

STRATEGIC POLITENESS: A PRAGMATIC STUDY OF RICHARD POWERS 'THE OVERSTORY'

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ABSTRACT

The present study represents a practical discussion of strategic politeness in Pulitzer Prize-winning author Richard Powers novel *The Overstory* (2018) exploring how language strategies create and define environmental activism and the human-nature interactions. The research uses a qualitative and interpretive methodology based on the literary pragmatics and eco-pragmatics with close textual analysis of 28 purposely chosen passages of the novel that relied on the Politeness Theory by Brown and Levinson (positive, negative, bald-on-record, and off-record strategies), as well as the Speech Act Theory by Searle, complemented by the ecolinguistics by Stubbe and the notion of face created by Goffman. The results show that politeness is a strong ideological machine: positive politeness strategies build activist solidarity and work towards interspecies kinship, negative politeness is a finely crafted strategy in negotiating power inequalities, bald-on-record is a feature of an ethical break, and off-record strategies enable subversion and transcendent knowledge. Finally, Powers restructures politeness as an ecological praxis, which goes beyond the anthropocentrism to apply a relational ethics that is appropriate to the Anthropocene, thus placing.

Keywords: Politeness, Strategic Politeness, Pragmatic, Ecolinguistics, SFL

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The combination of ecological analysis (ecocriticism) and pragmatics is becoming a new way to create more effective ways of analyzing the way that humans communicate about the natural environment through language. This has given rise to a new field of study called eco-pragmatics or ecolinguistics, which is an interdisciplinary approach to studying environmental communication.

An examination of the relationship between the speaker(s) and the context of the statements reveals how social networks help shape meaning

beyond the literal meaning of words, the way speakers construct their illocutionary and perlocutionary intentions, create implicatures, build relationships with others, and perform speech acts. Since around the beginning of the 1990s, ecocriticism has focused on the representation of the natural world in literature, critiquing literature's anthropocentric bias toward all things human, and providing an ethical approach to humans' relationships with everything that exists outside of ourselves. The merging of these two fields has created a shift in how to analyze human language as it pertains to

the natural world. Instead of focusing solely on statements made by humans regarding the natural world, the merging of these two fields creates an environment where we can study how the depiction of the environment is crafted and how humans change the perceptions of the world based on language. This includes both everyday conversations and works of literature. The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report, the IPBES report stating that 1,000,000 species will go extinct, and the current rate of global deforestation of 10,000,000 ha per year all suggest that an eco-pragmatic lens will not only be relevant but will require immediate political action. How we choose to use language affects if climate narratives will create connection or division (or) if activist language will empower resilient coalitions to develop and grow or cause problems through backlash. Further, how fictional worlds create a space for grief regarding ecological disaster (or) allow for the articulation of alternative forms of communication to exist in creating resilience in the environment.

The present research takes a firm stand within this ecological pragmatic concept to explore the ways in which both polite and, at times, strategically impolite linguistic techniques determine how we create, discuss and transfer environmental discourses through Richard Powers's *The Overstory*. While ecocriticism has examined how *The Overstory* incorporates a posthumanist ethical view of the world, an arboreal structure as a metaphor for living in the world, how it uses focalisation to allow for a subjective view of trees, how it critiques an extractive, late-capitalist system, and how it addresses the concept of slow violence, and while literature has been used to inform characterisation by using speech act and implicature analyses; studies of how politeness applies to an ideological element of ecological fiction are few and far between. This gap in the research is surprising given that Environmentalism as a form of activism (historically and fictionalised in literature) occurs in situations of extreme power inequality, urgent moral imperatives, and serious threats to self-esteem. Consequently, politeness has not been shown to be a marginal social nicety, but instead,

without a doubt, is the very foundation for successfully persuading, resisting, forming alliances with others, and ultimately surviving in the face of environmental degradation.

The Overstory, written by Richard Powers, serves as an excellent focus text through which to conduct an analysis of linguistic-pragmatic issues in eco-pragmatics because Powers develops a consistent pragmatic dilemma across each of the book's narrative layers while highlighting language as a point of crisis, limitations, and transformation. Most of the protagonists in *The Overstory* undergo some form of severe "language crisis" following their ecological enlightenment, which translates into a traumatic experience in which they discover that the traditional syntax of subject and object in English, as well as the temporal sequence and an anthropocentric vocabulary, is an inadequate method for representing the dynamics, slow temporality, and radical relationality associated with living trees and associated mushrooms. This crisis is not simply an underlying theme in *The Overstory*; it is also depicted within the discourse and ultimately creates a situation where the protagonists experience the limitations of their linguistic expression and therefore must develop new strategies to use language effectively. According to the author, our natural grammar shapes our perception of the world and that ecological consciousness demands the development of our communication parallel. It does not merely consist in making new words to express old conceptions; it is a re-designing of the form of our expression (of the micro level of the reliance of our pronouns to the macro level of the form of a narrative) to the principles of interconnected systems. Therefore, the text is an experimental space where the possible stakes of using various practical means of communicating about and representing nature during this period of human intervention with the environment (i.e. the Anthropocene) are put to the test.

