Politeness in the Qur'an: A Religio-Pragmatics Study of Face-Saving Act Strategies in Divine Imperative Discourse

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Abstract
This study is motivated by a gap in pragmatic research on religious discourse, particularly regarding imperatives in the Qur'an. Previous studies have generally applied the theory of face-saving acts (Brown & Levinson, 2016) to human-to-human communication without accommodating the theological dimensions that characterize Divine discourse. Therefore, this research is designed to investigate face-saving act strategies in Qur'anic imperative discourse through a religio-pragmatic approach, focusing on *Surah Yusuf*. The method employed is content analysis of imperative verses that reflect both Divine and interpersonal communication. The findings reveal that politeness strategies in Qur'anic imperative discourse are divided into *negative face-saving actsand positive face-saving acts.* Negative strategies are realized through linguistic mitigation, such as conditional constructions, attributing authority to Allah and using soft lexical choices to avoid coercive impressions. Conversely, positive strategies are characterized by respectful address, empathy, inclusivity, and spiritual submission that foster social and moral harmony. This study introduces a new concept: divine face-saving politeness, a form of theocentric politeness that is relationally transcendental, integrating *rahmah* (compassion), *hikmah* (wisdom), and respect for human dignity within Divine communication. The study concludes that politeness in the Qur'an represents a spiritual act that builds an educational dialogue between revelation and humanity. Theoretically, this research broadens the scope of pragmatics to encompass theological dimensions and affirms Qur'anic ethical values as a model of empathetic, reflective, and humanistic communication.
Key words: divine politeness, face-saving act, religio-pragmatics, Qur'anic imperative discourse, transcendental communication

Introduction

Language in the Qur'an functions not only as a medium for conveying divine revelation but also as a complex communication system that integrates spiritual, social, and moral dimensions in human life (Tafiati et al., 2022). Every utterance in the Qur'an—whether declarative, interrogative, or imperative—contains a meaningful communicative structure. Among the various forms of divine speech acts, imperative discourse occupies a unique position as it unites two seemingly contradictory orientations: authority and politeness (Hasan et al., 2024).. On one hand, the command form represents God's ultimate authority as the supreme source of truth. On the other hand, the manner in which these commands are delivered often reflects gentleness, empathy, and respect for human freedom and dignity (Alkumet & Mohiddeen, 2017). This phenomenon makes the analysis of politeness in Qur'anic imperative discourse particularly compelling from a pragmatic perspective, especially through the lens of the face-saving act theory (Brown & Levinson, 2016).

Studies on politeness in religious communication have attracted the attention of scholars across disciplines, primarily because religious language not only conveys information but also shapes behavior, ethics, and spiritual awareness. (2025) revealed that Qur'anic discourse embodies a systematic interaction among situational context, social relations, and communicative purpose, which together construct the rhetorical power of revelation. This perspective asserts that the linguistic structure of the Qur'an is not merely a formal construct but a medium for developing interpersonal meaning

that educates and guides. El-Hussari (2022) strengthens this view by asserting that linguistic signs in Qur'anic verses serve as a bridge between divine text and human understanding, inviting reflection and deep reasoning. Thus, Qur'anic communication is not a one-way mode of conveying obedience, but rather a spiritual dialogue that nurtures consciousness.

Several previous studies have examined linguistic and politeness dimensions in the Qur'anic text. Yahya Abu-athreh & Aladdin (2025) highlighted monologic and dialogic patterns, as well as the use of grammatical cohesive devices that maintain narrative unity and rhetorical coherence. Ramli et al., (2018) analyzed lexicography and semantics, emphasizing the importance of contextual interpretation to align meaning with revelation. (2024) explored linguistic perspectives, emphasizing the miraculous nature embedded in word choice, sentence structure, and rhetorical style, which deeply affects readers. Prior studies demonstrate that the Qur'an employs diverse politeness strategies in both divine-human and human-human communication (Al-Khatib, 2012; Gittan Jewad et al., 2020; Hadiloo, 2023). These studies suggest that Qur'anic language embodies complex linguistic strategies that establish meaning cohesion, thematic unity, and communicative harmony between the text and its readers. Politeness in the Qur'an, therefore, is not merely a communicative strategy but a manifestation of moral and religious principles that balance teaching, protection, and the integration of ethical values within the language of revelation.

Although numerous studies have examined the linguistic and politeness dimensions of the Qur'an, a research gap persists regarding divine imperative discourse. The study of face-saving acts—aimed at reducing potential threats to the hearer's face (face-threatening acts) with a specific focus on divine imperative discourse has not yet been a primary concern. In fact, divine imperatives serve a crucial communicative function: maintaining ethical and spiritual relationships between Allah and humankind while guiding readers toward moral development and religious obedience (Santosa et al., 2016). This gap underscores the need for new research that can explain the pragmatic and spiritual dimensions of speech acts in the Qur'an, particularly the face-saving strategies employed to preserve the hearer's face while optimizing the effectiveness of divine instruction. Therefore, this study seeks to fill a void in Qur'anic pragmatic research by enriching the understanding of how linguistic politeness integrates with religious values.

To address this gap in the study of face-saving acts within Qur'anic imperatives, this research introduces a religio-pragmatic approach as its analytical framework. Religio-pragmatics is an interdisciplinary approach that integrates pragmatic analysis with religious perspectives. This approach enables analysis that not only focuses on linguistic function but also on the moral and spiritual values embedded in language use. A religio-pragmatic analysis provides a framework to understand that politeness in the Qur'an is not merely an interpersonal communicative strategy but also an expression of divine values such as compassion (*rahmah*), justice, and divine wisdom (Bisriyah, 2022). Thus, the analysis of politeness in Qur'anic imperative discourse through the face-saving act theory reveals how God conveys commands without diminishing human honor as rational and dignified beings.

