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"WHY DON'T YOU…": A STUDY OF LINGUISTIC RESOURCES OF NEGATIVE POLITENESS IN ENGLISH RESEARCH ARTICLE REVIEWS

The article presents the results of a corpus-based study of interpersonal relations between the reviewer and the author aiming to analyze negative politeness strategies and identify linguistic resources employed by the reviewers to avoid face-treatening acts in their peer review reports. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and previous research on negative politeness strategies, the study identified five types of negative politeness strategies in the English-language corpus with suggesting and hedging as the most common ones. The results also show that the reviewers employ a variety of linguistic resources to mitigate the illocutionary force of critical comments, thus avoding imposing on the authors. They include impersonal constructions, questions, epistemic verbs, adverbials of degree and extent, modals, and personal pronouns among others. The study may shed some light on the ways of mitigating criticism and avoiding face-threatening acts in evaluative genres of academic discourse and provide further evidence of generic effects on language use in academic discourse.

1. Introduction

In modern linguistics with its dominant principle of anthropocentrism, discursive practices, including academic ones, are regarded as an interactional space involving individuals with their values, attitudes, and intentions rather than an information environment exclusively intended to convey new knowledge (Boginskaya 2022; Hyland 2000, 2005; Larina and Ponton 2022). A new approach

to understanding communication in the academic settings requires new studies on interpersonal strategies and linguistic features used to establish effective relationships between the communicants.

Being the evaluation of research findings, peer review is a good example of a negotiation between the reviewer and the author aimed to convey assessments and comments that help the editor to decide on manuscript acceptance or rejection. In the academic context, peer reviews play a number of roles, including evaluative and gatekeeping to help decide which articles should be published and didactic to motivate researchers to improve their manuscripts. Peer reviews are considered to be the measure of quality for journals, and manuscripts are published only after passing through this process. Supporting and verifying scientific knowledge though the value and contribution of the research to the field, they offer a critical perspective, displaying an awareness of the appropriate expression of praise and criticism (Hyland 2000). It is, then, not surprising that linguistic and discursive features of this evaluative genre have received attention in a number of academic discourse studies (e.g., Al-Khasawneh 2022; Alcaraz-Ariza 2011; Boginskaya 2023, 2024; Diani 2009; Fortanet 2008; Hyland and Diani 2009; Larina 2019; Larina and Ponton 2020, 2022; Moreno and Suarez 2008; Paltridge 2020; Sönmez and Akbaş 2023; Tse and Hyland 2009; Yakhontova 2019).

While these studies are valuable, to my knowledge, no attention has been paid to the linguistic mechanisms that shape their subtle social dynamics. This paper delves into the linguistic features employed in article reviews, focusing specifically on the phenomenon of negative politeness. Negative politeness, a key concept in sociolinguistics, refers to strategies used to minimize imposition and avoid potential face threats when interacting with others. While often associated with face-to-face interactions, negative politeness strategies are also demonstrably present in academic discourse, particularly in article reviews where social cues are often ambiguous. Studying linguistic resources used in this genre to display different types of negative politeness could be a valuable endeavor in academic discourse studies. By analyzing the linguistic resources and their impact, we can gain insights into the complex dynamics of academic evaluation, understanding how individual opinions and broader social norms shape the reception of knowledge within the academic community.

Thus, this study aims to shed light on how negative politeness manifests in article reviews, exploring the linguistic features that contribute to a sense of deference and respect towards the author of the reviewed article. To achieve this goal, the research seeks answers to the following questions:

(1) To what extent did the reviewers use different types of negative politeness strategies to soften criticism and avoid face–threatening acts?

(2) Which linguistic resources identified in previous research did the reviewers opt for to show the types of negative politeness?

(3) Which linguistic resources were most frequent in the corpus?

The next part of the article reviews previous studies on peer review as a genre of academic discourse. Part 3 defines the concept of negative politeness in relation to academic discourse. Part 4 sets the methodological framework for the study, describes the processes of data collection and analysis. Part 5 presents the results obtained in the study. Key findings are discussed in Part 6. The final part provides a brief overview of the conclusions of the study.

2. Previous research on peer reviews

Open science practices contribute to enhancing transparency of the peer review process and provide researchers with materials for exploring the interaction between the referee and the author from different perspectives. A growing body of research on peer review and referee reports has emerged to identify discourse strategies, metadiscourse patterns, culture- or discipline-specific features of this genre. Previous research has focused on different types of peer review – book reviews, thesis reviews, research article reviews, or research grant application reviews. Diani's (2009) study of English book review articles in linguistics, history and economics explored the use of *that*-clause complementation, which projects either others' ideas or those of the reviewer. Babaii's (2011) study, which analyzed book reviews published in physics journals, revealed that although they featured more impersonal than subjective criticism, the presence of personal comments, mockery and sarcasm raise some doubts over objectivity of hard sciences. Boginskaya (2023) has explored thesis reviews with the aim to identify lexico-grammatical structures used for hedging as a mitigating strategy

that helps the reviewer to create a friendly environment. The most comprehensive study of various types of peer review was conducted by Paltridge (2020) who examined reviewer reports from the points of view of pragmatics, content, context, and the use of evaluative language and presented suggestions for training reviewers through tasks and activities based on the findings of the study.

Despite remaining mostly anonymous and traditionally hidden from readers, peer reviews of research articles have been also explored from a variety of perspectives which became possible due to the open science movement aimed to make products of science publicly available. Nature journals, for example, follow the open peer review practice publishing both research articles and reviewer reports. Due to the open science movement, some reviewer reports are publicly available on https://publons.com/. Therefore, the traditionally occluded nature (Swales, 1996) of the genre of peer review of research articles does not prevent researchers from exploring it from different points of view (e.g., Fortanet 2008; Gosden 2003; Hyland and Jiang 2020; Kashiha 2023; Larina 2019; Larina and Ponton 2020, 2022; Mungra and Webber 2010; Paltridge 2020; Sönmez and Akbaş 2023; Yakhontova 2019).