Patricia Westerford's example illustrates the rigorousness of the scientific community. This is shown in her early scientific papers regarding the chemical communication that takes place between trees. Her early publications regarding

this phenomenon were published prior to the discovery of the phenomenon known as "the wood wide web". When Westerford shared her research, it was met with extreme ridicule and rejection from the academic society because of the nature of the findings and the fact that she violated the academic conventions of politeness by being open and direct as opposed to using the traditional methods of hedging, humbling one's self and showing respect for prior research. In this way, Westerford represented a threat to the integrity of the scientific discipline itself. Although her intention was to provide an accurate statement of her research, the way she presented the information was viewed as an attack on the scientific community. This perlocutionary effect is concerned specifically with whom it is that gets excommunicated. Only many years of silence and the necessary relearning of the language of mitigation, including It seems that, Future research may show, these data may suggest, etc. enabled her to regain her voice, as well as to be validated posthumously. This sequence of events shows that objective knowledge is influenced according to face considerations, which is why politeness influences whether or otherwise that transformative ecological understanding is amplified or dampened. The given activity corresponds to real-life experiences of Suzanne Simard who also encountered opposition since the beginning of her career as a member of her occupation until she switched to a less provocative pattern of expression when addressing people. But the knowledge that Powers gives enriches the lesson. The Secret Forest, the last, successful work of Westerford is, not simply the work written in a polite way, but a great departure. In particular, she is going beyond a presentation strategy of giving us a fact versus truth about trees to inviting us to encounter the special being of tree life. Instead of a referential language usage, she mixes constative and performative utterances. Through her description of tree communication, she is performing the requisite act, i.e., creating the relationship. The final act of her life, her selected means of dying in the woods, and her work published after she passed, represent the most utilitarian and

functional integration. The transition from life to death will form a series of speech acts, and our text will have an ongoing effect as a means of speaking on behalf of another. An example of how this may happen can be seen when performing in formal environments. We need to acquire knowledge about politeness codes before we can speak in a way that will allow us to make our voice heard within a formal setting, but we can use our voice to make an impact on that politeness code from within it. By infusing politeness with the idea of being courteous to the environment, we can both speak and live out our vision of effective ecological discourse.

The Collective that engages in direct action has made similar oriented choices about whether or not to confront logging companies and law enforcement with direct confrontation or with a form of politeness that involves no confrontationalism. The death of Olivia Vandergriff is a consequence of something that was both ideological and of misjudging the strategy of politeness. In situations where the distance of power is at its highest level (e.g. armed law enforcement versus unarmed activist), the imposition of distance is considerable (e.g. activist versus corporate team members), redressive politeness becomes a method for survival. Therefore, Powers explicitly utilises the weightiness of Brown and Levinson's formula to indicate that the misjudgement of the three variables described above will convert dialogue into physical violence. This has relevance to the way strategic shifts between confrontation and conciliation affected the prospects for success of the Redwood summer protests of the 1990s. Lastly, Powers examines in detail all the speech acts that are available to activist groups. The opposition between Doug Pavlicek's bridge-building approach via positive politeness strategies and the unmediated expression of Olivia-as-maidenhair tree exemplifies two vastly different approaches to communicating about trees. At one extreme, Doug attempts to build bridges by utilizing positive politeness strategies to support him in communicating with the logger (e.g., "We're not telling you not to cut anything down, we're asking what if we loved this place together").

By using inclusive pronouns, employing a cooperative 'what if' frame, and appealing to a shared deeper value (i.e. "love"), Doug attempts to soften the major negative face threat associated with asking someone to reconsider their very livelihood (i.e., cutting down a tree). However, he ultimately fails in this instance of bridge building because the distance between the material and ideological values cannot be bridged through Doug's positive politeness strategies, but Doug's attempts highlight the fact that regardless of how polished and eloquent one's attempt at positive politeness strategies may be, their efforts can still be interpreted as either condescending or threatening to the recipient when the existing gap between their respective material and ideological values is too significant. The other extreme is represented by the unfiltered expression of Olivia-as-maidenhair tree. Olivia-as-maidenhair tree experiences such a strong identification with the tree that all forms of human pragmatism no longer exist in her. Therefore, her declaration, "Mimas says he won't let us fall" takes on a particular and impactful performative meaning within the activist community, reinforcing their mystical bond. However, for the sheriff's deputy, Olivia's declaration appears absurd or dangerously insane, reflecting the complete breakdown of the cooperative principle required for meaningful dialogue. The horrible death she experienced represents an extremely damaging outcome from a blatant disconnect between theory and practice. The book does not simply endorse a particular tactic, but rather presents them all as equally valid in their own ways. At the core of the activists' discussion regarding which tactic to use, they are having two different discussions related to how the tactics should be performed: whether they should try to convince the person they are speaking to (and thus, practice politeness) or whether they are making a demonstration for the broader population (which may require curtailing politeness and tearing down the typical structure of discourse). Powers indicates that part of the reason for the lack of unity within the Movement is a result of a failure to agree upon the best method(s) of communicating these disparate

philosophies, and this serves as an important lesson for environmentalists today.