The main problem addressed in this research is how face-saving act strategies are realized in Qur'anic imperative discourse. This study focuses on identifying the forms of politeness strategies (face-saving acts) employed in Qur'anic imperatives. It is grounded in the assumption that politeness in the Qur'an is not only linguistic but also theological, moral, and ethical in nature (Al-Khatib, 2012). Therefore, every politeness strategy within the revealed text serves a dual function: preserving the interlocutor's honor (*face preservation*) and enhancing human spiritual awareness of God's greatness.

The novelty of this study lies in applying the face-saving act theory to religious discourse analysis, specifically, Qur'anic imperative discourse through a religio-pragmatic perspective. To date, politeness theories have primarily been applied to human communication in social, cultural, and political contexts. This study expands the theory's scope into the realm of transcendental communication, where the concept of *face* refers not only to human self-esteem but also to spiritual dignity upheld by revelation. By examining the dimension of divine politeness, this research introduces a new paradigm in pragmatic studies: politeness as both a linguistic and spiritual act.

Theoretically, the results of this study are expected to enrich pragmatic scholarship and contribute to the growing field of religio-pragmatic studies, which explore the interplay of language, morality, and devotion in sacred texts. Practically, this research contributes to the development of religious literacy that emphasizes the importance of ethical communication in both social and spiritual life.

Literature review

Politeness and Face-Saving Acts

Brown & Levinson (2016) laid the formal foundation for the study of politeness by introducing the concept of *face* as "public self-image." Their framework distinguishes between positive face and negative face. Positive face refers to the desire to be accepted or appreciated by others, while negative face represents the desire for freedom from imposition. Within this framework, face-threatening acts (FTAs) create a need for speakers to employ mitigation strategies, such as positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, or bald on-record to maintain social harmony.

In pragmatic studies, the concept of face-saving acts (FSA) refers to linguistic actions intended to reduce threats to the hearer's face (Haugh, 2015). Operationally, FSAs in empirical research are identified through specific linguistic strategies (e.g., hedging, justificatory explanations, softeners, mitigated imperatives, or the use of passive/implicit forms) or their social functions (e.g., maintaining relational status, avoiding conflict). Although this framework has been productive, recent studies show that politeness cannot be understood merely as an individual strategic calculation; it must also account for the context of power, social relationships, interactional dynamics, and the communicative medium (Ribino, 2023).

Recent empirical studies have expanded understanding of how FSAs operate within specific contexts. Locher & Watts (2005) introduced the concept of relational work, which views politeness as a jointly negotiated effort among participants to construct and maintain desired social relationships. In this sense, politeness is not only a way to "avoid face threats" but also a dynamic process shaped by interactional goals, social status, and contextual expectations (Mills, 2011). This view shifts Brown and Levinson's normative approach toward a more discursive one that emphasizes context and social practice in the realization of politeness strategies. Furthermore, Culpeper & Tantucci, (2021) developed the concept of reciprocity, describing the mutual dynamics between politeness and impoliteness. This concept becomes relevant when an act of politeness is interpreted or reciprocated differently, triggering a chain of mitigation responses. Thus, politeness should be understood not merely as a linguistic act but as a social phenomenon rooted in norms, culture, and power relations.

Religio-Pragmatics Approach

Universal pragmatic studies, such as those on speech acts, implicature, and politeness, offer powerful tools for analyzing discourse across social contexts. However, religious texts possess distinctive features: divine authority, collective and hierarchical orientation, and normative purposes that transcend ordinary social

interaction. Consequently, pragmatic analysis of religious texts requires conceptual adjustments that integrate theological dimensions with communicative strategies. In this context, we introduce religio-pragmatics as an approach that extends pragmatic inquiry to encompass religious discourse.

Critiques of Brown and Levinson's universal model highlight that cultural, religious, and ideological contexts significantly influence the determination of politeness strategies. Several studies recommend adapting the concept of face for authoritative or ritual discourse. Alabdali (2019) found that Brown and Levinson's framework does not adequately account for elements characteristic of Middle Eastern communities or religious discourse dominated by authority, ritual, and spiritual values. These findings reinforce the view that politeness strategies depend not only on social variables (such as social distance, power, and imposition) but also on specific cultural values, ideologies, and rhetorical conventions.

Based on these considerations, the religio-pragmatics analytical framework integrates pragmatic principles with theological and religious dimensions. The religio-pragmatic model encompasses: (1) authority frame: the speaker in this discourse is God, possessing absolute authority; thus, the power balance differs fundamentally from human interaction; (2) addressee ontology; the hearer may be an individual or a collective community defined by moral and religious categories; (3) illocutionary force and modalities: commands, prohibitions, and exhortations accompanied by promises of reward or threats of punishment influence the deployment of politeness strategies; (4) religious face-saving repertoires: linguistic devices such as praise, threat–promise structures, and moral appeals serve to preserve the hearer's face while reinforcing divine obligation; (5) intertextual and ritual embeddedness: phrases derived from ritual or textual contexts (e.g., prayers, *dzikr*) reinforce the legitimacy of commands and enhance face-mitigation strategies (Al-Khatib, 2012; Alqahtani, 2024). This framework thus offers a new lens for examining divine imperative discourse, revealing distinctive politeness strategies that differ from those found in ordinary social interaction.