Kourilova's (1998) study is considered to be the first one that analyzed discourse strategies in peer reviews of research articles. She explored the structure of complements and criticism within Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and explained the prevalence of direct criticisms by the anonymity of referees. Based on Halliday's (1985) metafunctional framework, Gosden (2003) analyzed reviewer comments on research papers and observed that much critical feedback from referees is oriented towards revisions whose underlying rationale is more interpersonal than ideational. The author divided referee comments into five categories such as Technical Detail, Claims, Discussion, References, and Format and interpreted them within Halliday's model. Fortanet (2008) conducted an analysis from a different angle. Using 50 peer review reports from Applied Linguistics and Business Organisation, the researcher identified their most significant evaluative features. The analysis revealed that criticism patterns were the most common in the whole corpus, whereas recommendations and requests through questions ranked second and third respectively. Mungra and Webber's (2010) analysis of reviewer reports submitted to medical journals identified the most prevalent comments and revealed that most comments were critical rather

than face-saving. Additionally, they divided all the comments into two groups – content comments and language comments and revealed that the first ones are overwhelmingly preferred by reviewers. Similar results were obtained by Tharirian and Sadri's (2013) study, which explored reviewer reports on the articles of Iranian researchers submitted to international journals.

From a linguistic perspective, Falk Delgado et al.'s (2019) study aimed to analyze words and expressions employed in reviewer reports and to estimate differences in net sentiment between peer review reports of manuscripts subject to one or more rounds of peer review and review reports on manuscripts initially rejected but accepted after appeal. They revealed that positive words, including *well, important, clear, significant, strong,* and *interesting*, mainly concerned the manuscript's research question, the methodological rigor and the quality of the writing. They also concluded that minor and major revisions reviews were more positive than those that initially rejected manuscripts. Hyland and Jiang (2020) scrutinized a corpus of 850 excerpts posted by authors on the Internet and identified some of the linguistic features which authors find discouraging or scathing. Using corpus techniques, they identified the content foci, stance features and keywords of these reviews in order to highlight what authors find wounding and what reviewers might seek to avoid. Yakhontova (2019) has conducted a more extensive cross-disciplinary study aimed to analyze both linguistic features and the functional organization of this genre. Additionally, she identified three communicative functions the genre performs in the academic setting – gatekeeping, evaluative, and didactic.

From a cross-cultural perspective, Larina and Ponton's (2022) study concerned blind peer article reviews to explore how disagreement and negative evaluation are expressed in British and Russian cultural settings. The authors revealed that British peer review reports are less categorical and contained less face-threatening acts than the Russian ones in which hedging as a politeness strategy was employed to a lesser extent.

One of the most recent studies conducted by Sönmez and Akbaş (2023) examines article reviews from a different angle focusing how reviewers establish relationships with authors by mitigating criticism and expressing compliments in transparent peer review reports. Their findings suggest that transparency makes

reviewers employ more politeness strategies to mitigate criticisms and avoid hurtful comments.

3. The concept of negative politeness in academic discourse

Politeness as a specific discoursal strategy is associated with the expression of respect and defined as a system for interpersonal relations that promotes smooth interaction by reducing the likelihood of conflict and confrontation (Lakoff 1973). Robin Lakoff, who developed one of the earliest theories of politeness, defined politeness as socially constructed behaviors designed to minimize friction in personal interactions. Her politeness principle outlines three key tenets: "Don't impose or Distance," "Give options or Deference," and "Make audience feel good or Camaraderie." The second principle, that involves providing interlocutors with options, allowing them to either accept or decline without feeling compelled, offers a particularly valuable lens through which to analyze peer review discourse.

In academic settings, politeness, which is realized through the employment of criticism mitigating and or complimenting strategies, helps avoid face-threatening acts that arise during the communication of new ideas or evaluation of research results thus maintaining a positive atmosphere.

In linguistics, politeness has been studied within a number of theories, the most prominent of which is the one developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), which is based on two key notions – politeness and face. Face is described as the public self-image which should be preserved to maintain harmony between people. Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that people need to acknowledge the face of other people and seek to make other people feel good, thereby maintaining their positive face. At the same time, people seek to avoid imposition, thus maintaining the other person's negative face. In doing so, they employ positive politeness strategies to show appreciation and negative politeness strategies to avoid criticisms, blunt comments, and disagreement. Since the present study seeks to examine the linguistic markers of negative politeness, the next paragraphs of this section will elaborate on this type.

As Brown and Levinson (1987) put it, negative politeness aims to mitigate the impact of the threat to the negative face which desires to be free of impositions. The researchers distinguished between ten types of negative politeness, including being conventionally indirect, questioning and hedging, being pessimistic, minimizing the imposition, giving deference, apologizing, impersonalizing, stating the face-threatening act as a general rule, nominalizing, and going on record as inuring a debt. Reviewers may therefore choose from a number of strategies to mitigate criticism. For example, they may apply suggesting as in 'I suggest providing more information about this trend' or resort to questioning as in 'Will RR be a good indication in this case?'. The choice of a politeness strategy is determined by factors such as social distance, power relations, and degree of imposition (Brown and Levinson 1987). The reviewer should take into account the degree of face threat that needs to be compensated for by the employment of an appropriate negative politeness strategy.

Yet politeness strategies have been treated in a number of other works performed on different types of discourse, Myers (1989) was the first scholar who paid attention to the role of negative politeness markers in academic prose. Following Brown and Levinson (1987), Myers found that negative politeness strategies applied in oral interactions can be extended to written academic discourse, in which making claims and presenting findings can threaten the negative face of other researchers. Direct negative feedback can lead to defensiveness and resistance. Negative politeness strategies help to minimize this threat by acknowledging the author's expertise and good intentions while still delivering constructive criticism.

