

RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Semiotic Units And Semiotic Means In Relation To Politeness: A Linguosemiotic Analysis

Madina Abdullazoda

Phd Student, Uzbekistan State World Languages University, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Received: 22 August 2025 Accepted: 18 September 2025 Published: 20 October 2025

ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between semiotic units and semiotic means in expressing politeness across linguistic and multimodal communication. Drawing upon linguosemiotic and pragmatic frameworks, the study argues that politeness is a semiotic phenomenon realized through the interaction of verbal, visual, audial, and kinetic signs. Semiotic units encode the conceptual meaning of politeness, while semiotic means actualize it contextually through tone, gesture, gaze, and design. The findings reveal that politeness operates as a multimodal semiotic construct that reflects cultural codes and communicative harmony across societies.

Keywords: Semiotic unit, semiotic means, politeness, multimodality, linguosemiotics, intercultural communication, pragmatics.

Introduction

Politeness is a core aspect of human communication, serving to maintain social harmony and mutual respect (Brown & Levinson, 1987). From a semiotic perspective, politeness is not only a linguistic phenomenon but a multimodal one, constructed through language, gesture, tone, and visual design. Semiotics allows us to understand how meanings of respect, empathy, and distance are encoded (through semiotic units) and realized (through semiotic means) across cultural contexts. However, politeness is not confined to linguistic expressions; it is also constructed through semiotic means such as tone, gesture, gaze, and spatial distance.

Semiotic theory provides a framework for understanding how meaning and social intent are encoded through various sign systems (Eco, 1976). Within this framework, the distinction between semiotic units (the smallest meaning-bearing elements) and semiotic means (the instruments through which these meanings are realized) becomes central to analysing politeness as a semiotic phenomenon rather than a purely linguistic one.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A semiotic unit refers to a minimal meaning-bearing element within a system of signs (Saussure, 1916). For example, the word “please” functions as a linguistic semiotic unit representing a politeness formula.

A semiotic means, on the other hand, is the communicative mechanism that conveys or reinforces that meaning in a specific context (Peirce, 1931–1958). For instance, when “please” is uttered with a soft intonation and a smile, the word becomes part of a multimodal politeness act.

Thus, the semiotic unit encodes politeness, while the semiotic means enacts it through contextual cues such as voice, gesture, and gaze.

In pragmatics, politeness is viewed as a system of communicative strategies used to protect face and express social respect (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 2014).

From a semiotic perspective, politeness is not only a matter

of verbal form but a multi-layered semiotic phenomenon — one that relies on verbal and non-verbal cues to construct meaning.

For example:

- A simple utterance like “Could you open the window, please?” (linguistic unit) becomes polite through its modal verb, intonation, and facial expression (semiotic means).
- A head nod or a gentle smile accompanying a request intensifies the polite meaning through kinetic and visual semiotic systems.

Therefore, politeness is realised as a semiotic event — a coordinated activation of multiple sign systems oriented toward social harmony and relational respect.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This research applies an interdisciplinary linguosemiotic methodology combining:

- Structural-semiotic analysis (Saussure, 1916);
- Triadic semiotic model (Peirce, 1931–1958);
- Pragmatic politeness framework (Brown & Levinson, 1987);
- Multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996).

Examples from linguistic, visual, kinetic, and digital communication were selected to illustrate how semiotic units and means collaborate in constructing politeness.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Criterion	Semiotic Unit	Semiotic Means
Definition	Minimal element encoding meaning or intention	a Mechanism realizing that meaning in communication
Function	Semantic: creates the potential for meaning	Pragmatic: activates meaning in context
Politeness Role	Encodes politeness formula (<i>please, thank you, sorry</i>)	Enacts politeness through tone, gesture, timing, gaze
Example (Linguistic)	The word “ <i>thank you</i> ” as a politeness marker	Said with a warm smile and soft intonation
Example (Visual)	Bowing symbol 🙏 in emoji	Used in digital communication to show gratitude
Example (Kinetic)	Bowing as a gesture of respect	Degree and speed of bow convey cultural politeness norms
Example (Digital)	🙏 emoji as gratitude or apology	Context determines whether it is humility or prayer

This comparative model demonstrates that semiotic units provide the form, while semiotic means provide the affective force behind politeness acts.

a) Linguistic politeness

Politeness is conventionally expressed through modal

verbs (could, would), indirect speech acts, and honorific forms.