The Qur'an and Linguistic Politeness

Recent empirical research demonstrates that the Qur'an employs distinctive forms of linguistic politeness. Khafaga (2024) shows that requests in Qur'anic dialogues function as macro–speech acts that generate sequences of subsequent acts, thereby extending their persuasive force beyond direct responses to encourage collective action or ethical reflection. Qur'anic politeness thus serves as both an interpersonal strategy and a means of shaping moral identity. Other studies have identified theological mitigation patterns that combine promises, normative reasoning, and collective address to preserve the hearer's face while reinforcing moral obligation (Arifianto et al., 2023). In addition, recent research on Allah-centered expressions highlights the role of religious formulae as sources of rhetorical legitimacy that also perform pragmatic functions by facilitating mitigation of FTAs in ways distinct from conventional politeness strategies (Abu Qub'a et al., 2025).

These empirical findings guide pragmatic frameworks for further investigation of speech acts in Qur'anic imperative discourse. Applied studies of sermons and *da'wah* communication emphasize the importance of integrating speech act theory, pragmastylistics, and analyses of ritual intertextuality to explain variations in politeness strategies within Qur'anic contexts (Migdadi et al., 2025). Politeness studies in Qur'anic discourse thus illuminate the intricate interrelationship among linguistic structure, communicative function, and divine authority in shaping the distinctive speech acts that characterize divine imperative discourse.

Method

Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative approach, grounded in pragmatics and religious linguistics, using content analysis. The primary purpose of this approach is to interpret the pragmatic dimensions in divine imperative discourse found in the Qur'an. The research focuses on forms of politeness manifested through Face-Saving Act (FSA) strategies. The religio-pragmatic approach used in this study is based on the view that Qur'anic discourse serves a communicative function between Allah, the speaker and human beings, the hearers, as well as interpersonal communication involving Allah, the Supreme Speaker. Therefore, linguistic politeness is understood as a religious pragmatic act rooted in transcendental interaction between God and His servants, and among human beings within the framework of divine awareness.

Theoretically, this analysis integrates several major frameworks, namely Brown & Levinson (2016) politeness theory which highlights the concept of Face-Threatening Acts (FTA), Searle (1976) classification of speech acts, especially the imperative category, and Qur'anic discourse analysis as developed by (Abdul-Raof, 2010; Yahya Abu-athreh & Aladdin, 2025). It also draws upon directive and imperative analysis models in Qur'anic linguistic studies (Bisriyah, 2022; Santosa et al., 2016). The combination of these theories provides a foundation for revealing linguistic politeness in divine commands that reflect religious values and God's authority over humankind.

Research Procedure

The research procedure was carried out in four main stages of systematic, sequential analysis. The first stage is text compilation, which involves collecting data from the Qur'anic text using the official Indonesian translation published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (2019). This translation was chosen because it has undergone validation, possesses legitimacy from authorized institutions, is officially established, and is widely used in Indonesia. The second stage is the identification of divine-imperative discourse, which involves tracing all verses containing forms of command and exhortation that are explicitly or implicitly attributed to divine authority, as well as interpersonal commands within the framework of divine consciousness. The identification process involved matching the Arabic text and its translation to confirm the presence of the imperative mood. The third stage is religio-pragmatic coding. At this stage, each imperative utterance was classified based on its function within the framework of Searle's speech act theory. The fourth stage is politeness and FSA analysis. At this stage, each imperative utterance was analyzed to detect the face-saving strategies employed. The analysis includes examining linguistic devices and contextual features that function to minimize potential threats to the hearer's face. The indicators of analysis include the use of lexical softeners, conditional clauses, indirectness, rational justification and moral or faith-based appeals, such as expressions of divine compassion and wisdom.

Data Selection

This study specifically focuses on data from Surah Yusuf. The selection of Surah Yusuf as the main data source is based on linguistic, pragmatic, and religious considerations. Surah Yusuf has unique discursive characteristics compared to other chapters of the Qur'an, particularly its dialogical narrative structure, which represents communicative relationships between Allah and the Prophet Yusuf, as well as other human figures. Linguistically, this surah contains a variety of imperative speech acts, both direct and indirect. This enables an analysis of politeness strategies in divine commands and human-to-human commands represented in the narrative. From a religious perspective, Surah Yusuf is known as *"ahsan al-qaṣaṣ"* ("the best of

stories") as affirmed in Q.S. Yusuf [12]:3. The story carries a didactic function containing values of patience and wisdom.

The data corpus of this study consists of verses containing divine imperative discourse, namely utterances in the Qur'an that represent Allah's direct commands to human beings and interpersonal commands expressed within the awareness of divine authority. The data selection process was conducted based on three main criteria. First, the speech act criterion, which requires that a verse contain a verb or linguistic construction functioning as a command (*fi'il amr*), such as the use of the suffix *-lah* in the Indonesian translation. Second, the addressee criterion, in which the command is addressed to prophets, individual humans, or humankind in general. Third, the context criterion, which includes verses that have illocutionary force as divine commands even though they do not employ explicit imperative markers.