These strategies are particularly crucial in peer reviewing, where the politeness, norms which regulate face-to-face dialogue, should be applied here (Larina and Ponton, 2020). Through negative politeness, reviewers can create a more collaborative environment where authors feel respected and valued. This encourages them to engage with the feedback, accept suggestions, and ultimately improve their work. According to Myers (1989), politeness markers are used in dealing with social interactions involved in publishing articles and marking authorial claims as being provisional. Every scientific report makes a claim that is to be taken as the article's contribution to knowledge. The making of a claim threatens both the disciplinary community because it is a demand by individuals for

communally granted credit and the negative face of other researchers because it implies a restriction on what they can do now. As Myers (1989) put it, academic writing is a balancing act: writers must respect existing knowledge, while also offering something new and original to justify publication. This act, therefore, threatens other researchers whose credit may be questioned and a disciplinary community suspending its absolute authority. The writers feel a need to assure the reader that the claims put forth are not intended to exclude alternative ideas and views. Negative politeness strategies help therefore to tentativise the writer's commitment to the proposition or mitigate the illocutionary force of the speech act of critique. In doing so, they serve as crucial discoursal strategies whereby the reviewers signal their attitudes towards the authors, and, as Myers (1989) claims, they are inextricably tied up with the face maintenance and thus viewed as features contributing to politeness.

4. Methodology

4.1. Methodological framework

Taking Brown and Levinson's politeness theory as a point of departure and incorporating the findings on the types of negative politeness obtained in previous studies (Brown and Levinson, 2017; Hyland, 2000; Larina and Ponton, 2022; Liu and Zhao, 2007; Paltridge, 2020; Sönmez and Akbaş, 2023), I developed a taxonomy of primary negative politeness strategies which can be observed in the genre of peer review (see Fig.1). Primary negative politeness strategies are defined as those that are most frequently observed and play a fundamental role in mitigating potential face-threatening acts within the peer review interaction.

Hedging

Suggesting

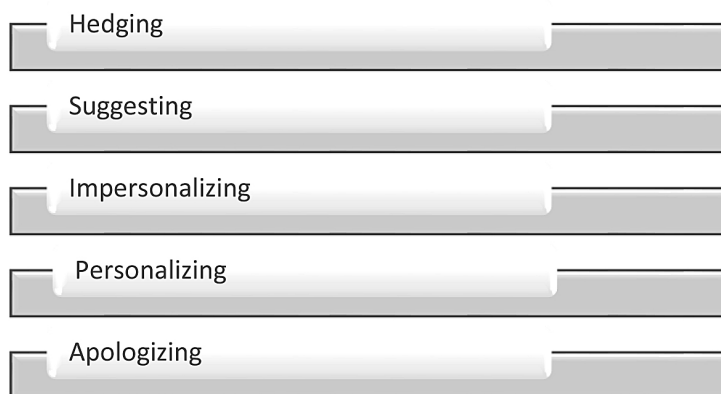Impersonalizing

Personalizing

Apologizing

Figure 1. Types of negative politeness.

Hedging is one of the most studied strategies of negative politeness. In most studies, politeness has been considered to be the main motivating factor for hedging, since academic discourse involves interactions among researchers in which the face maintenance is crucial (Myers, 1989). Politeness is also emphasized in Hübler's (1983) definition of hedging devices used to avoid apodictic statements overlooking the readers' wish to judge for themselves. Crismore and Vande Kopple (1988) defined hedges as elements that signal a tentative assessment of the truth of referential information and allow the author to reduce their responsibility toward the information presented. Salager-Meyer (1995) showed that hedges can protect author's reputation as a scientist by making claims tentative and avoiding absolute statements and aggressive comments. According to Holmes (1997), hedges could facilitate discussion, show politeness and oil the phatic wheels. In the same vein, Boncea (2014) considered hedging markers as helpful in expressing politeness and mitigating face-threats.

Suggesting is another type of negative politeness frequently used by reviewers. It is also directly connected to the interpersonal characteristics of the review process. This politeness strategy plays a role in shaping the social dynamics and maintaining the conventions of academic communication (Sönmez and Akbaş 2023). Providing authors with constructive suggestions about their manuscript and research creates an effective dialogue aimed to improve the quality of the paper submitted to the journal. It is important to note that reviewers often use indirect suggestions to give authors more flexibility in implementing the nec-

essary changes. In contrast, when using directive speech acts, which are potentially face-threatening, as Brown and Levinson (1987) described them, the reviewer expects the authors to accept the recommendations and to make necessary changes. Suggestions, though less authoritative, may provide rather strict directions in the context of the peer review due to the imbalance of power relations, as reviewers presuppose compliance with all their remarks on the part of reviewees (Yakhontova 2019). While the use of the linguistic devices such as deontic modals or performative verbs serves to mitigate the illocutionary force of the directive, I still classify the suggestions as employing negative politeness because they attempt to redress the inevitable FTA inherent in the reviewer's role. The reviewer is simultaneously imposing on the author's negative face and attempting to minimize the imposition through these mitigating strategies.

Two other negative politeness strategies included in the taxonomy are impersonalizing and personalizing. The first one is directed towards the authors and employed in referee reports to avoid explicit reference to them as in 'It is not clear how the corpus was built'. Non-human actors and passive constructions soften the force of criticism thereby reducing the threat to the author's face. Personalizing, which involves the shift of the communicative focus to the reviewer, also soften criticism as in 'In my opinion, they should provide a more detailed description of the materials used in the study". The frequent use of first-person singular pronouns and epistemic verbs by reviewers makes their comments more subjective, highlighting their individual perspectives rather than presenting objective truths. As Larina and Ponton (2020) claim, representing views as contingent and subjective rather than objectively true helps mitigate the face threatening potentialities of disagreement and criticism. This strategy creates the effect of discursive recognition to other voices: the reviewer acknowledges that the author may be right and opinions different from the one of the reviewer may exist.

