for answers to complaints. My methodology consisted of making a list of every compliment and complaint I could find and then looking at the forms used for answering. I found that answers to compliments occurred not as often

as those to complaints, and that the answer forms were more free than the ones for complaints. As I identified several forms used for answers to complaints, I decided to use only representative examples in this thesis instead of repeating the same form all over again. Therefore, the number of examples in this thesis is limited, but it covers the most frequently used forms found on both Turkish and United Airlines' Facebook and Instagram pages.

The names of the real customers will not be used in this thesis; I will refer to them as customers. During my search for replies, I saw that the majority of customers' comments refer to either complaints or compliments, so I decided to take a further look into the customer-airline communication in these cases. As the majority of the replies made by Turkish Airlines is in Turkish, I translated those replies to English as well in order to be able to compare them with the replies made by United Airlines. As is the case with compliments in oral discourse, the usual reply is to thank the speaker, which will also be shown in the examples, but when it comes to complaints, the agents reply with a request, and in some cases, an apology. In order to establish further communication with the customers and try to solve the problem, the agents request more information or ask the customers to be patient until their problem is resolved.

### 5.1. Compliments

In any conversational exchange, the preferred response to a compliment would be an agreement with the hearer, but seeing that there is no formula for producing a compliment, that also means that there is no formula for an answer. There is pressure on the hearer to agree with the speaker and accept the compliment, but there is also pressure on the hearer to minimize self-praise. Depending on its position in a sequence and on the context, any utterance can function as a compliment, which can then be applied to the answer to it as well. According to the data collected by Kádár and Bargiella-Chiappini, they deduced that “compliments can be paid in response to questions asking for one's opinion and in response to statements concerning wishes” (2011:28). Although this may be true for their work, here I will try to show that compliments can be used as a response to other compliments.

Communication is easier when both the speaker and the hearer use the same language and come from the same culture as previous research in intercultural communication has shown that performing acts in a second language can be challenging (Haugh and Kadar 2013, Kadar and Bargiella-Chiappini 2011, Theodoropoulo 2015). There are inherent differences between the first

language and culture, and the target language and culture. Compliments are culturally specific, too. Among others, features which are connected to cultural difference are, among others, frequency of occurrence, appropriateness, and recognition of utterances which are recognized as compliments.

The examples for this can be found in the following answers of Turkish Airlines' agents to their customers' comments. I have tried to find an equal number of examples in both languages, but with Turkish Airlines being a Turkish company, the prevailing number of customer-service replies is in fact in Turkish. During the time I was writing this thesis, Turkish Airlines had more than 10 million followers on Facebook and more than 1.8 million followers on Instagram. United Airlines, on the other hand, had 1.3 million followers on Facebook and more than 800 thousand followers on Instagram. Alongside more followers, Turkish Airlines also has more posts on both social media accounts as they post something almost every day, while United posts every two days. The amount of followers and posts certainly makes a difference when it comes to the number of comments as well. The more posts they publish, the more people will comment, which will give the airline a chance to connect with their customers.

In traditional Muslim societies the maxim of utmost modesty prevails, minimizing the speaker's value and avoiding the compliment is considered a desirable form of expressing politeness (Abadžić-Navaey and Bakšić 2018:4). The hearer is not expected to agree with the compliment, but to show modesty and reply as if there is no need to thank them, or in a situation where we have multiple agents involved, thank the speaker and in order not to take all the credit, indirectly mention the other agents (Samarah 2015:2007-2009). In American culture, on the other hand, the implicit ideal is to accept a compliment graciously, but Pomerantz (1978) writes that according to her data, "a large proportion of compliment responses deviate from the model response of accepting compliments" (as cited in Holmes 1986:495).

As there are not many published articles and books on politeness in Turkish, I have decided to use some examples from Teodosijević's book (2004) for this thesis. She dealt with Turkish language in everyday communication and summarized most of the polite expressions which reflect polite behaviour in Turkish. Furthermore, she wrote that conventional behaviour is deemed the only polite behaviour and that for this type of behaviour, people need to frequently use expressions of good wishes, gratitude and congratulations.

As I have previously stated, polite communication is very important for Turkish people, which they then use in intercultural communication by simply translating their fixed expressions

into other languages, and that can be seen in the examples 1-11, but especially in example 2. *Take good care of yourself* is a direct translation of a Turkish expression *kendinize iyi bakın*, which in English would be *take care*, but the fact that it consists of a premodifier *good* and *of yourself*, shows us that the speaker did not think about the English form and the fact that it might sound odd to English speakers, but rather just used the Turkish equivalent. Another example of this can be found in the example number 11, where the expression *cherish your days* is a direct translation of *günlerizin tadını çıkarın*, which is quite common in Turkish, but does not exist as an expression in English.

According to Bakšić, greetings are a way to show solidarity and should be explored as strategies for positive politeness (2012:54). To start off, the examples 1, 2, 5 and 6, which are in English, and 3 and 4, which are in Turkish, all begin with a greeting.

1. *Customer*: good service

*Turkish Airlines*: **Hello**, we're happy to hear that our team was able to be so helpful to you. Please feel free to send us with any further details, we'd love to pass along the compliment.

2. *Customer*: best fly and good service 😊😊😊😊

*Turkish Airlines*: **Hello** dear, we are truly happy to hear your kind words. We strive hard to provide the best service for you. **Thanks** for choosing us, take good care of yourself until we meet again.

3. *Customer*: Şuan istanbul Havaalanındayım THY Ailesine ilgi ve Alakadar Olduklarından Dolayı Çok Teşekkür Ederim Hizmet 10 Numara Daha Önce de Bir çok Kez Seheyat Yaptım o Seheyatlarımda Bile Hizmet Süperdi Başarılar Dilerim #Türkiyemizin Gururu.. (I am currently in Istanbul Airport, thank you to the THY family for their concern, the service was 10 out of 10. I travelled a lot in the past, the service was great. Good luck #theprideofTurkey)

*Turkish Airlines*: **Merhaba**, siz **değerli** yolcularımıza en iyi hizmeti vermek için çalışıyoruz. Güzel geri bildiriminiz için **teşekkür ederiz**. ❤️ (Hello, we work to provide you, our precious passengers, the best service. Thank you for the lovely feedback.)