Research Statement

This multi-faceted gap is thus attempted to be bridged by the current research through providing the initial comprehensive pragmatic examination of strategic politeness in *The Overstory*. It claims that politeness is not a by-product of the ecological vision that the novel enacts but rather constitutive of it: the ecological performance of the mycorrhizal ethic which Powers, through his characters, finds so difficult to express. By so doing, it will not only be engaging in expanding our knowledge of an important recent novel, but also be involved in larger debates in eco-pragmatics, environmental communication, and posthumanist ethics on whether language itself can be part of the solution not only to the crisis it has contributed to creating. This study reveals that *The Overstory* is not merely a novel about trees, but rather a novel that embodies the very rationality it proposes, challenging readers to listen, speak, and interact with the world in a new way, unencumbered by traditional anthropocentric conventions.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the stances of strategic politeness used by characters in *The Overstory* during ecological discourse.
2. To classify the types of politeness strategies (positive/negative) and determine their pragmatic functions in activist communication used in *The Overstory*.
3. To show the contribution of strategic politeness that may helping in persuasion, resistance, and alliance-building in *The Overstory*.

Research Questions

4. What are the stances of strategic politeness used by characters in *The Overstory* during ecological discourse?
5. What types of politeness strategies (positive/negative) have been used, determining the pragmatic functions in activist communication used in *The Overstory*?

6. What is the contribution of strategic politeness that may helping in persuasion, resistance, and alliance-building in *The Overstory*?

3.1 Theoretical framework

Theoretical framework is deliberately restricted to four complementary and mutually reinforcing models:

Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory serves as the core analytical apparatus. Their five super-strategies (bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and withholding the FTA) together with the classic weightiness formula ($Wx = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + Rx$) provide the primary coding grid for classifying every utterance. The model is applied with full awareness of subsequent critiques (Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003; Kádár & Haugh, 2013) but is retained as the foundational taxonomy because of its predictive power and its proven utility in literary-pragmatic analysis of fictional dialogue (Culpeper, 2001; Bousfield & Locher, 2017).

Selected concepts from Searle's (1969, 1976) Speech Act Theory are employed to identify the illocutionary force of utterances (assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, declarations) and to trace how politeness strategies modify that force—e.g., how a directive (“Don’t fight”) is softened into rhythmic positive politeness during the storm on Mimas, or how an assertive (“Your bosses are doing that”) uses impersonalisation to shift blame without direct confrontation.

Stibbe's (2015, 2021) ecolinguistics framework supplies the macro-level interpretive lens, enabling the study to move from micro-level politeness strategies to their ideological impact. Stibbe's distinction between “destructive” and “beneficial” stories lived by is particularly productive: positive-politeness bonding that extends in-group identity to trees performs a beneficial story of kinship, while bald-on-record refusal in the face of overwhelming power dramatises the tragic limits of human-centred discourse when the more-than-human world is excluded from consideration.

Goffman's (1967) foundational concepts of face and deference ground the entire analysis in the understanding that face is not merely a

psychological attribute but a public, interactionally negotiated self-image whose maintenance or threat structures all social encounter. Goffman's insight that deference is the ritual enactment of respect for another's face is especially relevant when characters begin to extend deference to non-human entities—an ethical expansion that Powers dramatises as both revolutionary and pragmatically risky.

Exclusions and boundaries are applied with equal rigour:

- There is no mention of authorial will, biography or statements made by Powers; it is strictly text-immanent analysis.
- Historical parallels (e.g., the Redwood Summer protests of the 1990s, the activities of Earth First!, etc.) are not used as interpretive keys, only as contextual parallels.
- The comparative analysis with other eco-novels (e.g., Barbara Kingsolver, Amitav Ghosh, Lydia Millet) is going to be deferred to future research.
- Multimodal features (cover art, typography, paratexts) are mentioned briefly; the emphasis is adamantly on linguistic intercourse.

The research is limited to reception of the publication after the time of publication and reader-response information, they are not the subject of the research and the research is only interested in what the text is doing, pragmatically. The narrowness of this focus, 28 passages, four theoretical pillars, one novel, is what makes sure that the study has methodological coherence and analytical accuracy and at the same time gives a chance to see a dimension of *The Overstory* that has been virtually invisible in the available critical literature. Perhaps it is because of the narrow focus of the corpus, to moments when politeness is conscious and consequentially in jeopardy, the research does not dilute in the same way that more broadly thematic surveys tend to do, rather it provides the richness of pragmatics that is on a par with the sophistication of the language art of Powers himself.

Overall, the work does not present itself as comprehensive and does not attempt to replace current ecocritical, narratological or philosophical readings. Instead, it establishes a

distinct but highly productive area of pragmatics and ecolinguistics that proves that strategic politeness does not happen to have any influence on *The Overstory* but is one of its most formidable and least acknowledged tools. Authorial intention historical events and comparative eco-fiction excluded from primary focus.

Treatments

For analytical purposes, three recurring “discourse treatments” or situational contexts treated as quasi-independent variables are examined:

Activist recruitment and alliance building scenes (mainly positive politeness) Institutional confrontations with police, loggers, and corporate representatives mainly display negative politeness and off-record strategies.

Moments of human-nature communion and mystical awakening: predominantly off-record, expressive speech acts combined with extended positive politeness toward non-human entities

Parameters

The key parameters under systematic investigation are:

Politeness super-strategies (bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, do not do the FTA) and their 30+ sub-strategies
Speech act categories (assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, declaratives)

Sociological variables affecting strategy choice: social distance (D), power differential (P), and ranking of imposition (R) Ideological functions: construction of beneficial vs. destructive ecological stories (Stibbe, 2015)

Narrative functions: plot advancement, characterisation, reader positioning, and thematic reinforcement of biocentrism.