Finally, apologizing is interpreted as a sign of courtesy. Apologies highlight the interactional aspect of peer review and neutralize negative connotations of criticism by creating a friendly atmosphere.

To facilitate the search for lexico-grammatical patterns used to mark negative politeness in the corpus, a list of linguistic items for each type of negative politeness strategies was developed, drawing upon a synthesis of established research

(Hyland 2005; Paltridge 2020; Sönmez and Akbaş 2023; Varttalla 2001; Yakhontova 2019) (see Table 1). The selection process involved identifying items common across these studies, focusing on those markers most relevant to the genre of research proposals. This list in Table 1, while not exhaustive, includes key linguistic items associated with each negative politeness strategy, to illustrate the range of strategies identified in the previous research.

Table 1. Linguistic realization of the types of negative politeness

Type of negative politeness	Lexico-grammatical categories	Linguistic resources	Examples
Hedging			
	Epistemic modals	*may, might, could, can*	However, this link **may** be based on regulation *Tbet* or *IFNg* or other yet uncharacterized targets.
	Epistemic verbs in active and passive voice	*think, believe, feel, guess, appear, seem, tend*	Fig. 1A **appears** to be mislabeled or is difficult to understand
	Adverbials	*perhaps, possibly, probably, apparently, maybe, usually, sometimes, slightly, a little, a bit, rather, quite*	This table is **quite** difficult to understand.
	Adjectives	*probable, possible, apparent, likely, slight*	Throughout this paper, the authors use Lck-Cre mice, so it is **likely** that HIF2a and miR-29a are also defective in CD8 T cells.
	Nouns	*probability, possibility, likelihood assumption, belief*	It is my **belief** that the paper would be significantly strengthened by including more figures featuring the comparison results.
	Pronouns	*some*	**some** of the findings have been generated using patients' samples, adding translational value to the overall study.
Suggesting			
	Deontic modals in impersonal and personal constructions and conditional sentences	*may, might, would, could*	**It would be important** to analyze the issue in detail. The study would be more comprehensive **if you could** include more data on the long-term effects of the treatment.

	Performative verbs in active and passive voice	*suggest*	To improve the reader's understanding, I **suggest** adding a discussion.
	Nouns	*suggestion, possibility*	I have only a few minor **suggestions.**
	Questions	*Why don't you...? Could you...? Would it be possible to consider...? Isn't it better to...?*	**Why don't you** remove the respective part of the "highlights" bullet points and omit Fig. 4A?
Impersonalizing			
	Nouns	*claim, article, idea*	This **result** lacks direct evidence.
	Passive constructions	*the analysis was performed... ... are not discussed*	**The experiments** with the His-tagged versions **were not carried out.**
	Impersonal constructions	*It is difficult to... It is generally not acceptable to... It is not clear...*	**It is not clear** what is being modeled in the active site.
Personalizing			
	First-person pronouns and possessives	*I, me*	**I** hope the authors find these comments constructive.
	First-person possessives	*my*	In **my** opinion, all values need to be reported.
	Adverbials	*personally*	I **personally** believe that the study could be improved with the addition of a discussion on the sectoral resolution and supply chain coverage of aquatic foods.
Apologizing			
	Adverbials	*unfortunately, regrettably*	**Unfortunately**, FAO production data only includes catch location at a very coarse level.
	Lexical verbs	*regret*	I **regret** that I cannot this manuscript for publication in its current form
	Adjectives	*sorry, afraid*	I am **afraid** I cannot recommend the manuscript for acceptance as it stands.
	Nouns	*regret*	The only **regret** I have is some grammatical errors in the manuscript.

In analyzing the linguistic items used to mark the negative politeness strategies, understanding the context and multiple functions of these items is crucial for their accurate analysis. For example, the modal verbs *may, can*, or *could* are used both for hedging and suggesting. For example, while in *'I may be wrong, but…'* *may* is used to soften the blow by acknowledging the possibility of alternative perspectives, in *'It may be helpful to…'* it implies a suggestion.

4.2. Data collection

To address the research questions set in the Introduction section, the corpus including 192 referee reports was created by downloading the texts from the websites of the international journals *Communications Biology*,[1] *Hereditary Cancer in Clinical Practice*,[2] *Environmental Health*,[3] *Biodata Mining*,[4] *Nature Communications*,[5] *Biogeosciences*.[6] Each of these journals embraces transparency by outlining their peer review process openly, making it part of their publication process. Reviewer comments to the authors, author rebuttal letters, and editorial decision letters can be found on the journal websites. These documents are published online as part of the supplementary peer review file with the aim, as Nature Communications website claims, "to improve the reliability of early results and the overall value of published manuscripts". Reviewers have several options – to remain anonymous, to sign their reports, or to choose to be acknowledged by name as part of the reviewer recognition scheme.

Only first-round reports were selected for the study due to their larger size, which allows for finding more examples of the use of politeness markers. Second- or third-round reviews of the articles published in the six journals selected for the study were limited to one paragraph or even one word (*None*) if the authors managed to revise their paper following the reviewer's comments.

The size of the corpus build for the present study is 137,472 words. As is evident from the journal titles, all the reviewers evaluated natural and nature-related

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[1]   https://www.nature.com/commsbio
[2]   ttps://www.hccpjournal.biomedcentral.com
[3]   https://www.ehjournal.biomedcentral.com
[4]   https://www.biodatamining.biomedcentral.com
[5]   https://www.nature.com/ncomms
[6]   https://www.bg.copernicus.org

sciences papers. Most reviewers recommended minor or major revisions (85 and 102 instances, respectively). Five reviewers rejected the manuscripts, but they were all subsequently published. The reviewer reports were written in English. However, it was not possible to identify whether the authors of these texts were native speakers of English as reviewers' identities were not disclosed. To eliminate the impact of time, only the reviewer reports on the articles published in the most recent issues of each journal, published between 2020 and 2023 were selected in order to exhibit the linguistic characteristics of present-day evaluative academic discourse. Table 2 illustrates the size of the corpus.