Identification and Classification

The identification and classification stages were conducted using the principles of content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013), pragmatic methods (Bardovi-Harlig, 2025), imperative categorization (Searle, 1976), and face-saving acts (Brown & Levinson, 2016). Each imperative verse was analyzed based on three main analytic dimensions. The first dimension is the structural form, namely the grammatical realization of the imperative form, categorized as direct, mitigated, or indirect. The second dimension is the pragmatic function, which encompasses the illocutionary force of the command speech act. The third dimension is the face-saving strategy, referring to linguistic mechanisms that reduce threats to the hearer's positive or negative face. The face-saving strategies include: (1) mitigation through justification, such as the use of "because…" or "so that…"; (2) affirmative softeners, such as "Indeed, Allah…" or "Truly…"; (3) indirect exhortations, such as "Will you not reflect?"; (4) collective inclusivity, such as "O leaders of the people…"; and (5) reward–threat framing, which combines positive and negative spiritual consequences. The reliability of the classification results was verified through inter-rater verification to ensure the validity of interpretations. The verses were then categorized into two thematic domains: imperatives with negative face and imperatives with positive face.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through the lens of religio-pragmatics. The first stage was a textual-pragmatic analysis, which examined the imperative verses based on their illocutionary act types, pragmatic force, and expected perlocutionary effects. The framework of Brown and Levinson was employed to identify the types of positive politeness and negative politeness strategies. The second stage was religious contextualization, which traced the correspondence between divine intent and the politeness strategies embedded within the linguistic structures. The third stage was categorical mapping, namely the construction of a taxonomy of face-saving strategies in divine imperative discourse. This mapping identified patterns such as commands with empathy, with justification and with spiritual rewards. The fourth stage was interpretive synthesis, which connected the linguistic dimensions with theological purposes. At this stage, politeness is viewed as an expression of God's guidance of human behavior, both directly and indirectly. Direct commands refer to instructions delivered by God to humankind, while indirect commands are conveyed through interpersonal instructions within the framework of divine awareness.

Credibility and Data Validity

To ensure the credibility and validity of the analysis, this study implemented several validation strategies. First, source triangulation was conducted through cross-examination between the Arabic Qur'anic text, the official Indonesian translation issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, and the researcher's interpretive notes. Second, peer debriefing sessions were held with linguistics experts. These sessions took the form of reflective and evaluative discussions aimed at ensuring interpretive consistency and minimizing subjective bias. This procedure served as a form of external validation for the data, theoretical framework, and interpretation of face-saving acts.

Ethical Considerations

In line with the principles of research ethics in religious studies, this research adheres to the concept of reverential objectivity , as emphasized by Abdul-Raof (2012). This principle ensures that every stage of analysis is conducted with academic rigor while maintaining reverence for the sanctity of the Qur'anic text. The study does not interpret the verses in theological or doctrinal contexts but instead focuses on the pragmatic dimensions as manifestations of divine communication. Thus, this research maintains a balance between scientific precision and spiritual respect toward the sacred text that serves as the object of study.

Results

Negative Face-Saving Act

The negative face-saving act in the Qur'anic context refers to linguistic strategies used to preserve the addressee's freedom to act, think, and respond. This strategy appears when a command is delivered in a non-coercive, gentle manner or through certain mitigations.

Mitigation through Hedges and Minimize Imposition

Mitigation is a politeness strategy used to reduce the illocutionary force of an utterance so that the message is conveyed without threatening the interlocutor's freedom. In Qur'anic discourse, this strategy appears in the form of hedging and minimizing imposition, which shows the subtlety of expressing commands or exhortations. The use of mitigation through *hedges* in the Qur'an indicates a form of cautionary or suggestive statement expressed carefully through conditional or tentative linguistic markers. This form serves to lower the degree of propositional certainty, making the utterance softer and less threatening to the interlocutor's freedom of thought.

(1) "Let him go with us tomorrow morning to have fun and play. We will certainly take good care of him." He (Jacob) said, "Indeed, it saddens me that you should take him away, and I fear that a wolf may devour him while you are negligent of him." They said, "If a wolf devours him while we are a strong group, then surely we are the losers." (Yusuf: 12–14)

Excerpt (1) shows a directive utterance, a request from Yusuf brothers to take him along that is indirectly rejected by their father. The rejection prompts Yusuf's brothers to reaffirm their request in verse (14) with a more polite strategy. They use the conditional form "if" in the sentence: "If a wolf devours him while we are a strong group, then surely we are the losers." This directive employs a *negative face-saving act* indicator through the use of mitigation in the form of *hedging*. The use of the conditional "if" functions as a mitigative marker that weakens the degree of certainty and reduces the intensity of the statement. In this way, the speakers (Yusuf's brothers)

do not directly assert a tragic possibility but rather present it as a conditional possibility. This strategy protects the interlocutor (their father) from negative face threats, so that he does not feel pressured or forced to accept the tragic possibility directly. Pragmatically, this verse represents a *negative face-saving act* strategy through conditional mitigation to reduce the propositional force of the utterance and avoid threatening the interlocutor's freedom of thought and emotion. The second form of mitigation is realized through *minimize imposition*. This strategy reduces the burden or pressure on the interlocutor by proposing an alternative action that is lighter or less demanding. It becomes salient in Qur'anic discourse when a speaker seeks to persuade or convince another party to accept a proposal without making the recipient feel coerced. In the story of Prophet Yusuf, this strategy appears when one of his brothers offers a milder solution than the initial plan.