4. *Customer*: Thy başka bir sey bilmem en güzel hizmet ve rahatlık çok seyahat etmem fakat ettiğimde de thy şaşmam. (THY is something else, I don't know, the best service and comfort, I don't travel a lot, but I always choose THY.)

*Turkish Airlines*: **Merhaba**, güzel düşüncelerinizi bizimle paylaştığınız için **teşekkür ederiz**. Siz değerli yolcularımızın geri bildirimleri bizim için çok önemli. İyi günler dileriz. (Hello, thank you for sharing your lovely thoughts with us. The feedback of our precious customers means a lot to us. Have a nice day.)

5. *Customer*: I want to tell you what happened to me on flight 3830 Chicago to Lexington flight today. My wedding band fell off my finger before takeoff and I couldn't find it anywhere. I was sick about it. I asked the flight attendant if she found it to please return it to me. She went above and beyond

what I asked for asking everyone to please look for it. A passenger in the back of the plane found it and I am at a loss for words. It means so much to me. Thank the flight attendant and the person that found it.

United: **Hi**, Bill, we are happy that you were able to find your wedding band with the assistance of the flight attendant. Can you please privately message us with your confirmation number and the flight attendant's information so that we can forward this to them. ^PC





6. Customer: Dear United Airlines, I want to thank you with the travel that changed our lives. My daughter and me travelled Lima to Sidney. The day of departure, she was very sad leaving her grandma and friends in our country, Peru. From the first time at the airport the staff was very friendly and helpful. The crew was very kind, they looked after us very well.

United: **Hi**, An. We are happy to hear that you and your daughter had such a positive travel experience! **Thanks** for the shout-out! ^FC

In English, that is *hello*, and in Turkish that is *merhaba*. Teodosijević writes that *merhaba* is the most frequent greeting in Turkish and can be used by both young and old people. Furthermore, it is often used in combination with other appropriate greetings. A greeting is also a confirmation that the hearer wants to make contact with the speaker. Unlike opening arguments and greetings, the closing ones are harder and last longer, or in this case, are longer when it comes to word count, because they suggest that the hearer will keep on caring for the speaker. Since the termination of communication represents a certain risk for the speaker and the hearer, goodbyes and closing greetings last longer than the informative role of the language suggests because the hearer needs to be convinced his positive face is not threatened.

Furthermore, when we look at examples 1 and 2, we can see that the example number 2 includes the word 'dear' after the greeting, which may not be odd for most people who would read this comment, but I believe it is important to touch upon it because it demonstrates the difference between these two cultures. 'Dear' is frequently used in written communication in English, but it is mostly used with a name of the person someone is referring to, and that is not the case here. On the other hand, the equivalent for 'dear' in Turkish, *canım*, is usually used without a name, and its literal meaning is 'my soul, my life'. According to my own experience and knowledge of the Turkish culture, it is used in communication with people close to the speaker, but also for creating a bond with mere acquaintances or unfamiliar people. Therefore, I would conclude that the person who wrote this might not have been aware of this difference in the languages, or the culture so this word in a written response might be unexpected and possibly impolite for a person not speaking Turkish.

When it comes to accepting a compliment, the obvious sign of acceptance is thanking the speaker, which can be seen in examples 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, by Turkish Airlines and in examples 6, 17, 19, 21 and 22, made by United. In English, this is made by using the expression *thank you* or *thanks*, and in Turkish with *teşekkür ederiz*, which is the most frequent way to thank somebody, or *teşekkürler*, a form used to express respect.

7. *Customer*: I tried your airlines more than once, and the trips were more than excellent and safe   Keep going  

*Turkish Airlines*: **Thank you** for your kind words. See you next time!

8. *Customer*: Çok güzel bir paylaşım çok teşekkür ederiz THY 3 mart sabah 8.30 Ankara'dan İzmir'e gittim 12 mart 12.30 da İzmir 'den Ankara'ya döndüm herşey için çok teşekkür ederim tüm ekibinize her şey çok güzeldi. (Very nice post, thank you very much. THY March 3, 8.30 in the morning I went from Ankara to Izmir, and came back to Ankara from Izmir on March 12. Thank you to the entire team, everything was perfect.)

*Turkish Airlines*: Değerli yorumlarınızı bizimle paylaşmış olduğunuz için **teşekkür ederiz**. En kısa sürede tekrar görüşmek dileği ile. (Thank you for sharing these precious comments with us. We hope to see you again soon.)

9. *Customer*: 30 years I have been flying Turkish airlines thank u all ur crew... Im happy to flying

*Turkish Airlines*: We're glad to hear this. We strive to provide the best service for you. Thanks for choosing us, take care of yourself until we meet again.

One of Brown and Levinson's strategies for positive politeness is claiming common ground, which can also be seen in the answers of Turkish Airlines, specifically in examples 9, 10 and 2 (as show above), written in English, and in examples 12 and 13, written in Turkish. According to them, common ground can be achieved in three ways: "S may convey that some want of H's is admirable or interesting to S too, S may stress common membership in a group or society, and S can claim common perspective with H without necessarily referring to in-group membership" (1994:103).

10. *Customer*: Best best in the world fly and good service. Love Turkish Airlines  TRTR

*Turkish Airlines*: **Hello**, we are truly happy to hear your kind words. We strive hard to provide the best service for you. **Thanks** for choosing us, take good care of yourself until we meet again.

11. *Customer*: I like Turkish airline, their crew member are very cordial and cooperative. I want to visit London again in Turkish Airline in May 2022.

Turkish: Hello, we do appreciate that you enjoyed your flight experience. Cherish your days till we meet up again onboard.