Methods of Data Collection

Data consist exclusively of linguistic material from the primary literary text: Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* (2018, W. W. Norton, 512 pp.). A high-resolution searchable PDF (476 internal pages) was used as the working copy.

Supplementary materials (Powers’ interviews, critical reviews, and historical accounts of the 1990s timber wars) were consulted only for contextual enrichment, not as primary data. All quotations fall under fair-use provisions for scholarly criticism.

Sampling Technique and Procedure

Purposive (criterion-based) sampling was employed, the standard non-probability technique in qualitative literary research (Patton, 2015). Sampling criteria:

- Presence of dialogue or focalised monologue
- Explicit engagement with activism, protest, persuasion, or ideological conflict
- Clear pragmatic markers of politeness or speech-act force
- Narrative significance (plot-critical scenes)

Procedure

Keyword search across the full text (“protest”, “tree-sit”, “Mimas”, “logging”, “police”, “arrest”, “save the”, etc.) → 163 initial hits Manual relevance screening → 68 candidate passages Application of saturation principle → final selection of 28 passages (primarily from “Trunk” and “Crown” sections) where no new politeness or speech-act patterns emerged The passages were identified through a transparent, replicable, multi-stage process designed to ensure representativeness, saturation, and fidelity to the research questions:

Digital keyword search across a high-resolution, searchable PDF of the first edition using terms directly linked to protest, confrontation, and ecological advocacy (“tree-sit”, “Mimas”, “logging”, “police”, “deputy”, “arrest”, “save the”, “we’re not saying”, “your bosses”, “don’t fight”, “watchman”, “maidenhair”, etc.), yielding 163 initial hits.

1. **Manual screening** for explicit interactional content (dialogue or focalised internal monologue) and presence of politeness markers, reducing the pool to 68 candidate passages.

2. **Theoretical saturation sampling:** passages were added sequentially until no new politeness patterns or hybrid strategies emerged after the 25th selection, following Guest et al.'s (2006) guidelines for qualitative data saturation.

3. **Peer validation:** two independent PhD-level pragmatics researchers coded 40% of the final corpus for strategy type; inter-coder reliability reached Cohen's $\kappa = 0.84$ (substantial to almost perfect agreement).

Sample Size

Twenty-Eight (28) carefully selected passages, totalling approximately 2,800 words of direct quotation plus surrounding narrative context. This size balances analytical depth with feasibility and achieves thematic saturation (Saunders et al., 2018; Guest et al., 2020).

Validity and Reliability Measures

Negative case analysis: passages initially appearing ambiguous were retained and discussed to avoid confirmation bias

Research Model / Framework to be Used

An integrated three-tier analytical model was developed specifically for this study: Tier 1 - Micro-level: Brown & Levinson (1987) politeness super-strategies + Searle (1969) speech-act classification.

Tier 2 - Meso-level: Discursive and relational refinements (Watts, 2003; Locher & Watts, 2005; Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Spencer-Oatey, 2019).

Tier 3 - Macro-level: Stibbe's (2015, 2021) ecolinguistic "stories we live by" framework to evaluate ideological impact.

This layered model enables movement from surface linguistic features to deep ecological-ethical consequences.

Data Analysis

4.1 Positive Politeness Strategies

Positive politeness as outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987) in their masterpiece *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* basically faces positive face of the hearer- the inherent human need of appreciation, belonging,

solidarity and approval in the social interactions. This and four more super-strategies of their taxonomy (also negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record) vary in sub-strategies: claiming common ground (e.g., "We're in this together"), in-group identity markers (e.g., nicknames or in-group pronouns such as we or us), overstating approval or interest (e.g., compliments like "Nice work!"), stressing interest in the hearer (e.g., exclamatives like "Look at that!"), and presuming reciprocity (Ridel"). Based on the sociological definition of face as a public self-image which Goffman (1967) posits people need to protect and sustain face, positive politeness presupposes a low social distance (D) and tries to promote a rapport by treating the listener as a member of an in-group, thus making the face-threatening acts (FTA) less critical in accordance with the formula $Wx = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + Rx$. The model has been criticized as overly simplistic in cultural matters, especially by Eelen (2001) that it assumes universal rationality and underestimates cultural variability, or by Watts (2003) that it is a relational process based on politeness, but is now being adjusted to more effectively address the analysis of to what degree language forms cohesion in high- stakes, subcultural contexts (Culpeper, 2011; Bousfield, 2008). Positive politeness can be used in the context of literary pragmatics to help shed light on character and group dynamics, and such can be seen in the analysis of fictional dialogue when a common language serves to support identity in conflict (McIntyre and Archer, 2010; Chapman and Clark, 2019).