Example: “Would you mind helping me?”—the unit (modal verb) encodes deference, while the means (intonation, word order) shapes its pragmatic tone (Leech,

2014).

b) Visual politeness

In visual communication—advertising, film, social media—politeness is constructed through colour choice, gaze direction, and spatial distance (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996).

For instance, soft pastel colours and open body posture in visual design connote friendliness and approachability, functioning as semiotic means of politeness.

C) Audial politeness

Tone, rhythm, and pitch contour in speech act as audial semiotic means that modify politeness.

For example, a high rising intonation softens a directive (“Close the door, please?”) transforming it from an order into a request.

d) Kinetic politeness

Gestures, bowing, nodding, and hand placement embody kinetic semiotic means.

In Japan, the degree of bow correlates with social hierarchy — a deeper bow implies greater respect — demonstrating how politeness operates through embodied semiotics (Ide, 2005).

e) Digital politeness

In online communication, emojis, reaction icons, and punctuation serve as digital semiotic means for expressing politeness.

For example, the addition of “😊” or “🙏” softens text-based messages, compensating for the lack of tone or gesture in digital discourse (Herring, 2013).

Politeness, as a semiotic practice, is culturally variable.

- In Western cultures, direct eye contact is polite and signifies sincerity; in Eastern cultures, prolonged eye contact can be impolite or disrespectful.
- A handshake in Western interaction signifies equality; in Eastern contexts, a bow often implies humility and respect (Scollon & Scollon, 2011).

These variations indicate that semiotic means operate under culturally embedded semiotic codes, which influence how politeness is perceived and produced.

The expression of politeness rarely relies on a single code. In natural discourse, linguistic, visual, audial, and kinetic semiotic means co-occur to achieve pragmatic harmony.

Example (Face-to-face interaction): A person says, “I’m sorry to bother you,” (linguistic unit) → smiles apologetically (visual means), → speaks softly (audial means), → lowers head slightly (kinetic means).

Here, politeness emerges from the synchrony of multiple semiotic codes, forming a multimodal act of respect and empathy.

CONCLUSION

Semiotic analysis reveals that politeness is a multimodal, semiotic phenomenon—not merely a linguistic category.

- Semiotic units (words, symbols, gestures) encode politeness intentions.
- Semiotic means (tone, posture, design, timing) realize these intentions in interaction.

Their integration forms the semiotic architecture of politeness, which varies across cultures but universally functions to preserve social harmony and interpersonal respect.

Recognizing the semiotic nature of politeness deepens our understanding of how humans construct empathy, hierarchy, and cooperation through the language of signs.

REFERENCES

1. Barthes, R. (1968). *Elements of Semiology*. Hill and Wang.
2. Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge University Press.
3. Chandler, D. (2002). *Semiotics: The Basics*. Routledge.
4. Eco, U. (1976). *A Theory of Semiotics*. Indiana University Press.

5. Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as Social Semiotic*. Edward Arnold.
6. Herring, S. (2013). *Pragmatics of Computer-Mediated Communication*. De Gruyter Mouton.
7. Ide, S. (2005). *Exploring the Concept of Politeness in Japanese and Other Languages*. Multilingual Matters.
8. Jewitt, C. (2016). *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*. Routledge.
9. Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. Routledge.
10. Leech, G. (2014). *The Pragmatics of Politeness*. Oxford University Press.
11. Lotman, Y. M. (1990). *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. I. B. Tauris.
12. Peirce, C. S. (1931–1958). *Collected Papers*. Harvard University Press.
13. Saussure, F. de. (1916). *Cours de linguistique générale*. Payot.
14. Scollon, R., & Scollon, S. W. (2011). *Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach*. Wiley-Blackwell.