(2) One of them said, "Do not kill Yusuf, *but cast him into the bottom of the well; some travelers may pick him up if you wish to do something." (Yusuf: 10)*

Excerpt (2) contains a *negative face-saving act* strategy through *minimize imposition* as seen in the clause "cast him into the bottom of the well." This suggestion reduces the burden of the act compared to the option of killing Yusuf. The clause functions as linguistic mitigation to lessen the sense of threat or coercion. By offering a lighter alternative, the speaker seeks to lower the threat level to the interlocutors' *negative face* (Yusuf's brothers) by not forcing them into an act that is too morally or emotionally burdensome. Pragmatically, this verse shows how the speaker maintains a balance between communicative purpose (getting rid of Yusuf) and respect for the interlocutor's freedom of action through the *minimize imposition* strategy so that the proposal is more acceptable without causing resistance.

Lexical Choice of Impersonalization

Lexical choice plays a role in maintaining pragmatic politeness through the selection of words that avoid direct confrontation. In the Qur'anic context, the use of impersonal or generalized forms serves as a strategy to admonish or warn without attacking personal identity.

(3) "You do not worship besides Him but only [mere] names that you and your forefathers have named, for which Allah has sent down no authority. The judgment belongs only to Allah. He has commanded that you worship none but Him. That is the correct religion, but most of mankind do not know." (Yusuf: 40)

Excerpt (3) displays a *negative face-saving act* strategy through *impersonalization* by removing personal focus to reduce the sense of direct threat to the interlocutor. Here, Prophet Yusuf criticizes idol worship using general terms without addressing specific individuals: "You do not worship besides Him but only names that you have named." This strategy reduces the confrontational tone since the criticism targets a general phenomenon (the practice of idolatry) rather than specific people. In this way, Prophet Yusuf does not directly threaten the listeners' *negative face.* This verse demonstrates that although the message conveyed is firm (a prohibition against worshiping others besides Allah), the *impersonalization* strategy within the framework of *negative face-saving act* makes the utterance feel like a divine assertion rather than a personal attack or coercion by Prophet Yusuf.

Indirect Request Structure

Linguistic structure is an important medium to frame the intention of commands or requests so that they do not seem threatening to the interlocutor's freedom. In Qur'anic command discourse, the *indirect request* form is one of the prominent features of politeness in interactions between figures.

(4) "And there entered the prison with him two young men. One of them said, 'Indeed, I saw myself [in a dream] pressing wine,' and the other said, 'Indeed, I saw myself carrying bread on my head, from which the birds were eating.' They said, 'Inform us of its interpretation; indeed, we see you as one of the doers of good.'" (Yusuf: 36)

Excerpt (4) displays a *negative face-saving act* strategy through the use of *indirect request* by the two young men imprisoned with Prophet Yusuf. Although their main goal was to ask Yusuf to interpret their dreams, their request was delivered gently and mitigatively. Instead of giving a direct command like "Interpret our dreams," they first narrated their dreams: "Indeed, I saw myself pressing wine" and "I saw myself carrying bread on my head." Only afterward did they make their request implicitly: "Inform us of its interpretation." This structure shows a shift from directive to narrative utterance, which functions to reduce coerciveness toward the interlocutor (Yusuf). Pragmatically, this *indirect request* form is a hallmark of *negative politeness strategy*, as it respects the interlocutor's *negative face* Yusuf's right to act freely without compulsion. Such utterances maintain harmony in the sensitive prison setting while demonstrating a high degree of politeness in interpersonal communication.

Transcendental Authority and Attribution of Power

In Qur'anic discourse, commands are often attributed to divine authority to eliminate the sense of personal dominance. Attribution to God's will serves to mitigate potential threats to the interlocutor's freedom because actions are understood as part of divine order rather than human will.

(5) "And the one from Egypt who bought him said to his wife, 'Provide him a good residence. Perhaps he will benefit us, or we may adopt him as a son.' And thus We established Yusuf in the land that We might teach him the interpretation of events. And Allah is predominant over His affair, but most of the people do not know." (Yusuf: 21).

Excerpt (5) demonstrates the application of a *negative face-saving act* strategy within the dimension of transcendental authority. The phrase "Allah is predominant over His affair" functions as a *divine authority attribution* that places all human decisions and events under God's will. In this context, the Egyptian official's command to his wife, which seems like a human exercise of power, is balanced by the assertion that ultimate authority remains with Allah. By attributing all matters to God, the Qur'anic text reduces the intensity of individual power claims (the official's authority) over his interlocutor (his wife). Thus, this verse mitigates potential threats to the interlocutor's *negative face*, as the command is no longer presented solely as an expression of personal will but as part of divine intention and design. Divine power functions as a frame that softens human power relations and affirms that every action, including commands and prohibitions, occurs within the bounds of God's will.

Positive Face-Saving Act

Positive politeness (positive face-saving act) in Qur'anic communication focuses on maintaining social harmony through appreciation, emotional closeness, and acknowledgment of the interlocutor's dignity. This strategy is oriented toward fulfilling the hearer's need to be accepted, respected, and recognized within social and spiritual communities. In Surah Yusuf, the principle of positive politeness is evident through forms of address, empathy, togetherness, and recognition of the transcendental dimension that connects humans with their Creator.

Forms of Address and Collective Identity

Positive politeness is manifested through address forms that signify collective identity and relational closeness. In the Qur'anic context, the use of address terms symbolizes respect, preserving social harmony and preventing interpersonal conflict.

In-group identity markers

One of the main strategies of positive politeness is the use of in-group identity markers through linguistic forms that denote belonging to the same group and foster a sense of togetherness. This strategy is used to express solidarity, strengthen social bonds, and reduce social distance between speaker and hearer. In religious communication, in-group identity markers build spiritual cohesion, positioning both the speaker and the hearer as members of a faith community sharing common goals and values.