12. *Customer*: Yolculuğum esnasında ve valiz aktarımında hiçbir sorun yaşamadım teşekkür ederim. (I had no problems during the flight or with the luggage transfer. Thank you.)

*Turkish Airlines:* Size daha iyi hizmet verebilmek öncelikli hedefimiz. Bir sonraki uçuşunuzda görüşmek üzere. (Our priority is to be able to provide you even better service. See you on the next flight.)

13. *Customer:* THY uçuşlarım da her zaman çok konforluydum kesinlikle herşey düşünülüyor verdiğiniz paralara değiyor 🍋 (My flights with THY are always very comfortable, they think of everything. It's definitely worth the money.)

*Turkish Airlines:* **Merhaba**, nazik sözlerinizi duymaktan gerçekten mutluyuz. Sizin için en iyi hizmeti sunmak için çok çalışıyoruz. Bizi tercih ettiğiniz için **teşekkürler**, tekrar görüşene kadar kendinize iyi bakın. (Hello, we are very happy to hear your thoughtful words. We try very hard to provide you the best service possible. Thank you for choosing us, take care until we meet again.)

14. *Customer:* THY bir numara diğerlerini de kullandık bariz farklı sunum personel temizlik süper yani. (THY is perfect, we travelled with the others as well, obviously different, presentation, crew, cleanliness was superb.)

*Turkish Airlines:* **Merhaba**, siz değerli yolcularımıza en iyi hizmeti vermek için çalışıyoruz. Güzel geri bildiriminiz için **teşekkür ederiz**. (Hello, we work to provide you, our precious passengers, the best service. Thank you for your lovely feedback.)

15. *Customer:* Thanks a lot! With the help of Facebook in-charge of the Turkish Airlines, I got my missing miles claimed. Thanks so much for your enormous support. Keep up the excellent job!

*Turkish:* You are most welcome. Should you need additional assistance please do not hesitate to contact us. Have a great flight!

16. *Customer:* I want to tell you what happened to me on flight 3830 today. My wedding band fell off my finger before takeoff and I couldn't find it anywhere. I asked the flight attendant if she found it to please return it to me. She went above and beyond what I asked asking everyone to please look for it. A passenger in the back of the plane found it for me and I am at a loss of words (...).

*United:* Hi, Bill, we are happy that you were able to find your wedding band with the assistance of the flight attendant. Can you please privately message us with your confirmation number and the flight attendant's information so that we can forward this to them.

17. *Customer:* Thrilled to see this! Very proud to be a part of the extended United family!  
#goodleadsthe way

*United:* Family is family, no matter how extended. Thanks for your support, Katie! <3

By stating that they try to provide the best service for their customers, they point out that all of them belong to a group connected by this airline, whether it be as customers or as workers. In the example 17, the customer is the one stating that they all belong to the United family, which is only built upon in the reply made by United. Brown and Levinson describe that as “indicating that S and H both belong to some set of persons who share specific wants, including goals and values” (ibid.103). Another strategy used for claiming common ground is exaggerating (interest,


approval, sympathy with H) and is often done with exaggerated intonation, stress, and other aspects of prosodics. The usage of this strategy can be found in Turkish Airlines' examples 2, 7, 10 and 20 (in English) and 3, 8, 13 and 14 (in Turkish). In English we have *truly happy* and *kind words*, while in Turkish we have *değerli yorumlar* (precious comments), *değerli yolcular* (precious passengers), *güzel geri bildirim* (lovely feedback), *nazik sözler* (thoughtful words), *güzel düşünceler* (lovely thoughts). When it comes to United's responses, the usage of this strategy can be seen in the examples 18, 19 and 21. Even though there are examples of both companies using this strategy, it can be seen that Turkish Airlines uses it more frequently than United.


I would argue there are many ways for claiming common ground, many of which have not been mentioned by Brown and Levinson, but in my opinion should be mentioned in this analysis. One of those is using expressions which evoke the next encounter, sharing comments about the location a customer is flying to and in that way supporting the customer's comment is also a way of claiming common ground. This is expressed in the examples number 9 and 11 (*cherish your days till we meet up again onboard*), and in the example number 18 (*the more time free time in Hawaii, the better*). Furthermore, expressing nice wishes is also one of them, as seen in the examples 8 (*en kısa sürede tekrar görüşmek dileği ile*, meaning "wish to see you again as soon as possible) and 15 (*have a great flight*).

18. *Customer*: The United pre-testing clearance program through SFO is great! Very efficient, you get your wristband while in SFO, then bypass the long line when you land in Hawaii (for my trip Maui).

*United*: Well said! We're glad it worked well for you. The more free time in Hawaii, the better. ^MJ

19. *Customer*: Cheers to everyone at United and all of us that miss seeing you more often

*United*: We feel the same way about you, Cesar. Your next trip will be a great one.  ^RH

20. *Customer*: Best fly in the world and good service. Love Turkish Airlines  TRTR

*Turkish*: Hello, we are truly happy to hear your kind word. We strive hard to provide the best service for you. Thanks for choosing us, take good care of yourself until we meet again.

21. *Customer*: Dear United Airlines, I want to thank you with the travel that changed our lives. My daughter and me travelled Lima to Sydney. There was long time that she has not seen her father since the pandemic began. The crew was very kind, they looked after us very well, I have no words to thank you all.

*United*: Hi, An. We are very happy to hear that you and your daughter had such a positive travel experience. Thanks for the shout-out!



22. *Customer*: The vast majority of your team are truly “Hero Characters”. Not easy work and thankful for the people who chose to do it.

*United*: We’re proud to have a team who makes it so easy to let Good Lead the Way. Thank you for caring for our team; we are thankful for you too!

While in the example number 18 we see the repetitive usage of the modifier *well*, in the example 19 the speaker decided to use modifier *great* in order to exaggerate the possible future experience of the user. In the example 20, we can see multiple usage of adjectives and adverbs as modifiers within one single comment, such as *truly happy, kind words, best service, good care*. This usage can also be an example for strategy “intensify interest to H”, as Brown and Levinson say it is used in cases when the speaker wants to intensify the interest of his own contributions to the conversation by making a good story (1994:106).

