

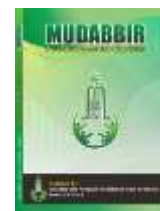


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The Use of Formal Language in English Debate Forums on YouTube

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of formal language in English debate forums on YouTube by analyzing authentic utterances produced by debaters and moderators in formal debate settings. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, this research analyzes three debate videos, including Youth Leadership Debate competitions and a Harvard student debate held at the John F. Kennedy Jr. Forum. The data consist of selected utterances taken directly from debate transcripts that reflect formal language use in openings, argumentation, disagreement, and closing statements. Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory is employed to explain how speakers manage disagreement while maintaining professionalism and social harmony. The findings show that formal language in debate forums is realized through institutional greetings, structured argument framing, mitigated criticism, and evaluative closing statements. Expressions such as formal audience address, guided argument markers, and indirect disagreement demonstrate that formality in debate goes beyond basic politeness and is shaped by academic and institutional norms. This study highlights the importance of formal spoken English in debate contexts and suggests that debate videos on YouTube provide valuable data for analyzing academic oral discourse.

Keywords: *Formal Language, Debate Forum, Politeness, YouTube*

INTRODUCTION

Formal language is a defining feature of academic communication, particularly in public speaking contexts such as debate forums. Debate competitions require speakers to express disagreement, challenge opposing arguments, and persuade audiences while maintaining respect and professionalism. This linguistic demand distinguishes debate discourse from casual spoken interaction, as speakers must carefully select words, structure arguments, and manage interpersonal relations.

English debate forums are especially relevant for linguistic analysis because disagreement is not only expected but institutionalized. Speakers are required to oppose ideas without attacking individuals, which makes politeness and formality essential. Previous studies on academic discourse emphasize that formal spoken language relies on structured argumentation, indirect criticism, and institutional framing (Halliday, 2014; Holmes, 2013). In debate contexts, speakers are required to challenge ideas without threatening interpersonal relations, which makes politeness strategies essential in maintaining formality (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Culpeper, 2011). However, many studies focus on classroom interaction or written discourse, while fewer examine debate forums hosted on digital platforms.

YouTube provides access to authentic debate performances conducted in formal academic settings. Debates uploaded on YouTube, such as university-level competitions, allow researchers to observe naturally occurring spoken language without experimental manipulation. This study therefore focuses on English debate forums on YouTube to analyze how formal language is realized in real debate interaction. Using Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, this research aims to explain how speakers employ formal language strategies to manage disagreement and maintain social harmony in competitive academic debates.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the use of formal language in English debate forums. The data were collected through field-based observation in the form of video analysis. Three English debate videos were selected as data sources, consisting of two Youth Leadership Debate (YLD) grand final debates and one Harvard student debate conducted at the John F. Kennedy Jr. Forum. These videos were chosen because they represent formal, institutional, and academic debate contexts.

The data consist of utterances taken directly from the debate transcripts. The researchers watched the videos repeatedly, transcribed relevant parts, and selected utterances that clearly demonstrate formal language use in openings, argument development, disagreement, and closing statements. The data analysis followed three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and data verification. Brown and Levinson's

Politeness Theory was applied to interpret how speakers manage face-threatening acts through formal and polite language strategies during debate interaction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the three debate transcripts shows that formal language is consistently used throughout the debates and is not limited to simple expressions of polite disagreement. In the opening sections, formality is strongly marked through institutional greetings and audience address. For example, in the Youth Leadership Debate, the moderator opens the event by addressing the audience with expressions such as “Distinguished ladies and gentlemen” and formally introducing judges, debaters, and institutions. Similarly, in the Harvard debate, the moderator states, “Good evening everyone and welcome to the John F. Kennedy Jr. Forum at the Institute of Politics.” These utterances function to establish institutional authority and signal that the interaction takes place in an academic public forum. This aligns with Halliday’s (2014) view that formality in spoken discourse is shaped by context and social function. Such institutional greetings reflect what Biber et al. (2011) describe as an academic public-speaking register, where language choices are influenced by institutional roles and audience expectations.

Formal language is also evident in how speakers frame their arguments. In the YLD debate, speakers use expressions such as “I will be proving to you that we are no longer giants in those sectors” and “Let me tell you a story, a story of greatness.” In the Harvard debate, speakers guide their arguments with phrases like “Let me tell you about resilience” and “Now let me show you.” These expressions reflect planned discourse and structured reasoning, which are characteristic of academic oral argumentation. Such language choices help speakers control the flow of arguments and maintain clarity for the audience.

When expressing disagreement, speakers employ mitigated criticism rather than direct confrontation. For instance, in the YLD debate, a speaker states, “It is not to say that she is not developing in one area or the other, but it is to say that relative to other African countries she is no longer the giant that she used to be.” This utterance shows how disagreement is softened through careful phrasing. Similarly, in the Harvard debate, a speaker responds with “While I acknowledge the previous speaker’s point, this overlooks the broader context.” According to Brown and Levinson (1987), such strategies represent negative politeness, as speakers minimize the threat to the opponent’s face while maintaining argumentative strength. Similar patterns of indirect criticism in formal debates have also been identified in previous studies, which show that speakers tend to challenge arguments rather than individuals in institutional debate settings (Locher & Watts, 2005; Ilie, 2015).

In the closing sections, formal language is used to evaluate arguments and persuade the audience. Speakers commonly use expressions such as “In conclusion,

ladies and gentlemen”, “We have demonstrated that”, and “Based on the arguments presented.” These utterances are impersonal, evaluative, and authoritative, reflecting the formal nature of academic persuasion. Previous research on academic spoken discourse suggests that such evaluative language is commonly used to strengthen persuasion while maintaining objectivity and formality (Hyland, 2005; Ädel, 2018). The consistent use of such expressions across all three videos indicates that formality in debate forums is systematically constructed through linguistic choices shaped by academic norms and institutional expectations.

These findings support previous studies that emphasize the role of politeness and structured language in formal spoken interaction (Holmes, 2013). Unlike informal discussions commonly found on social media, debate forums require speakers to balance disagreement with professionalism, making formal language a crucial component of effective debate performance.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that formal language in English debate forums on YouTube is realized through institutional openings, structured argument framing, mitigated disagreement, and formal evaluative closings. The analysis of authentic debate transcripts shows that formality goes beyond basic polite expressions and is deeply influenced by academic and institutional contexts. Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory helps explain how speakers manage disagreement while maintaining social harmony in competitive debates. The findings suggest that debate activities play an important role in developing formal spoken English skills and that YouTube debate videos provide rich and authentic data for the study of academic oral discourse.

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