(6) "O Yusuf, ignore this, and (O my wife) seek forgiveness for your sin. Indeed, you were of the wrongdoers." (Yusuf: 29)

(7) "O my sons, go and find out about Yusuf and his brother and do not despair of relief from Allah. Indeed, none despairs of relief from Allah except the disbelieving people." (Yusuf: 87)

Excerpt (6) and (7) demonstrate the application of the positive face-saving act through the use of in-group identity markers that emphasize emotional closeness, respect, and social solidarity. In excerpt (6), the speaker chooses a personal and gentle form of address, "O Yusuf," full of respect and without reproach, even in a sensitive context. This strategy preserves Yusuf's positive face his desire to be respected and socially accepted while maintaining relational harmony amidst potential tension. The direct use of the name serves as a symbol of respect for the hearer's personal identity and dignity. Meanwhile, in excerpt (7), the address "O my sons!" is used in a familial context with a stronger affective dimension. Prophet Ya'qub's affectionate tone reinforces emotional closeness and warm kinship ties. Through this address, Ya'qub conveys a command gently and empathetically, making it sound participatory rather than authoritative. Both address forms illustrate the vital role of in-group identity markers in maintaining the hearer's positive face. Whether in social or familial settings, respectful and affectionate address terms sustain relational harmony, affirm group solidarity, and prevent threats to the hearer's self-image. These two verses exemplify Qur'anic positive politeness in preserving honor and harmony in social interaction. Positive politeness in Qur'anic communication also functions to establish egalitarian relationships that honor the hearer's dignity. This politeness is demonstrated through respectful forms of address that preserve relational harmony and highlight esteem, as seen in excerpts (8) and (9).

(8) "The king said (to his courtiers), 'Indeed, I saw in a dream seven fat cows being eaten by seven lean ones, and seven green spikes (of grain) and others dry. O eminent ones, explain to me my vision if you should interpret visions.'" (Yusuf: 43)

(9) "And when they entered upon him (Yusuf), they said, 'O noble one, adversity has touched us and our family, and we have come with inferior goods, so give us full measure and be charitable to us. Indeed, Allah rewards the charitable.'" (Yusuf: 88)

Excerpt (8) and (9) show the implementation of positive face-saving acts oriented toward respect, collaboration, and recognition of the hearer's dignity. In excerpt (8), the king — an authoritative figure — chooses not to command directly but instead opens with a respectful address, "O eminent ones." This in-group identity marker indicates social awareness that a command framed with respect and inclusivity is more readily accepted. Likewise, in excerpt (9), Yusuf's brothers use the address "O noble one" before making their request. This title expresses sincere respect for Yusuf's moral integrity. The term *al-'Aziz* reinforces Yusuf's positive image as a person of virtue and avoids face-threatening acts. Through this strategy, the speakers create polite, humble, and persuasive communication.

Include both speaker and hearer in activity

This strategy emphasizes mutual participation between speaker and hearer in a shared activity. By collectively involving both parties, positive politeness is established through social solidarity and shared responsibility. Such utterances reflect collaborative communication that nurtures harmony and closeness in social relations.

(10) "He (Yusuf) said, 'You will plant for seven consecutive years, and whatever you harvest leave in its spikes, except a little from which you will eat.'" (Yusuf: 47)

Excerpt (10) demonstrates a positive face-saving act through the inclusion of both the speaker and the hearer in a shared activity, where the speaker positions himself within the same collective endeavor as the hearers, as a sign of solidarity and social empathy. Yusuf's words, "Whatever you harvest, leave in its spikes," are not authoritative commands but empathetic advice carrying a sense of collective responsibility. Yusuf positions himself not as a ruler but as part of the community facing a shared challenge. Pragmatically, this speech act embodies the essence of positive politeness that stresses empathy and social participation. Yusuf uses empathetic logic that links his command to rational benefit — the prevention of future famine. Thus, this verse exemplifies leadership communication that is both humanistic and collaborative: the directive is delivered in the spirit of solidarity and shared responsibility, fostering harmony between the speaker and the hearer as they confront collective challenges.

Expressions of Empathy and Solidarity

Positive politeness also manifests through expressions of empathy and solidarity that reflect sensitivity to the hearer's emotional needs. By showing concern for the hearer's feelings and circumstances, communication becomes more humane and civilized. In Surah Yusuf, this strategy plays a role in restoring relationships and strengthening social bonds.

(11) "'Ask the people of the city where we were and the caravan with which we came, and indeed, we are truthful.'" (Yusuf: 82)

Excerpt (11) illustrates empathy and solidarity as the foundation of polite, civilized communication, strengthening social relations and emotional closeness between the speaker and the hearer. The utterance "Ask the people of the city where we were and the caravan with which we came" reflects respectful and considerate family communication. The directive "Ask" is expressed in a non-authoritative tone, as a form of positive politeness infused with empathy and respect. Pragmatically, this utterance represents the positive politeness strategy of *notice/attend to hearer's needs*, showing concern for the emotional and psychological state of the hearer — in this case, Prophet Ya'qub, who was grieving. Thus, Ya'qub's sons seek to preserve their father's positive face, avoid threatening his self-esteem, and foster collective awareness and togetherness through the plural form "we."