The strategy “use in-group markers” includes usages of address forms, of language or dialect, of jargon or slang, and of ellipsis. The usage of address forms is the only strategy which can be seen in the selected examples. The example 2 features the usage of *dear*, which is one of the in-group identity markers described by Brown and Levinson (1994:107). Furthermore, all the other responses by Turkish Airlines feature the usage of a second person plural pronoun of address as an honorific form, unlike the responses made by United.

The following strategy is the one of seeking agreement, for which Brown and Levinson say can be achieved through talking about safe topics and through repetition, among other ways (ibid:112). In the examples 18, 21 and 22 by United Airlines, the speaker uses this strategy as a means of agreeing with the speaker and corroborating his words. In the examples 24, 25 and 26 the speaker repeats the topic of the compliment/refers to the words previously used in order to agree with the hearer. In the examples 26 and 27, the speaker states that he agrees with the hearer by responding positively to his comment, or in this case a compliment. In addition to that, these two replies are compliments themselves, used as a response to another compliment.

23. *Customer*: <3 this. So touching. Thanks for sharing United!

*United*: It has a way of putting a smile on your face, doesn't it? 😊😊 ^RH

24. *Customer*: I’ve known Kristin since she was a child. I worked with her family at their local Ice Cream Parlor. What a beautiful story of love, and United! Kristin is one amazing woman!! Thank you for sharing United! ❤️✈️ These are the stories this world needs to hear!

*United*: We're happy to tug on the heartstrings a little... 😊😊 ^RH

25. *Customer*: Super cool story! 😊

*United*: Right? Best thing you'll see all day. ^RH

26. *Customer*: My fave livery.

*United*: Fave comment.

27. *Customer*: We flew back that plane from Maui a few weeks ago. Wonderful flight. There's a bit of glare in this picture but that's Haleakala in the background. (Author's note: a photo was also included in the comment.)

*United*: Great shot from a great vacation spot!

28. *Customer*: I've never been let down by this airline.

*United*: We're never gonna give you up

Never gonna let you down

Never gonna run around and desert you

The next strategy, which in my opinion is sometimes closely connected to the previous one, is the strategy of presupposing/raising/asserting common ground. It can be achieved through using gossip or small talk, by hedging opinions, pseudo-agreeing with somebody or telling white lies. By talking to the hearer about unrelated topics, the speaker is showing the hearer that he is interested in what he has to say. The same can be applied to customer-company communication, whether the customer's original comment was meant as a compliment or not, which is exactly the case in examples 23-27. Humour could be classified as another way of claiming common ground, even though it is not specifically mentioned by Brown and Levinson, but it can be found in many replies to compliments. It usually involves a reference to the speaker's comment and in that way the hearer also shows interest in the speaker's comment and is a great way of agreeing with the customer or forming a connection. This strategy can be seen in examples 24, 26, and especially 28, where the ground for this is a seemingly ordinary compliment made by the customer, but the answer is partially taken from a very well-known song and is modified to fit the image of the airline itself. This strategy of using humour is quite frequent with United Airlines as they have a more informal and relax style of communication than Turkish Airlines, where, for example, this strategy cannot be seen.

## 5.2. Complaints

The speech act of complaining includes voicing the speaker's disapproval. Complaints are intrinsically non-polite acts, but the speaker can always use mitigation devices or politeness

strategies to minimize the impact. The same can be said for the hearer, too, and even desirable, in order to prevent conflicts from happening.

Decock and Depraetere offer a definition of complaints which is, according to them, cross-culturally valid. Their definition of a complaint is as follows: “the complainer disapproves (B) of a past or ongoing action or occurrence (A) which does not conform to her expectations and interests. The consequence of this action or occurrence are at a cost to the complainer, who holds the complainee (at least partly) responsible for the perceived offence (C) and who wants the complainee to remedy the perceived offence in some way (D) (2008:10).

In their paper, Decock and Depraetere identified 6 types of complaints which can be grouped into two major groups, implicit and explicit complaints. Category 1 refers to a hint or an implicit complaint, while category 2 includes an explicit reference to the speech act of complaint. Categories 3 to 6 contain different numbers of constitutive components which are communicated on-record, with category 3 containing at least one such component, and category 6 containing four components (ibid:11-19). Those four constitutive components are:

- A) A past or ongoing action or occurrence (the complainable)
- B) The disapproval or negative evaluation of the complainable
- C) The assumed negative involvement of the complainee, and
- D) The wish for the offence to be remedied

Unlike compliments, in which only strategies for positive politeness could be found, complaints offer examples of both positive and negative politeness. In most cases, answers to complaints consist of apologies and request where the airlines try to minimize the damage and offer a solution to the problem by asking for more information.

#### **a) Decock and Depraetere’s classification of complaints**

According to the examples I compiled during my research, I observed that all of the complaints made about either Turkish Airlines or United Airlines, are indeed explicit because they consist of at least one of the constitutive components. Most complaints consist of components A, B, and C, as I will show in the following examples. There is a small number of complaints that consist of one or two components, but most customers explain their experiences in detail and therefore provide the reason for the complaint (the complainable), the way the company in question

is connected to the complaint (the involvement), and their negative evaluation of the past or occurring situation.

Customer: My flight was 2h30 min late. The connection to my next flight was short. Your staff told me that my suitcase was on board. It was not. Another passenger has the same story. Do you instruct your staff to lie to passengers? I have been travelling for 22 hours and now I have to wait for hours at the airport as they try to locate my suitcase filled with gifts.

In the example above, we have the complainable (past action - no suitcase on board), the negative evaluation of the complainable (customer openly asking if the staff lies to passengers), and the negative involvement of the complaine, in this case Turkish Airlines, whose staff lied to the passenger.

The following complaint was left on United Airlines's Facebook page, and it also consist of three constitutive elements.