Table 2. Corpus details

Journal	No. of reviewer reports	Number of words
Hereditary Cancer in Clinical Practice	32	19,657
Environmental Health	32	23,678
Biodata Mining	32	21,733
Biogeosciences	32	27,074
Nature Communications	32	24,987
Communications Biology	32	20,343
Total	192	137,472

4.3. Data analysis

In order to investigate the linguistic items used to mark the five types of negative politeness, this study adopted a corpus-based methodology, utilizing the AntConc corpus analysis tool to identify relevant linguistic items. While corpus analysis is inherently computational, the primary analysis of these items was conducted manually. The analysis process went through several steps. Quantitative analysis supplemented with manual contextual analysis was applied to all instances of negative politeness markers so as to analyze the socio-pragmatic context in which linguistic items are used to identify whether they act as negative politeness markers.

First, linguistic markers in the reviewer reports were identified using AntConc 3.4 (advanced text analysis software which provides details about the text and can ensure the accuracy of research results), searching for every item in the lists presented in Table 1. Second, the markers found in the corpus were manually analyzed in context to determine their pragmatic functions and to ensure that

they serve as negative politeness markers. Finally, the occurrences of linguistic items used to mark the five types of negative politeness were classified and combined. The examples discussed are intended to illustrate variation in the lexico-grammatical markers of negative politeness.

5. Results

The findings presented in this section concern the linguistic resources used to mark the types of negative politeness in the reviewer reports. First, the data obtained from the study is presented, beginning with the total frequency of each type of negative politeness (Table 3). Thereafter, focus is placed on the frequencies of linguistic items used for each type of negative politeness (Tables 4-8).

Table 3. Frequencies of negative politeness strategies

Type of strategy	Raw frequency	Relative Frequency
Suggesting	998	36.2
Hedging	784	28.4
Personalizing	506	18.4
Impersonalizing	451	16.4
Apologizing	17	0.6
Total	2,756	100

The table shows that suggesting with 36.2% was the most frequently used negative politeness strategy. Hedging with 28.4% ranks second in the list of negative politeness strategies. Personalizing and impersonalizing were almost equally distributed in the corpus with 18.4% and 16.4% respectively. Apologizing was the least frequent negative politeness strategy used to express regret about reviewer recommendations or excessive criticism.

Taking a look from another angle, that is, from the perspective of the frequencies of linguistic resources used to show negative politeness, the results are presented in Tables 4-8.

Table 4. Linguistic realization of suggesting

Linguistic categories	Raw frequency	Relative Frequency
Deontic modals in		
- impersonal constructions	469	47
- personal active voice constructions	187	18.7
- personal passive voice constructions	40	4
Questions	121	12.1
Active voice lexical verbs	34	3.4
Passive voice lexical verbs in	31	3.14
- impersonal constructions	23	2.3
- personal sentences	8	0.84
Nouns	43	4.33
Other	73	7.33
Total	998	100

Table 5. Linguistic realization of hedging

Linguistic categories	Raw frequency	Relative Frequency
Epistemic modals	158	25.6
Lexical verbs in		
- impersonal constructions	98	12.5
- personal sentences	47	6
Adverbials	129	16.5
Nouns	94	12.9
Pronouns	89	11.4
Adjectives	58	7.4
Other	47	2.1
Total	784	100

Table 6. Linguistic realization of impersonalizing

Linguistic categories	Raw frequency	Relative Frequency
Impersonal constructions	212	47
Nouns	145	32.2
Passive constructions	94	20.8
Total	451	100

Table 7. Linguistic realization of personalizing

Linguistic categories	Raw frequency	Relative Frequency
First-person singular pronouns	391	81.9
First-person plural pronouns	1	0.2
First-person possessives	85	17.9

Total	477	100

Table 8. Linguistic realization of apologizing

Linguistic categories	Raw frequency	Relative Frequency
Adjectives	9	53
Adverbials	5	29.4
Nouns	2	11.7
Verbs	1	5.9
Total	17	100

The study revealed that suggesting was most frequently realized through deontic modals and questions; hedging – through epistemic modals and lexical verbs; impersonalizing – through impersonal constructions and nouns; personalizing – through first-person pronouns, and apologizing – through adjectives.

6. Discussion

In what follows, the five types of negative politeness and linguistic resources employed to mark them will be discussed as concerns their pragmatic functions and contexts in which they appear in the corpus.

6.1. Suggesting

While negative politeness strategies are employed to soften criticism, it is still important to provide feedback that helps improve the manuscript. The reviewer needs therefore to strike a balance between providing constructive feedback and maintaining a positive relationship with the author. Suggesting is a crucial negative politeness strategy which is helpful in maintaining a positive and constructive academic environment. When reviewers suggest rather than dictate, they acknowledge the author's expertise and their unique perspective. Direct criticism, even when well-intended, can trigger defensiveness and resistance in the author. Suggestions, particularly when delivered with empathy and respect, are more likely to be met with openness and willingness to engage. They foster a sense of collaboration and mutual respect, essential for a healthy academic environment. As can be seen from Table 3, suggestions were extensively employed

by the reviewers. Most reviewers sought to avoid direct commands and recommendations by making suggestions that sound milder and politer, as is shown in the following examples.

(1) **It would be important** to estimate the kinetic inductance of these electrodes.