Strengthening Social Relations and Closeness

Positive politeness in divine commands strengthens social relations and interpersonal closeness. In Qur'anic communication, this is expressed through respect, warmth, and emotional involvement, creating a harmonious atmosphere of interaction. Through such strategies, language functions as a tool for building spiritual awareness and social cohesion.

(12) "So when she (the wife of al-'Aziz) heard of their gossip, she invited the women and prepared a banquet for them. She gave each one a knife and said (to Yusuf), 'Come out before them.' And when they saw him, they greatly admired him and cut their hands, saying, 'Perfect is Allah! This is not a man; this is none but a noble angel.'" (QS Yusuf: 31)

(13) "Say (O Muhammad), 'This is my way; I and those who follow me invite to Allah with insight. Exalted is Allah, and I am not of those who associate others with Him.'" (QS Yusuf: 108)

Excerpt (12) and (13) depict the positive face-saving act as a strategy for strengthening social relations and interpersonal closeness in communication. In excerpt (12), Zulaikha's invitation to the women and her preparation of a place for them demonstrate a pre-request politeness strategy before issuing the directive "Come out." Through this hospitable action, Zulaikha creates a warm social atmosphere and preserves the hearers' positive face — their desire to be accepted and respected socially. Interestingly, the communicative dynamics in this verse transition from social relations to spiritual awareness, as the women shift from worldly admiration to acknowledgment of Allah's greatness. Thus, positive politeness here functions as a spiritual medium guiding human consciousness toward divine values. In excerpt (13), the phrase "I and those who follow me" represents a collective form that embodies the *in-group identity marker* strategy, emphasizing social closeness and religious solidarity. Instead of positioning himself as a superior individual, Prophet Muhammad highlights togetherness in his mission through egalitarian linguistic construction. This reflects positive politeness centered on shared purpose, moral equality, and social participation. Pragmatically, these verses affirm that positive face-saving acts in the Qur'an serve both as verbal politeness and as a communicative tool fostering harmonious social relations and spiritual awareness. Both data points illustrate how positive politeness strengthens interpersonal bonds: in excerpt (12), politeness transforms conflict into understanding, while in excerpt (13), it reinforces social and moral cohesion in an empathetic call to faith.

Transcendental Dimension: Spiritual Submission

This dimension represents the highest form of positive politeness in human–divine relations. Politeness in the form of submission embodies the ultimate reverence toward divine authority. Transcendental communication reflects spiritual expression that harmonizes the relationship between creation and the Creator.

(14) "My Lord, You have given me [something] of sovereignty and taught me of the interpretation of dreams. Creator of the heavens and the earth, You are my Protector in this world and the Hereafter. Cause me to die a Muslim and join me with the righteous." (QS Yusuf: 101)

Excerpt (14) presents politeness in its transcendental dimension. It shows a directive expressed in the form of a supplicative act of total submission conveyed with tenderness, acknowledgment, and love. The phrase "You are my Protector in this world and the Hereafter" illustrates the highest level of positive politeness — that of a servant toward his Lord. Yusuf positions himself humbly in full submission. Transcendentally, his politeness emerges not from social relations but from deep spiritual awareness.

From a religio-pragmatic perspective, this verse reflects the evolution of politeness discourse from social to spiritual realms — from respect among humans to total devotion to Allah. Excerpt (14) affirms the transcendental dimension of politeness culminating in existential acknowledgment of Allah as the Protector and Owner of the soul. Thus, the positive face-saving act in this transcendental context is not merely a linguistic strategy for social harmony but a spiritual medium for preserving harmony between creation and the Creator. The language of politeness in this verse is gentle in expression and profound in spirit.

Discussion

In general, this study's results show that the Qur'anic imperative discourse serves as a medium for delivering divine commands through politeness in transcendental communication. The commanding language God uses toward humans conveys both authority and empathy. The structure of imperative sentences in the Qur'an demonstrates linguistic strategies that affirm divine power while preserving the dignity of the listener as a noble being. Within the framework of the face-saving act theory (Brown & Levinson, 2016), this phenomenon can be understood as a divine effort to convey revelation while maintaining the human face, thereby not diminishing spiritual dignity. Pragmatic analysis of several imperative verses reveals that speech acts of command are conveyed through face-saving strategies that minimize threats to the human face. This phenomenon shows that the language of revelation serves as a synthesis of power and compassion in a unique, transcendent communicative construction. These findings align with contemporary pragmatic studies that interpret politeness as a means to balance power and empathy in asymmetric communication contexts (Lyu & Yuan, 2023; Waziri, 2022).

Findings on the positive face-saving act in Qur'anic imperative discourse reveal its role in constructing communicative relationships grounded in empathy and moral reinforcement. This strategy is not merely used to represent authority and obedience, but also to frame command as an expression of respect for human dignity, affirming spiritual values and moral promises. This pattern indicates that Qur'anic politeness is grounded in a theological intention to cultivate reflective awareness and spiritual attachment between God and humans. Pragmatically, this finding is consistent with Brown and Levinson's *positive politeness strategies*, which aim to create psychological closeness between speaker and hearer. However, in the divine context, such closeness is theological rather than social, rooted in God's mercy

(*rahmah*) and wisdom (*hikmah*) toward humankind. Previous studies show that Qur'anic politeness operates within two relational dimensions—God-human and human-human (Alqahtani, 2024; Gittan Jewad et al., 2020; Jewad et al., 2020). In line with the paradigm of *moral pragmatics* (Björkenfeldt & Gustafsson, 2023; McNab & Mavrou, 2025), this study extends that notion by introducing *the face-integrative* dimension a form of politeness that not only emphasizes goodness but also integrates moral values in cultivating human spiritual awareness. Thus, the *positive face-saving act* in the divine context functions as a pedagogical device that represents an educative dialogue between revelation and humanity, rather than a mere rhetorical strategy.