Customer: @united we'll never book a vacation with you again. We have 150,000 awards miles saved up and your website says the flights we need are available yet the purchase won't go through and your customer service has been no help. We'll take all of our future flights and literal hundreds of thousands of reward points to another airline.

The complainable is the fact that the customer cannot purchase the flight he wants because the system won't let him (the negative involvement of the complaine, seeing that the website belongs to the company), and the disapproval of the customer (openly stating they will not use this airline again).

There are some cases when a complaint consist of just one element, as is the case in the following example made on Turkish Airlines' Instagram page. The customer does not state the reason for the complaint, therefore there is no complainable nor the explicit involvement of the complaine, just the customer's negative evaluation.

Customer: Türkiye'nın gururu olduđu olduđunu iddia ettiđiniz büyük řirketinizden bir kiři bile yardımcı olmadı, yazıklar olsun. (Not one single person from your big company, which you claim to be the pride of Turkey, did help me, shame on you.)

## **b) Brown and Levinson's strategies**

To start off, I will show examples for the strategies for positive politeness I already discussed above. The first strategy was the usage of greetings, which can be seen in the examples 29, 30 and 31, by both Turkish and United Airlines. While going through all the examples of answers to compliments and complaints, I have seen that greetings at the beginning are not rare, but those at the end of an utterance are quite rare. Furthermore, I have noticed that Turkish Airlines uses

greetings at the end of an utterance more often than United Airlines. Based on my personal knowledge of Turkish culture, I would argue that is because Turkish people tend to use more greetings in their everyday life, which then applies to computer-mediated communication too. One of the examples for this is the examples 32 and 33.

29. *Customer*: I just had the worst experience with Turkish Airlines customer service. The representative spoke to me so rudely! I used to hear great reviews about Turkish Airlines customer service, but those days are obviously over.

*Turkish*: Hi, we are very sorry to hear your complaint about our customer service. Can you please share more details via PM with us?

30. *Customer*: Why is it so difficult to claim airmiles!!!

*Turkish*: Hello dear, we're sorry to hear that. Please refer to the following link in order to claim your missing miles and include your membership ID, a copy of your ID or passport and the boarding passes of the flights.

31. *Customer*: I never flew united airlines and worst first experience ever. Let's not talk about airlines I never had worst experience in my life. I had a trip for business for 2 weeks. I flew on May 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday. They lost my luggage they sent to Louisville Ky I don't know how it got there. (...)

*United*: Hello, Handreen, we sincerely apologize for any continued frustration this has caused. Please send us a private message with your file reference number so we can look into your baggage for you. ^RB

32. *Customer*: 10 Ağustos 2019Tk 2020 saat 17:15 Istanbul Kayseri sefer sayılı uçuşun 25 a nolu koltuğuna ait biniş kartım vardı, boarding tamamlanmıştı ve uçağın kalkışına yakın bir zamanda yerhizmetlisi görevlisi gelerek buranın başka bir yolcuya ait olduğunu, daha fazla ücret ödediğini, kalkmam gerektiğini beyan etmiş ve başka bir koltukta uçuşu gerçekleştirmek zorunda olduğunu söylemiştir (On August 10, 2020, I had a boarding pass for the seat no 25 at the flight Tk 2020 at 17:15 Istanbul Kayseri, boarding had finished and short before take-off, a flight attendant came and told me the seat belonged to some other passenger, that I had to pay more money, leave my seat and spend the flight in a different seat.)

*Turkish*: Dosyanız hakkında işlemlerin sürdüğünü görmekteyiz. En kısa sürede bilgilendirilmeniz için konuyu birimize ilettik. İyi günler dileriz. (We see that your file is being processed. We forwarded this topic to our unit in order for you to be informed as soon as possible. We wish you a nice day.)

33. *Customer*: 26 marttan beri açmış olduğum geri bildirim neden dönmüyorsunuz. Her aradığımda yeni bir kayıt açıyorlar. İnsanları oyalamaktan başka birşey yapmıyorsunuz. Bir allahın kuluda dönmüyor. Yasal her hakkımı kullanacağım. Maddi hem manevi yıpratınız. Adınıza yakışmıyor. (Why are you not responding to my feedback from the 26th of March. Every time I call, you open a new file. Do you nothing but string people along. Not one person responded. It does not suit your name.)

*Turkish Airlines*: Merhaba, geri bildiriminiz hakkında işlemin sürdüğünü görmekteyiz. Mümkün olan en kısa sürede ekiplerimiz sizinle iletişime geçilecektir. İyi günler dileriz. (Hello, we see that the process about regarding your feedback is ongoing. Our teams will contact you as soon as possible. Have a nice day.)

34. *Customer*: Typically happy with United but not today. Booked seats together months ago. Checked in today, seats still together. Then United separates us. We booked and chose seats when the plane was empty. Pretty frustrating.

*United*: We're disappointed we've let you down during your recent travel. If your travel is complete, we encourage you to submit your feedback on this experience to our Customer Care team.

Another strategy for positive politeness which can be found in answers to complaints consists of redressing a potential threat of some FTA by showing the hearer that the speaker is willing to provide him something he wants by offering or promising something. While in the example 29 the speaker does not offer anything specific, he gives an indirect hint that this problem is going to be dealt with, but in the examples 30 and 32 the speaker does connect the possible solution of the problem to forwarding the information to the unit in charge by requesting the customer to send the information they need. Furthermore, in the example 32, the speaker makes a direct offer of examining the problem at hand. In the example 31, the speaker blatantly makes a promise of coming back to the hearer by using "will get back to him".

35. *Customer*: Hello there, my booked flight was cancelled almost a month back and I still haven't got my refund (\$ 1500). I'm fed up of reaching out to your customer support team. Can someone please look into this? Or is this how your scam airline works? Folks... BEWARE

*Turkish*: Hello, we are sorry for the delay. Please know that it is never our goal to inconvenience you. Our unit in charge has been informed about the subject and will inform you as soon as possible. Your patience is much appreciated.