(2) Besides this, there is a series of comments that **the authors might want** to consider before resubmission of the revised version of the manuscript.

(3) **The order** of the presentation in the paper **could be improved**.

The analysis revealed that the reviewers generally avoided direct reference to the authors by suggesting through the use of the deontic modals used in impersonal constructions, as illustrated in Examples (1) and (2), and personal sentences, as shown in Example (3). Impersonal constructions such as *it would be important to + verb, it would be beneficial to + verb, it would be helpful to + verb, it would be nice to, it may be helpful to, it could be useful to + verb* were numerous in the corpus. Their share was about 70% of the total number of suggesting patterns. In contrast to *should*, which conveys a strong illocutionary force, *might, may, could* and *can* are softer, and suggest rather than oblige the authors to make revisions. Using softer modals can encourage authors to engage with suggestions rather than feeling obligated to comply with demands.

Example (4) shows that the reviewer uses two types of negative politeness – the hedging adverbial *perhaps* which expresses doubt thus softening the force of the utterance and the impersonal structure with the modal *could* which implies suggestion. It should be noted that a combination of several negative politeness strategies (for example, hedging + suggesting) was quite common in the corpus. By utilizing multiple strategies, reviewers can create a more collaborative and supportive peer review process, ultimately leading to higher quality research and a richer scholarly exchange.

(4) The theme emerges quite well from what has been written, but **perhaps** in this sentence, to reinforce the message, **it could be useful to** recall the difficulties typically associated with the analysis of emerging risk factors, in the danger assessment phases.

Concerning lexical verbs, the analysis found only three items – *suggest, encourage* and *like* – used in active or passive voice sentences, as illustrated in Examples (5) and (6).

(5) **I suggest** the authors include this discussion to make this rationale more accessible to the reader.

(6) The use of more objective, quantitative metrics like PSNR is **encouraged.**

The only noun used to realize this strategy was *suggestion*, which occurred 12 times.

(7) Here are **my suggestions** for improvement.

Questions were also rather frequent in the corpus. By framing suggestions as questions, the reviewer involves the author into a dialogue and invites to explain the choices or consider alternative approaches. This approach tends to come across as more collaborative, promoting a healthy peer review process.

(8) **Could** the authors provide the formula used for calculating the compression ratio?

(9) **Isn't better to** supplement all the fitting parameters, such as amplitude reduction factor So2?

The employment of suggestions in the genre or peer review can be regarded as a crucial aspect of developing interaction with the author within the evaluative process contributing to the relational dynamics in the academic setting and supporting social practices pertaining to the established conventions that exist in academic discourse (Yakhontova, 2019). Given the interpersonal nature of peer review, it is not surprising that commands and direct recommendations were uncommon in the corpus. Mitigating the illocutionary force of criticisms and providing authors with constructive comments contributes to a productive dialogue for the sake of improving the quality of the manuscript. These politeness markers help reviewers create a welcoming environment of freedom and openness (Sönmez and Akbaş, 2023), that differs from a strict type of review featuring expressions such as 'You should…', 'It is necessary to…', 'Reformulate…'.

6.2. Hedging

Hedging ranks second among the negative politeness strategies found in the corpus. It aims to soften the illocutionary force of critical comments or potentially offensive or confrontational statements and to reduce the undesirable effects of the reviewer's behavior. Hedging involves using linguistic resources that allow reviewers to express their opinions in a cautious and less direct manner to maintain a respectful tone and establish a harmonious relationship with the author, while still providing useful feedback. By employing the hedging strategy, referees can express their reservations or doubts without appearing threatening and reduce defensiveness on the part of the author thus promoting a more collaborative discussion. Examples of hedging in reviewer reports include using adverbials of degree and extent.

(10) Figure 5i is **quite** misleading.

(11) Line 168, the sentence is **a bit** confusing.

These words act as "dampeners," reducing the strength of the statement they modify. By adding *quite* or *a bit*, the reviewer acknowledges that their perception might not be universally shared or that there may be room for interpretation.

In the following the example, hedging is realized through the use of the probability adverbials *maybe,*

(12) This phrase is **quite** vague (**maybe** even too casual) for describing the content of the article.

Maybe introduces a degree of doubt, suggesting that the causality of the phrase might not be universally perceived, thus making the utterance less forceful and more open to discussion. *Quite* also contributes to softening the tone of reviewer feedback and creating a more nuanced approach.

Lexical items that soften criticism and provide the author with opportunities to reflect on the suggestions also include distancing verbs such as *seem* and *appear*.

(13) It **seems** to be not a single sine function, and appears to be not even periodic with 360deg.

(14) This **would seem** to exclude climate change effects on mortality, but climate change does kill people.

Additionally, hedging can be accomplished through the use of epistemic modal auxiliaries, as illustrated in Examples (15), which introduces a degree of uncertainty and make the reviewer's statements less absolute.

(15) CIFAR-10 accuracy **might** not be the best choice.

Epistemic hedging avoids dictating a specific course of action, leaving room for the author to engage with the feedback and make their own choices.

The critical tone of the review was frequently mitigated through the use of indefinite pronouns such as *some* functioning as semantic operators, which reduce the intensity of criticism and accuracy of the propositional content, as in Example (16). De-intensifying the evaluation with an uncertainty marker makes the utterance less categorical, thus softening the negative emotional impact on the author.

(16) However, the presentation of the data suffers from **some** inconsistencies as well as missing important information on the samples investigated as detailed below.

Authors are less likely to feel attacked or threatened when reviewers express their opinions with a degree of uncertainty.

Overall, hedging is an important politeness strategy in the genre of peer review, as it enables fruitful discussions between the author and the reviewer, ultimately improving the manuscript. Hedging fosters a sense of partnership rather than a hierarchical relationship between reviewer and author. It encourages a shared exploration of ideas, rather than a rigid judgment. By using it effectively, reviewers can create a more collaborative space where authors feel valued and encouraged to improve their work.