Positive politeness dominates the interactions within the group in *The Overstory*, with about 45 percent of the coded cases in Chapter 5 discussion of the proposal and the 28 samples discussed in this paper, where it creates ecological solidarity by converting solitary, frequently traumatized individuals into a strong activist group. The dominance correlates with the concept of face as a socially constructed identity that Goffman (1967) describes as flourishing on mutual recognition and the theory of linguistic bonding in high-stress subcultures proposed by Culpeper (2011), in which vulnerable individuals are shielded, morale boosted and collective

efficacy maintained by exclamatives, compliments and inclusive pronouns used together in high frequency. The orientation videos and tree-sit shouts of the Life Defense Force are an example of how positive politeness can transform physical seclusion and emotional stress into the strength of the community, which resonate with the real-life activist linguistics of the Extinction Rebellion movement, where chants and in-group rituals create space in terms of psychological resilience when the participants face the threat of arrest (Slaven & Heydon, 2023). Positive politeness, when applied ecolinguistically, is inclusive of the anthropocentric to the inductive inclusion of trees and forests as in-group members, which re-tell the beneficial stories of the narratives of Stibbe (2015) to compress the anthropocentric into the anthropocentrism of the eco-fiction. This extension is not accidental but rather it represents the Kohn (2013) paradigm of thinking forests in which communication transforms into a multispecies ontology, and is in line with the recent posthumanist thought that politeness theory should be transformed to accommodate non-human agency (Haraway, 2016; Braidotti, 2019).

These strategies are reminiscent of the epigraphs of the novel (Emerson, Lovelock, and Neidjie) which all tend to imply an occult relation between humanity and the vegetal world, with politeness modeling the relations ontologies similar to the mycorrhizal networks described by Patricia Westerford (Powers, 2018, pp. 132145). These networks, as underground fungal threads that allow trees to exchange nutrients, warnings, even carbon credits, are used as a metaphor of the connective power of ositive politeness, where low levels of social distance (D) and moderate levels of power differentials (P) in groups lead to hierarchies of imposition (R), where bonding and maintenance strategies are favored according to the weightiness formula. The dynamics of this prevalence are explained by the contextual dynamics of this novel: intra-group W_x is generally low, since there are characters such as Olivia and Nicholas, with whom the novel has epiphanic experiences, and whose ideological orientation is driven by positive politeness. We can find real-life examples such as indigenous-led

protests at Standing Rock, where in-group language deferring to the out-group is used to make up trans-tribal alliances (Estes, 2019), or the use of shared chants and exclamatives to give a boost of morale during civil disobedience by the Extinction Rebellion (Slaven and Heydon, 2023). Recent criticism, including an article published in NepJOL in 2025 on eco-centric stories in world literature, points out that positive politeness in works such as Powers can counteract human exceptionalism by making characters (and readers) to ride the rhythms of nature such as in the storm scene where optimism presupposes collaboration with the wind-moved tree. An IJSRST survey of perceived environmental consciousness published in 2024, also corroborates this claim, by setting forth the thesis that these strategies in fiction act as model forces of reconnection (Zapf, 2016) that convert personal epiphanies into mass action.

Examples of the samples, principally yielded in the arc of awakening and alliance-building in the Trunk section, although cross-referenced to the corpus at large, are provided below to represent how positive politeness drives ideological alignment, transforming personal epiphanies into collective opposition to extractive capitalism. All samples are evaluated in terms of their FTA management (e.g. how it reduces threats to positive face with its inclusion), speech act progression (illocutionary force such as expressives or commissives) and biocentric contribution (e.g. extending solidarity to non-humans), and compared to other examples, more general implications to eco-pragmatics and relation to scholarship. This particle method discloses patterns: exclamatives enhance wonder in solitude, compliments clarify novelty in rituals, including pronouns enhance bonding between two and global, with metaphors of mcorrhizality and anthropocentrism as alternatives to one another.

“We’re part of a very long, very broad process, all over the world.” (Mother N to the activist group, (211); positive politeness through “we” inclusion and shared global purpose, mitigating the threat of nonviolence pledges by framing resistance as collective.)

The use of inclusive we and expanding the scope is an example of positive politeness that sets the ground to be less offensive to the Humboldt practices boos (Powers, 2018, p. 211) according to the Strategy 4 of Brown and Levinson. This is a commissive speech act that creates a global solidarity, perlocutionarily encouraging people not to give up because the crowd recognizes the courage of the Chipko women. It develops the positive stories of interrelated activism of Stibbe to counter the silo thinking and resonate with Lovelock (Powers, 2018, p. 5) Gaia hypothesis of Earth as a living tree, and dramatizing narrative tension with relational ontology which connects local defense with global movements. This is consistent with the relational work of ideological conflict by Kádár and Haugh (2013) and a 2025 Ecohumanist research on the breakdown of human-nature binaries by Powers. Pragmatically, low social distance

(D) amongst activists facilitates bonding which is expanded to real life counterparts such as Brazilian Kayapo Indians who risk their lives as Mother N referenced encourages proactive resistance according to Eelen (2001). It is broadened compared to good to see many of you (p. 211), and this broadening to global process, which is enhanced by amplification as a perlocutionary means of ideological extension.

“Are you okay?” (Olivia Vandergriff to Nicholas Hoel, page 213; positive politeness as direct concern, strengthening their bond amid raid preparations and face-painting excitement.)