36. *Customer*: Bad Bad service I'll never fly again... by Turkish Airlines

5 years ago I lost 5 baggage, I never get it back... Again no way to even thinking to fly this airline. My advice to all friends family anyone Read this content think thousand times before u decide to go by Turkish Airlines.

*Turkish:* Merhaba, yaşanan bu durum için üzgünüz. Konuyu bagaj birimimize iletibilmemiz için kayıp bagaj referans numaranızı ve e-mail adresinizi özel mesaj aracılığı ile iletibilir misiniz? (Hello, we are sorry for what happened. In order to forward this matter to our baggage unit, could you send us your baggage number and your e-mail address via PM?)

37. *Customer:* My advice: find another airline. My friend was just (Nov 29, 2021, 4:45 pm) yelled at and kicked out from the check-in counter from #Turkishairlines at #berlinaairport being told he doesn't have the required papers to enter Korea (Health declaration form, Travel record documentation).

*Turkish:* Hello, we kindly request your friend to visit the following link to send and official claim for the issue. Our unit in charge will get back to him after carefully examining the matter.

38. *Customer:* I wish United took care of their customer issues and inconveniences like they say will, been longer than 30 days and I still haven't heard back on my cases, Deplorable service!

*United:* Let us look into this for you. Please send us a private message with your confirmation number so a member of our team can check this. ^EB

39. *Customer:* Our experience with United staff at the Houston gate counter was a prime example of bad customer service. One of the lady rolled her eyes and one yelled at a customer. We've been flying quite a bit and have finally seen the difference in customer service amongst the big companies. I have to hand the trophy to Delta.

*United:* We'd like to learn more about your experience. Can you please send us a private message with your confirmation number so we can learn more?

As was stated earlier, both strategies for negative and positive politeness can be seen in replies to complaints. The most frequent strategy for negative politeness is obviously apologizing, which can be observed in examples 29, 30, 31, 35, 36, and 37, in both English and in Turkish, made by both airlines. While the examples 30, 35 and 36 offer a simple *sorry*, examples 29 and 31 offer a pre-modifier in the form of *very* and *sincerely*, something Brown and Levinson would characterize as exaggeration. Example number 34 does not offer an apology, but it does offer an expression of negative emotions directly connected to the inability of the company to perform as it should have, which could than be seen as an admission of guilt.

Furthermore, the next strategy I would like to examine is the one Brown and Levinson define as "incurring a debt", which would suit the examples 33, 35, 37, 38 and 39. In these examples, the speaker goes on record stating that a future action will take place,

or in this case a debt, which would be the act of looking into the case in matter, possibly solving it and getting back to the customer. What is interesting about these examples is that this strategy can also be viewed as promising, a strategy for positive politeness I dealt with before. I would claim that the ambiguity arises from the lack of definition by Brown and Levinson, or the clever use of examples which cover only one strategy.

### 5.2.1. Direct and indirect speech acts

When it comes to strategies for negative politeness, the first one Brown and Levinson deal with is the strategy of being conventionally indirect. They define it as a strategy in which the speaker has opposing tension: the speaker has a desire to give the hearer an “out” by being indirect, and the desire to go on record (1994:132). This basically means that the speaker uses sentences and phrases which have an unambiguous meaning different from their literal meaning.

Speech act theory was introduced by J.L. Austin who divided acts into three types: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. The locutionary act is roughly equivalent to meaning in the traditional sense, while the illocutionary acts are utterance which have a certain conventional force, i.e., informing, ordering, undertaking etc. Perlocutionary act is what we bring about or achieve by saying something (1962:108). He found there to be five general classes of utterance, and those are: verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives and expositives (ibid:151).

Austin’s theory was further developed by Searle who dealt with what Austin called illocutionary acts, criticising Austin for not stating clear and consistent principle of rules on which his taxonomy was constructed. He divided speech acts into three general groups:

- a) Uttering words = performing utterance acts
- b) Referring and predicating = propositional acts
- c) Stating, questioning, commanding, promising, etc. = illocutionary acts (1969:24)

Building on Austin’s taxonomy, he proposed an alternative one with five types of acts

- Assertives – the purpose is to commit the speaker to something is being the case
- Directives – attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something
- Commissives – those illocutionary acts whose point is to commit the speaker to some future course in action
- Expressives – the point is to express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional context



- Declarations – successful performance of one of its members brings about the correspondence between the propositional context and reality (1979:12-16)

Furthermore, Searle divided all speech acts into direct and indirect ones. If the speaker utters a sentence and means exactly and literally what he says, we are talking about a direct speech act. All other acts are indirect, where one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing another (ibid:30-31).

If there is a direct relationship between the structure and the function of the utterance, that means the speech act is direct. If there is an indirect relationship between the structure and the function, the speech act is indirect. There are three possible types of direct speech acts: interrogative, imperative and declarative. Interrogative type is used to get some information from the hearer and is usually marked with the usage of a question mark. The imperative type usually marks an order or a command given to the hearer, while the declarative’s function is to give out an opinion or a fact.

Category of speech acts	TYPE		
	Declarative	Imperative	Interrogative
<b>DIRECT</b>			
<b>INDIRECT</b>			

When a declarative type is used as an indirect speech act, it no longer serves the purpose of giving out an opinion, its’ function is to give a command or to request something, which is the case in most of the answers to complaints in this thesis. When it comes to function of direct and indirect speech acts, Yule (1996:55) proposed three possible functions: statement, question, and order/command.