6.3. Impersonalizing

Using impersonal and passive constructions and structures with a non-human actor was another frequently employed negative politeness strategy that serves the purpose of avoiding mentioning of the manuscript author. As Sönmez and Akbaş (2023) claim, the use of these impersonal structures contribute to a more detached tone, emphasizing the action or its result rather than the agent thus di-

minishing personal responsibility of the author. By taking the focus away from the author, the reviewer can provide feedback in a less confrontational manner thus maintaining a constructive tone throughout the review process and minimizing the chances of causing discouragement.

One way of impersonalizing reviewer comments is to use the passive voice instead of the active voice, as illustrated in Example (17).

(17) Uncertainties and limitations of the review **are not discussed**.

The reviewer uses the passive voice instead of saying 'You/the author didn't discuss uncertainties and limitations of the review'. By shifting the pragmatic focus from the author to the defect of the article, the reviewer presents the comment, which is less personal and more focused on the content.

Using a non-human actor can also contribute to impersonalizing. Structures with a non-human actor help reviewers avoid directly pointing out flaws to the author, as in below:

(18) The **data** obtained is particularly noisy in spite of the rather large values of the critical current.

(19) This **result** is very unreasonable and lacks direct evidence.

Another linguistic pattern is impersonal constructions, as in the following example.

(20) As a consequence, **it is not clear**, whether the content of these paragraphs refers to results from literature or to discussion from the authors.

This structure also allows the reviewer to maintain a collaborative atmosphere while providing feedback. By depersonalizing the comments and focusing on the content, the reviewers can effectively communicate feedback and reduce the threat to the author's face without causing unnecessary offense or discouragement.

6.4. Personalizing

Personalizing as a negative politeness strategy ranks third in the corpus and was predominantly realized through the employment of first-person singular pronouns and possessives. Only one first-person plural pronoun was found in

the corpus to express an apology, which can be explained by the fact that peer reviews are written by one author, who bears personal responsibility for evaluating the study. Here are some examples from the corpus.

(21) **I** am not convinced that dichotomization is a good idea given the loss of information.

(22) If **I'**m not mistaken, often (at least in **my** experience), the application of risk assessment often refers to the opposite case.

(23) **Allow me** also **to give a more specific suggestion**, regarding this figure.

The modal modification of propositional content reduces categoricalness by shifting the focus from a negative evaluation to the subjectivity of the reviewer opinion and transfers criticism to the possible world through axiological predicates included in the evaluation. Furthermore, epistemic verbs such as *think* and *believe* in Examples (24) and (25) serving the hedging purpose provide an opportunity to produce critical statements regarded as an alternative rather than absolute truth.

(24) I **think** this is critical, a storage system should be independent of the 'class' of the data that is being stored.

(25) **I believe** that the discussion around the topic (with the due differences between "Threshold" and "non-threshold" chemical carcinogens) may be relevant here.

Combining hedging with personalizing is a powerful and nuanced way to employ negative politeness in peer review. It allows reviewers to express criticism while minimizing face-threatening acts to the author. While hedging introduces uncertainty and softens the strength of a statement by acknowledging that the reviewer's perspective might not be the only valid one and allows for alternative interpretations, personalizing involves directly addressing the author, showing that the reviewer acknowledges their effort and expertise and creating a sense of shared understanding, which can make criticism feel less confrontational. Combining these two strategies creates a more delicate and respectful tone.

First-person singular pronouns were also observed with adjectives and verb forms denoting emotional states such as confusion or curiosity, as in Examples (26) and (27), which also contributed to mitigating the force of criticism.

(26) **I'm confused** about environmental racism being coined by Rev. Chavis in 2000.

(27) **I'm curious** why not authors did cross-species validation?

I-pronoun personalizes the feedback and shifts the focus away from a purely objective, detached stance. By saying *I'm confused* or *I'm curious*, the reviewers acknowledge their personal experience and perception. This humanizes the review and can make it feel less adversarial.

6.5. Apologizing

The least frequently used negative politeness strategy was apologizing. The infrequent employment of this strategy in the corpus can be explained by the predominant type of referee reports published on the journal websites – these were reviews recommending minor or major revisions. The apologizing strategy was seen only in 13 major revision reviews and in four rejection reviews.

While uncommon, apologizing is an effective negative politeness strategy as it helps maintain a respectful tone while addressing potential criticisms. By apologizing, the reviewer acknowledges that their comments may come across as critical, which can help alleviate any negative impact on the author's emotions. Furthermore, an apology shows that the reviewer is empathetic and aware of the potential effect their comments might have on the author. The analysis found four linguistic items used by the reviewers for apologizing – *afraid, sorry*, *to regret, regret,* and *unfortunately.* Here are three examples from the corpus.

(28) Despite many physical/chemical characterizations and theoretical calculations were made in this work, **we are afraid** that several inconsistencies with previous reports and lack of novelty prevent us from a favorable recommendation of this study for publication.

(29) The only **regret** that can be expressed is the absence of a comparison with the use of random forests after the selection of variables by the three methods, which could also have been relevant for a more detailed evaluation of the effect of the proposed procedures or the comparison with embedded variable selection procedures.

(30) I'm **sorry** that the review is too negative.

As Radovanović (2023) put it, apologies can be expressed in two ways: explicitly through the use of performative verbs like *apologize*, and implicitly through the use of related assertive utterances. The corpus primarily showcased apologies conveyed through adjectives, adverbials, and, less frequently, nouns. The corpus contained only a single instance of a performative verb used to convey an apology. Example (29) demonstrates an implicit apology expressed through the noun *regret,* addressing minor flaws and suggesting a call for improvement rather than direct criticism. Examples (28) and (30) demonstrate the reviewers implicitly apologizing for their recommendation to reject the manuscript and their critique of the work through the use of the adjectives *afraid* and *sorry.*

Reviewers using apologies in major revisions should be mindful of the potential to dilute the impact of their feedback. It is vital to maintain a constructive and respectful tone while also acknowledging the author's perspective. If the focus shifts too much to apologies, it might hinder open and productive discussion about the manuscript. Authors might feel defensive or discouraged from engaging fully with the reviewer's suggestions.