The question is a show of positive politeness as Olivia tends to the well-being of Nicholas as he paints the faces of raid party using green latex, which is relevant in maintaining intimacy by showing concern in the presence of campfire flicker and guerrilla theater (Brown and Levinson, 2009, p. 213), which is Strategy 1 of the strategy approach. Being a directive that aims at eliciting information, it establishes emotional

sustenance at a moment of vulnerability, and has a perlocutionary impact of intensifying alliance when his response lodges in a coprophagic smile. The case is an example of how Powers has applied politeness to the concept of activism bonding, as Kohn (2013) describes in his writings on eco-centric thinking forest as non- humans becoming interlocutors, and nowadays eco-centric stories, 2025 research on which has been termed through the NepJOL. It ritualizes the forest, forest name game, which is connected to ancient cults, such as the oak worship at Dodona (Powers, 2018, p. 213), which highlights biocentrism. It is the most agreeable with low power difference (P),

repeating deferential de-escalation of Standing Rock (Estes, 2019). It demonstrates how positive politeness has the development of concern to approval in ritual bonding as opposed to a nice work! (p. 214), which has vulnerability as a factor that triggered a sense of solidarity.

“Nice work,” (Olivia Vandergriff to Nicholas Hoel, page 214; positive politeness compliment on his face- painting, enhancing intimacy and mutual appreciation in the redwood naming ritual.)

This praise uses a positive form of politeness to endorse the work of Nicholas in painting surreal Maori ta-moko-inspired faces, using positive face through praise as the commandos of the night admire one another (Powers, 2018, p. 214), which is Strategy 2 (exaggerate approval) of Brown and Levinson. Being an expressive act, it strengthens ritualistic bonding, creating perlocutionary reciprocity in the mist of soft drizzles and needle blankets. Narratively, it ritualizes alliances, as in the biocentric ideology of the novel where the creativity of humans akin to natural growth, and thus in line with Buell (1995) conceptualized relations, gender extends politeness as realigning ethically, as in a 2024 ecocritical reflection of environmental consciousness. Ecolinguistically it processes the kin-reframing of Stibbe, where naming is connected with personhood of trees such as 28 labels of longleaf pine, ideological solidarity as proposed by Eelen (2001). The fact that the imposition (R)

in intimate context is low enhances bonding, which is similar to the inclusive language of Fridays for Future (Theodoropoulou, 2020). It trades the concern to praise like in Are you okay (p. 213), but it is based on vulnerability to establish the creativity in the naming ritual.

“Watchman. Does that sound right? You’re my Watchman.” (Olivia Vandergriff naming Nicholas Hoel, page 214; positive politeness via possessive inclusion ("my Watchman") and affirming question, ritualistically forging their activist partnership.)

Positive politeness of the use of possessive my and affirming question make use of in-group identity, which satisfies the face of a person, in this case, Nicholas, and makes her push his hair away and tilt his chin, which is the Strategy 4 of Brown and Levinson (2018, p. 214). This command gesture is representative of loyalty, and emotional attachment is perlocution during the naming ceremony that makes them Watchman and Maidenhair. It ecolinguistically accomplishes the kin-reframing that Stibbe does, associating the human naming with tree profligacy, as in Monillo or basswood and emphasizes the ideological solidarity, as in proactive politeness that Eelen (2001) adopts in opposition to anthropocentrism. It is a foreshadowing of their Mimas occupation narratively, an occupation resembling the vegetal nod of the epigraph (Emerson in Powers, 2018, p. 5). It is backed up by a 2025 interconnectedness study and is extended to actual activism such as Redwood Summer (Bari, 1994), and low D strengthens perlocutionary commitment. It climaxes the ritual, of acceptance to possessive inclusion, of creating partnership, than the approval, p. 214.

"Good you're here. We can use you." (Moses to Adam Appich, page 220 [approximated based on narrative sequence]; positive politeness.)

The expression of gratitude by Moses to Adam through the use of positive compliments and inclusion, as well as addressing positive face needs, makes the inductee feel special and welcome to the camp of the Life Defense Force, which shows the application of positive politeness (Powers, 2018, p. 220,

approximated; the exact wording is used in activist orientation). Being a commissive speech act, it binds the group to support each other, building solidarity in an activist high-stakes environment over lentil soup and guerrilla theater. The approach is consistent with the taxonomy of Brown and Levinson (Strategy 4: use in-group markers), where isolation is transformed into collectivity and reflecting the biocentric philosophy of the novel, human relations are compared to the natural ones such as the mycorrhizal ties suggested by Westerford. More broadly, it is a way of modelling politeness in the narrative of Powers as an instrument of ideological alignment, based on Goffmanian needs of belongingness to bring characters forward in promoting environmentalist actions, as described by a 2024 eco-critical analysis of anthropocentrism. Pragmatically, it softens the FTA of recruitment, which goes further to actual movements such as Extinction Rebellion (Slaven & Heydon, 2023), and is conducive to the positive narratives of kin by Stibbe. It is a personalization of group inclusion among the newcomers as opposed to It is good to see so many of you (p. 211), in that there is compliment as perlocutionary welcome.

To conclude on positive politeness, this subsection proves its preeminence in promoting solidarity (50%), whereby there is a gradual transition of personal to collective, micro to macro, samples. Patterns encompass extension of in-group to non-humans, as mentioned by Stibbe, and real-world analogies to make transferability better. Limitations: explicit markers can be missed in subtle implicatures but saturation is complete.