Category of speech acts	statement	FUNCTION	
		Question	order/request
<b>DIRECT</b>			
<b>INDIRECT</b>			

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While looking for examples for this thesis and examining them online, I noticed that most of the comments customers left on Facebook and Instagram pages of Turkish Airlines and United Airlines are, in fact, complaints. I would argue this is very significant for the companies themselves

because their potential customers will also see these complaints and their answers to them while looking for information or comparing them to other airlines. Therefore, the customer service needs to minimize the damage made by the complaints and satisfy the speaker's needs. In order to do that, in most of the cases the customer service requests for more information and/or apologizes for the experience described in the comment. These requests are, in most cases, indirect speech acts whose function is to elicit more information. However, there are some cases in which the customer service uses a direct speech act and openly requests additional information. Upon closer inspection of all the answers to complaints made by both Turkish Airlines and United, I found there to be 10 different patterns of answers used by United and 8 patterns used by Turkish Airlines. In general, most of these answers include a statement which serves as an apology and an indirect request in the form of a question, imperative, or a statement.

This first table shows all the patterns used by United.

<b>Pattern</b>	<b>Example</b>
1. Direct request (imperative) + promise (direct speech act – statement)	40. Hello, we kindly request your friend to visit the following link to send and official claim for the issue. Our unit in charge will get back to him after carefully examining the matter.
2. Apology (direct speech act) + direct request (imperative)	41. Hello, Handreen, we sincerely apologize for any continued frustration this has caused. Please send us a private message with your file reference number so we can look into your baggage for you. ^RB
3. Statement (direct speech act) + direct request (imperative)	42. We'd like to look into this for you. Please send us a private message with

	your confirmation number so that we can learn more.
4. Statement (direct speech act) + indirect request (question)	43. Jason, it sounds like we need to better understand what happened. Can you send us a Private Message with your confirmation number and more details? ^CT
5. Apology (direct speech act) + statement (direct speech act)	44. We're sorry to keep you waiting, Kirk. Delays are definitely frustrating and we're working to have you on your way soon as we can. ^KL
6. Question (direct speech act) + indirect request (imperative)	45. Hi, Joseph. Are you travelling with us today? If you need assistance please private message your confirmation number and a brief description of how we can best assist you. ^KG
7. Apology (direct speech act) + indirect request (statement)	46. Hi, Bryan. We're sorry to hear your bag was damaged. We encourage you to reach our Baggage team at 800-335-2247 when you have a moment. ^KF
8. Indirect request (question)	47. Hi there, can you send us a DM with details about this, please? ^LF
9. Apology (direct speech act) + indirect request (question)	48. Hi there, we're sorry to learn you've been delayed today and that you're in danger of missing your event. We know this is far from ideal. Could you send us a private message with your confirmation number so we can check what's going on? ^MP

<p>10. Indirect request (statement) + apology</p>	<p>49. We would need you to send us a private message via Facebook as we cannot facilitate calls on this platform. Our apologies, Gertrude.</p>
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The following table consist of replies used by Turkish Airlines. As can be seen from the table, most of the examples are in English, while there is just one pattern which is commonly used in Turkish. That is the pattern “apology (direct speech act) + indirect request (question)” for which I have also provided a Turkish example. During my research, I found this pattern to be the only one used in communication with Turkish customers, both on Facebook and on Instagram.

<b>Pattern</b>	<b>Example</b>
<p>1. Direct request (imperative) + promise (direct speech act –statement)</p>	<p>50. Hello, we kindly request your friend to visit the following link to send and official claim for the issue. Our unit in charge will get back to him after carefully examining the matter.</p>
<p>2. Apology (direct speech act) + direct request (imperative)</p>	<p>51. Hello dear, we’re sorry to hear that. Please refer to the following link in order to claim your missing miles and include your membership ID, a copy of your ID or passport and the boarding passes of the flights.</p>
<p>3. Statement (direct speech act) + direct request (imperative)</p>	<p>52. We have checked the respective file and found out that our unit in charge has already contacted you. Please check your box. Also, for security reasons, we kindly suggest you delete your</p>

	<p>comments revealing your personal info. Thanks.</p>
4. Statement (direct speech act)	<p>53. We see that your file is being processed. We forwarded this topic to our unit in order for you to be informed as soon as possible. We wish you a nice day.</p>
5. Apology (direct speech act) + indirect request (statement)	<p>54. We're sorry to hear this and would like to have a better understanding of the situation. Please feel free to send us additional details via private message.</p>
6. Apology (direct speech act) + indirect request (question)	<p>55. Hi, we are very sorry to hear your complaint about our customer service. Can you please share more details via PM with us?</p> <p><i>Merhaba, yaşamış olduğunuz sorun için üzgünüz. Konuyu inceleyebilmek için şikayetinizin detaylarını özel mesaj aracılığı ile paylaşabilir misiniz? (Hello, we are sorry for the problem you experienced. In order to examine this, could you share the details of your complaint via PM?)</i></p>
7. Apology (direct speech act) + statement (direct speech act)	<p>56. Hello, we are sorry for the delay. Please know that it is never our goal to inconvenience you. Our unit in charge has been informed about the subject and will inform you as soon as possible. Your patience is much appreciated.</p>
8. Direct request (imperative)	<p>57. Hi, please share your complaint details along with your ticket number via PM.</p>

Based on these representative examples I used throughout this paper, I concluded that both companies use ten patterns for their replies to complaints, and those are the following:

- a) Direct request (imperative) + promise (direct speech act – statement)
- b) Apology (direct speech act) + direct request (imperative)
- c) Statement (direct speech act) + direct request (imperative)
- d) Statement (direct speech act) + indirect request (question)
- e) Statement (direct speech act)
- f) Apology (direct speech act) + statement
- g) Apology (direct speech act) + statement (indirect request)
- h) Question (direct speech act) + indirect request (imperative)
- i) Apology (direct speech act) + indirect request (question)
- j) Request (indirect speech act)

Furthermore, upon closer examination, we can see that there are three possible combinations of direct and indirect speech acts into which these aforementioned ten or eight patterns, respectively, can be put into. The first one is only direct speech acts, the second direct and indirect speech acts together, and the third one being only indirect speech acts. United uses all three of these combinations in their answers, while Turkish Airlines uses only direct speech acts and a combination of direct and indirect speech acts. From the ten most commonly used patterns I enumerated above, we can see that the companies prefer direct speech acts when communicating with their customers. United uses 5 different patterns of answers which include only direct speech acts, and four patterns which include a combination of direct and indirect speech acts. When it comes to patterns with only indirect speech acts, there are two possible choices. As for Turkish Airlines, they use six different patterns in which we can find only direct speech acts, and only two patterns which include a combination of direct and indirect speech acts. I would say that the companies prefer direct speech acts because in this way they instruct their customers about their next steps in a clear manner, but this approach also leaves less space for the customers to misinterpret the reply, which would likely lead to them leaving another comment, or in this case, a complaint.