7. Conclusion

Reviewing is a cognitive operation based on the reflexive, value-oriented activity of the researcher. This involves assessing the validity of claims, the soundness of methods, the originality of insights, and the overall significance of the findings. By assessing research results obtained by other researchers, reviewers are being under the influence of two opposite factors: on the one hand, it is necessary to be categorical and convincing enough to defend personal points; on the other hand, it is advisable to avoid too categorical statements and to observe the maxim of politeness not to damage own professional image and not to cause critical backlash from opponents. These factors influence communicative behavior of the reviewer, balancing between the desire for objectivity and building mutually respectful relationships between participants in scientific communication. Even strong criticism should be delivered with tact and sensitivity, avoiding personal attacks or inflammatory language. The study showed that the negative

politeness strategies – suggesting, hedging, personalizing, impersonalizing, and apologizing – play a crucial role in conveying reviewer's evaluation by carefully calibrating the level of directness and the potential for face-threat.

The analysis revealed that the most frequent negative politeness strategy was suggesting used to avoid direct commands, thereby contributing to establishing a harmonious relationship with the author. Hedging ranks second in the list of negative politeness strategies. It also softens the illocutionary force of reviewers' comments and ensures the success of communication by creating a psychologically comfortable environment. Personalizing and impersonalizing were almost equally distributed in the corpus and used to emphasize the subjectivity of reviewer evaluations or to shift the focus from the author to the content. Apologizing, the least common negative politeness strategy, served as a sign of reviewer's courtesy and empathy. The study also revealed that negative politeness was realized through a variety of lexico-grammatical categories and patterns, the top three most common of which were deontic and epistemic modals, first-person singular pronouns, and adverbials. The lexico-grammatical categories used to realize each type of negative politeness differed significantly. The study revealed that suggesting was most frequently expressed through deontic modals and questions; hedging – through epistemic modals and lexical verbs; impersonalizing – through impersonal constructions and nouns; personalizing – through first-person pronouns, and apologizing – through adjectives.

Thus, exploring an evaluative genre of academic discourse, this article made an attempt to offer a comprehensive analysis of negative politeness strategies and their linguistic realization in the reviewer reports openly published by six international journals in the field of natural and nature-related sciences. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of the social dynamics of article reviews and the intricate ways in which language is used to shape academic communication as well as can give insight into how reviewers navigate the delicate balance between expressing their opinions and maintaining a polite and respectful tone. The results can be used by academic course instructors in order to raise learners' consciousness about the ways academics put forth their critical comments and mitigate the effect of criticism in evaluative academic discourse. Learning from the linguistic choices of experienced reviewers can be a valuable tool for novice reviewers. By studying how criticism is softened and

nuanced, novice reviewers can build their own vocabulary and hone their skills in providing constructive feedback.

Finally, a few limitations of this study should be emphasized. The conclusions about the frequencies, types and functions of linguistic resources used to show negative politeness are based on the analysis of only 192 reviewer reports and should be interpreted only as trends due to a limited size of the corpus. For more comprehensives findings, further research should involve more reports which can allow us to identify other linguistic means of mitigating criticisms in reviewer reports. It would be also interesting to conduct an analysis of linguistic markers of positive politeness strategies in reviewer reports to shed light on the interpersonal dynamics in this evaluative genre of academic discourse. Furthermore, examining the presence and function of positive politeness strategies in reviewer reports would be a valuable contribution, shedding light on the interpersonal dynamics within this evaluative genre of academic discourse. Additionally, future research could investigate whether reviewers utilize implicatures as a strategy of negative politeness in the corpus, providing a deeper understanding of the subtle and indirect ways criticism is conveyed.

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„Zašto ne biste…": Istraživanje jezičnih sredstava negativne ljubaznosti u recenzijama znanstvenih radova na engleskom jeziku

Sažetak

Članak donosi rezultate korpusno utemeljenog istraživanja međuljudskih odnosa recenzenata i autora, a cilj mu je analizirati strategije negativne ljubaznosti i identificirati jezična sredstva kojima se recenzenti koriste kako bi izbjegli ugrožavanje ugleda (engl. *face-threatening acts*) autora u recenzijama. Oslanjajući se na teoriju ljubaznosti Browna i Levinsona (1987.) i prethodna istraživanja o strategijama negativne ljubaznosti, u istraživanju je uočeno pet vrsta strategija negativne ljubaznosti u korpusu tekstova na engleskom jeziku, pri čemu su predlaganje (engl. *suggesting*) i ublaživanje izričaja (engl. *hedging*) najčešće korištene. Rezultati također pokazuju da se recenzenti koriste različitim jezičnim sredstvima kako bi ublažili ilokucijsku snagu kritičkih komentara, izbjegavajući tako nametanje autorima. Ta sredstva uključuju impersonalne konstrukcije, pitanja, epistemičke glagole, priložne oznake stupnja i opsega, modalne glagole i osobne zamjenice. Istraživanje može rasvijetliti načine ublaživanja kritike i izbjegavanja ugrožavanja ugleda u procjeniteljskim žanrovima akademskog diskursa te pružiti dodatne dokaze o utjecaju žanra na upotrebu jezika u akademskom diskursu.

Ključne riječi: recenziranje, negativna ljubaznost, kritika, ublaživanje izričaja, ugled
Key words: peer review, negative politeness, criticism, hedging, face