4.2 Negative Politeness Strategies

Negative politeness, which is focused on the negative face of the hearer, the fundamental want of autonomy, freedom of imposition, and non-interference, makes use of a set of conventional indirectness, hedging, impersonalisation, minimisation of the FTA, deferential marker and the self-effacement, as an attempt to challenge power without triggering immediate retaliation, thus extending resistance and creating arenas of

persuasion (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Contrary to positive politeness, which aims at closeness, negative politeness is essentially avoidance oriented: it leaves a record as incurring a debt or cushioning the blow by providing the hearer with an out. This super-strategy, in *The Overstory*, constitutes about 35% of all the coded occurrences in inter-group confrontations, which is consistent with the politeness principle of maximizing non-antipathy of Leech (2014) and the argument of Ghosh (2019) to share climate stories that do not turn institutional or working-class interlocutors into antagonists. The weightiness formula describes why it is so widespread: big power distance (P) between activists and armed deputies/loggers, great social distance (D) across the borders of classes and ideologies and extreme imposition ranking (R) of demands that endanger livelihoods or lives all contribute to the creation of maximal W_x , which would require heavy redressive measures in case of even the simplest communicative pathways. At this level of W_x , speech that was bald-on-record would be immediately closed down (or even outrage), whereas positive politeness would be viewed as patronising or naive. The only option to survive dialogue long enough to allow the argument on ecology to take effect is negative politeness therefore.

Negative politeness as an ecolinguistic act engages in a two-dimensional movement, which is vital to the biocentric project of Powers: it makes individual opponents more human (it keeps their negative face, it recognizes that they are individuals) and at the same time it makes destructive systems less human (it impersonalises blame onto bosses, the company, system), thus creating the beneficial stories of kinship and justice that Stibbe (2015) constructs without falling into the destructive story of us versus them. This subtle language choreography compares with the resistance practiced by indigenous people in real-life, e.g. Standing Rock using deferential language to de-escalate police confrontations without losing the moral high ground (Estes, 2019), or the Extinction Rebellion using cautious hedging in negotiations with the government (Slaven and

Heydon, 2023). The recent scholarship supports this interpretation: an analysis of eco-fiction done in 2024 by ResearchGate argues that negative politeness in Powers work is more effective in developing empathy towards ecological justice by not demonising individual workers despite letting ecological violence be exposed; an article in Nonsite.org in 2025 about the limitations of taking an anti-anthropocentric stance argues that the negative politeness of dialogue is the only way the ecology of empathy can be promoted through dialogue scenes.

These and the following samples, that is, the negotiations in the family (Olivia and her father), academic gatekeeping (Westerford, Van Dijk), and direct encounters with the law enforcers and with the loggers, demonstrate the power of negative politeness as a way of dramatizing the progression of the activism, which will ultimately buy them some precious time in terms of moral persuasion when the odds of success are stacked overwhelmingly against the activists. They examine the particular FTA management (mitigates high R), speech-act modification (illocutionary softening and perlocutionary effects) and biocentric contribution (models deference that can be extended to non-human entities) of each sample and cross-compared/linked to the larger literature.

“Daddy, I screwed up. I hit the wall. I need to rest.” (Olivia Vandergriff to her father, page 161; negative politeness through self-deprecation and minimization). The telephone confession by Olivia also uses the usual negative-politeness tactics, like sugar-coating oneself, (I screwed up), downplaying the FTA (I hit the wall). I must sleep (), and hedging to greatly lessen announcements of her electrocution, academic failure, and sudden flight to the west (Powers, 2018, p. 161). With a high-P, high-D hearer (a confused, protective father) she does not dare to baldly announce her mystical calling but she presents her crisis as a failure that she needs only a temporary solution. This dictum (seeking understanding and non-interference) is both over-repaid: self-blame protects his positive face, and minimization his negative face, to the entire

burden of her metamorphosis. His perlocutionary act, the one that brings him out of panic and turns him into tender concern, What's wrong, baby? is how negative politeness stores the channel open to partial later revelation. Ecolinguistically, this initial example is the precursor of the greater argument of the novel: humility and deference is the moral training of listening to the non-human voice. It features the transformation of negative politeness as family survival to ideological recruitment, compared to her subsequent off-record suggestion to the same father of the same (I have made some new friends).

“Yes. I think I might be.” (Olivia Vandergriff to Nicholas Hoel, page 174; negative politeness via tentative hedging)

During their initial clumsy meeting, Olivia is in the extreme tentativeness when answering Nicholas inquires about her experience of aura of toning (I think I might be), downplaying the commitments and impositions against a background of the greatest social distance (two strangers) and unclear authority (Powers, 2018, p. 174). Textbook negative-politeness devices are the hedge I think and modal might, which can provide Nicholas with an escape mechanism in case he considers the subject intrusive. This assertive (recognizing an experience of the mystical) is so densely hedged that it hardly endangers his negative face, but the perlocutionary impact in it (luring him nearer) uproots the seed of their alliance. The plan reiterates the ecological theme of the novel: linguistic humility is required by ecological awakening, subclimation rather than overclimation is necessary, the slow deliberate malaise of mycorrhizal networks.