Company	Pattern	Total
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	Direct speech act	Direct + indirect speech act	Indirect speech act	
United	5	4	1	10
Turkish Airlines	6	2	0	8

When it comes to the function of direct and indirect speech acts, Turkish Airlines prefers to use direct requests in their communication, which is in accordance with my findings above about the indirect and direct speech acts, while United prefers indirect requests. In addition to this, I have found that both companies use four patterns of answers which begin with an apology to their customers, one of the most efficient ways to express politeness. In addition to apologies, the other strategy for negative politeness which is frequently used in these examples is hedging, most notably in examples which include a direct request (imperative). These requests are softened with “please” as a hedge, such is the case in examples 28, 29, 32, 38, 39, 41, 42, 43 and 44.

Unlike Brown and Levinson, who designated requests as intrinsically face-threatening acts, Spencer-Oatey believes they may be face-threatening, but need not always be. According to her, requests can “give” face to the hearer or can make us feel inconvenienced or imposed upon and in that way infringe on our sense of sociality rights (2008:19). The requests I have dealt with in this paper are linked to the comments of speakers and represent a direct reply to the wishes of the speakers. Majority of the speakers in their comments wishes to know how they can get satisfaction or compensation for their negative experience and they openly request for instruction how to do that. Having this in mind, I would argue then that the replies containing requests are not intrinsically face-threatening as the speakers make way for those same request and in that way their face does not get threatened.

Similarly to requests, apologies too do not have to be intrinsically face-threatening. Spencer-Oatey believes the level of face-threatening is linked to the seriousness of the offence the offender is apologizing for. She states two elements involved in apologizing: the impact on the offender’s face of other people’s awareness of the offence, and the impact on the offender’s face by the act of apologizing (ibid:19). If the offense is minor, neither the offender nor the offeree’s face will be threatened by the act of apologizing itself. However, if the offence is significant, the offender’s face may be seriously threatened by people knowing about the offence, and his face

may be threatened by apologizing. Seeing that all of the examples I cited in this paper are available to the public (with or without logging on) and are read by people who also want to make their own complaint or those who simply want to gain more information about the company itself, I would say the level of face-threat is already high. In this case, I believe it can be said that the act of apologizing is a lesser face-threat than the lack of it because it is something that is expected by the speaker itself, but also by the readers of those complaints.

## **6. Conclusion**

The purpose of this master thesis was to examine the politeness strategies used in both English and in Turkish language when it comes to computer-based communication, namely the communication between the customer service and clients of two major airline companies, United Airlines and Turkish Airlines, both on their Facebook and Instagram accounts. As the majority of comments made on these social media consists of compliments and complaints, this thesis was based on replies to these types of comments.

Polite communication is one of the pillars of corporate computer-based communication with the public because it can be reviewed by anyone who has access to social media and is therefore important for the company to leave good impression on their customers. Furthermore, as the material for this thesis was collected during the Covid-19 pandemic, computer-based communication was even more important as customers had to rely on Internet in order to get in touch with the customer service of different companies, seeing that it is possibly the simplest way of getting in touch with them.

The basis for many avenues of research on politeness is Brown and Levinson's groundbreaking theory of politeness which differentiates between two types of politeness, negative and positive one. Strategies for negative and positive politeness are used to threaten one's negative or positive face and while Brown and Levinson enumerate different examples and ways in which these strategies can be used, their examples seem to lack diversity and do not cover all the possible



manifestation of these said strategies. Even though many such strategies can be found in the examples used in this thesis, they are sometimes hard to recognize as they do not fit the definition, but also because they are used in a completely different context. In general, their framework seems to fit into both English and Turkish language, but it needs to be supported by other views on politeness.

As a general rule, I would say that strategies for both negative and positive politeness are easier to recognize in replies made by Turkish Airlines as their style of communication is more formal and formulaic than that of United Airlines. The style of United Airlines is more informal and simple and they try to get closer to their customers, especially when replying to compliments whereas Turkish Airlines nurtures a more distant relationship with their customers.

Replies to complaints demonstrate the usage of both positive and negative politeness, which is no wonder as strategies for positive politeness are designed to increase the closeness and the solidarity between the speaker and the hearer, and complaints offer a chance to companies to retain a good relationship with their customer. On the other hand, not all replies to complaints necessarily involve an admission of guilt, and that is where negative politeness is used, as it is designed for situations in which the speaker wants to distance themselves from the hearer. It is sometimes hard to recognize if these replies should be seen as examples of positive or negative politeness because they fit into the description of both strategies, as they usually consist of some sort of a promise of reviewing the matter or handing it over to a unit in charge. As it was stated before, this goes to show that the approach in which Brown and Levinson developed their theory is very much different from this one, and that their theory should be built upon with other ways of expressing politeness.

Even though Brown and Levinson see conventional indirectness as a strategy for negative politeness, most of the replies to complaints consist of direct statements, requests and directions to the customers telling them what needs to be done in order to take care of the matter, or a combination of direct and indirect requests. This does not mean that these replies are impolite, but rather that this part needs to be revised using some other views on politeness.

Spencer-Oatey also dealt with requests, and unlike Brown and Levinson, who classified them as face-threatening act, she claims they do not always have to be seen in that way. The level of threat is closely connected to the level of imposition on our rights, but as the customers

themselves are looking for a way to protect their rights, I would say they are willingly accepting the imposition and therefore do not consider these request face-threatening.

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