Findings related to the *negative face-saving act* in the Qur'anic imperative discourse demonstrate its strategic role in mitigating threats to the listener's freedom and autonomy. This strategy appears through linguistic forms that reduce the severity of command, such as conditional structures, theological reasoning placed before or after the command, and gentle or rational lexical choices. These findings correspond to Brown and Levinson's *negative politeness* framework, which seeks to preserve the hearer's freedom of action. However, in religious contexts, *negative face-saving acts* acquire new meaning: mitigation not only prevents communicative resistance but also grants humans moral freedom to choose obedience. This finding can be explained through the concept of *linguistic accommodation* (Razzaq, 2023; Ullah, 2025), which shows that the Qur'an adapts its style and tone according to audience characteristics and social context. Thus, *negative face-saving acts* in revelation serve as rhetorical strategies acknowledging human free will within the framework of divine morality

This study presents novelty in two main aspects. First, our findings identify that *face-saving acts* in the Qur'anic imperative discourse possess a theological dimension distinct from politeness in human-to-human communication as described by Brown and Levinson. In the divine context, "saving face" is not only oriented toward social relations but also toward spiritual and moral relations. While in Brown and Levinson's theory, *face* refers to a social self-image to be maintained, in divine discourse, *face* expands into the existential dignity of humanity, preserved through the language of revelation. Based on these findings, this study introduces a new category, termed divine face-saving politeness, as a theocentric politeness strategy that integrates empathic, educative, and normative dimensions. Second, the study finds that divine politeness is *relationally transcendental*, a form of politeness that transcends ordinary social relations because it is rooted in divine values such as *rahmah* (compassion), *hikmah* (wisdom), and justice.

One important theoretical contribution of this research is the concept of the face-integrative dimension, which extends Al-Khatib's (2012) classification of Qur'anic politeness. Al-Khatib identified two relational dimensions: God-human and human-human. Our research adds a new *face-integrative* dimension within the God-human relationship a communicative form that not only preserves human face but also integrates moral and reflective values within it. By introducing the concept of *divine politeness*, this study opens the way to develop a religious pragmatics framework (Chen et al., 2025; Orthaber, 2022; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2015) that integrates theological values with linguistic mechanisms. This model enables a more holistic analysis of religious texts, which have been relatively overlooked by conventional pragmatic theories.

The findings of this research reveal fundamental differences from conventional politeness theory and challenge Brown and Levinson's *face-saving act* model. In the classical framework, *face* is defined as the social self-image maintained through positive politeness (showing appreciation) and negative politeness (avoiding imposition). However, in the divine context, *face* is not merely social but existential it relates to human nature as a being with dignity and free will.

Therefore, *face-saving* in the Qur'anic discourse not only avoids threats to human honor but also affirms the human spiritual potential to choose goodness. This demonstrates that divine politeness carries a transformative dimension that transcends the mitigative function assumed in conventional pragmatics. This understanding aligns with the contemporary pragmatic paradigm, which views politeness as a moral and multimodal practice that reflects value awareness and power relations within social and spiritual contexts (Brown & Kim, 2025). This argument is also supported by Zhao (2025) new *metapragmatics of respect* paradigm, which asserts that modern politeness cannot merely be understood as a linguistic strategy but as a moral practice grounded in respect for human dignity.

This research expands the scope of pragmatics to encompass theological dimensions in speech act analysis. Ribino (2023) in his systematic review of politeness in human-machine interaction, emphasizes that politeness theory must adapt to different communicative contexts. If politeness can be adapted for communication with machines, then a similar adaptation should exist for transcendental communication between humans and God. The concept of divine face-saving politeness we propose provides a framework for such adaptation.

Conclusion

This study concludes that imperative discourse in the Qur'an conveys divine authority through a system of politeness that harmonizes command and compassion. The analysis shows that both positive and negative face-saving acts are embedded within Qur'anic imperatives to preserve human dignity, mitigate threats to individual autonomy, and foster moral reflection. Within the framework of *religio-pragmatics*, politeness in divine communication emerges as both a linguistic and spiritual act that functions to guide. The key novelty of this research lies in the introduction of the *divine face-saving politeness* concept, a religio-pragmatics category that extends Brown and Levinson's model from the social to the transcendental realm. Unlike conventional politeness theories that emphasize social equilibrium, Qur'anic politeness is *relationally transcendental*, integrating empathy (*rahmah*), wisdom (*hikmah*), and moral consciousness in divine imperatives.

Theoretically, this research expands the field of pragmatics by incorporating theological dimensions into the analysis of face-saving acts and offering a framework that bridges linguistic strategies with divine intention. Practically, the findings affirm Qur'anic communicative ethics as a model for constructing empathetic and respectful discourse in social interaction, education, and interfaith communication. Nevertheless, this study is limited to Surah Yusuf and textual-pragmatic aspects without exploring the multimodal or cognitive dimensions of divine politeness. Future research is recommended to further develop the *divine face-saving politeness* framework through corpus-assisted analysis or comparative studies across other surahs and sacred texts from different religions to test its explanatory strength and validity.

AI Tools Declaration

We acknowledge the use of AI to check and edit our writing in this research for spelling and grammatical errors.

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