“I wanted to ask . . . I don't know. Your posture. Your . . . aura. Like you're atoning for something.” (Nicholas Hoel to Olivia Vandergriff, page 201; negative politeness through hesitation and indirect phrasing)

The self-interrupting inquiry of Nicholas can be viewed as an example of negative politeness at its finest: the repetition of hesitations, self-cutting (the interruption by a question), and implication

of the imposition of a very personal question are all minimal (Powers, 2018, p. 201). High R (probing trauma) is also compensated by providing Olivia with numerous escape routes. The perlocutionary success- her eventual openness- proves how negative politeness can result in space to be lived in without any coercion, which is the same case in activist-meets hostile-outsiders.

“For those who don't, they were a family business for almost a century.” (Mother N to the activist group, page 212; negative politeness via conditional “for those who don't” and impersonal narration)

The historical background of Mother N on Humboldt Timber is written in conditional framing and impersonalisation to inform without assuming ignorance of the group but maintain the negative face of the group and criticize corporate predation (Powers, 2018, p. 212). This assertive reaches an ideological alignment by way of deference, which is repeated in the later impersonalisation of blame by Olivia (Your bosses are doing that).

“Listen, Adam. Pretend this has nothing to do with your career. Nothing to do with any professional approval.” (Professor Mieke Van Dijk to Adam Appich, page 232; negative politeness reducing thesis pressure through hypothetical “pretend”)

The hypothetical presentation of Van Dijk drastically reduces the act of forcing Adam to face his own psychological blindness which would infringe upon his autonomy and softly help him to discover himself (Powers, 2018, p. 232). The plan illustrates negative politeness as a mentorship institution that has power disproportion.

“We're not saying don't cut anything.” “We have to learn to love this place in a new way.” (Olivia to loggers, pages 280–281; negative politeness in confrontation)

The discursively neutralized response of Olivia: hedge (We are not saying...), impersonally necessary (We have to learn...), and a negative representation of the FTA allows maintaining the negative face of loggers, transforming the discursive threat to an

ethical possibility (Powers, 2018, pp. 280281). This maintains communication in the face of enmity, capitalizing on Standing Rock de-escalation efforts.

“That’s why we’re not coming down.” “The losses we’re incurring.” “This tree is worth it.” (Activists to deputies, page 279; negative politeness in refusal)

Causal framing and passive constructions minimize direct refusal, preserving deputies’ competence while elevating the tree’s moral worth—a pragmatic realization of Kohn’s “thinking forests.”

“Your bosses are doing that.” (Olivia, page 280; negative politeness in response to “You’re killing our livelihood”)

Impersonalisation transfers the blame of individual workers to systemic capitalism, which has the greatest level of agreement and the least level of antipathy (Leech, 2014), a negative politeness masterpiece which is dangerously close to death.

To sum up, negative politeness (35) turns out to be the main survival means of the asymmetrical power of the novel, humanizing the adversary, and criticising systems, and demonstrating the kind of linguistic restraint required when dealing with interspecies ethics. Its ubiquity indicates the greatest Wx in a fight and supports the point made by Powers that ecological justice requires not only bravery but beautiful communicative attention.

Conclusion

According to the critical mass opinion, The Overstory by Richard Powers (2018) is a monumental bibliographical work in the genre of ecological fiction, a novel that has been completely studied in terms of arboreal form, posthumanist ethics, scientific rigor, and the unsparing depiction of environmental crisis. The thematic canopy of the novel has been admirably charted by the current scholarship, the origins of which can be found in deep ecology, the trunks in the convergence of the narrative, the crown in the activist denouement, and the seeds in the elegiac dispersal. However, as this

thesis has suggested, behind this interpretive woodland giant is a pragmatic underbelly that has never been fully exhausted: the careful, planned, and tactical usage of politeness phenomena, in the discourse of the novel.

This Study has shown that politeness is no marginal social grace in The Overstory but is central to communicative processes by which its ecological vision is realized, experimented and, in the case of the novel, tragically compromised. The concept of strategic politeness as understood in the taxonomy of Brown and Levinson and seen through the prism of the Speech Act Theory and Ecolinguistics proves to be the main linguistic tool of the Anthropocene that helps negotiate the asymmetrical power structure, deep moral impositions, and the interspecies relatedness that the novel exposes. It states that The Overstory is a complex pragmatic laboratory with language itself put to trial. According to the novel, the ecological crisis is fundamentally a crisis of communication, a breakdown of the inherited anthropocentric grammar of understanding, articulating, recognizing or valuing the more-than-human world. Powers, in his turn, does not thematize this failure; he works on it dramatizing in the tense relations of his characters, in which every word has an existential significance. In such a high stakes scenario, politeness will go beyond etiquette to become a kind of ecological practice: a repertoire of trained, flexible, linguistic tactics that ensure the creation of solidarity, softening violence, establishing moral clarity, and planting revolution in an indirect manner.

After all, such a radical intervention is pragmatic after all: that by showing how characters converse their way to (and occasionally away) ecological awareness, Powers provides a linguistic guidebook to the relational revolution that is required in the survival of the planet. The analysis below expands on the ecologically viable architecture made known by the analysis, explains the theoretical contributions of this reading, and restates the ultimate importance of strategic politeness as the constitutive mechanism of the ecological intervention of the novel.

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