

Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Analysis of Criticism in COVID-19 Responses: KompasTV vs. CNN YouTube Channels

Hayuning Sekar Damarratri^{1*}, Ni Wayan Sartini²

Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia

*) Corresponding Author

Email: hayuning.sekar.damarratri-2025@fib.unair.ac.id; hayuningsekar19@gmail.com

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Abstract

YouTube comment sections have become important platforms for public discourse, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, where users often criticise government policies. Due to the differing cultural orientations of Indonesia (high-context) and the United States (low-context), netizens from each country are expected to use distinct pragmatic strategies when expressing criticism online. However, comparative studies of criticism in social media between Indonesian and American contexts remain limited. This study examines the forms and pragmatic strategies of criticism used by Indonesian netizens on Kompas TV and American netizens on CNN in response to their governments' handling of COVID-19. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study analyses 200 critical comments (100 from each channel) selected from the ten most engaged posts per account. Comments were classified using Searle's taxonomy of illocutionary speech acts and analysed with Brown & Levinson's politeness theory to identify strategies for mitigating face-threatening acts. The equivalence method (Sudaryanto, 2015) was used to interpret the linguistic data within broader socio-cultural contexts. The findings are expected to reveal distinct patterns of directness and indirectness between Indonesian and American netizens, reflecting their cultural values. This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of criticism in digital communication and cross-cultural

pragmatics and offers practical insights for media practitioners and linguists interested in online public discourse.

Keywords: *cross-cultural pragmatics, criticism, speech acts, politeness, YouTube comments*

INTRODUCTION

YouTube has become a key platform for digital public discourse (Schuessler et al., 2026), especially on political and crisis-related topics (Reynolds & Hallinan, 2024). Its comment sections facilitate public participation, social oversight, and discussion on government policy (Dubovi & Tabak in Schuessler et al., 2026). These dynamics intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, as government actions drew global concern and widespread criticism on social media (Raskhodchikov & Pilgun, 2023), including YouTube.

Criticism on YouTube varies in form, strategy, and politeness (Alafwan et al., 2023). Indonesian and American netizens may use distinct pragmatic patterns in expressing political dissent, given their different cultural backgrounds. Indonesians, shaped by high-context culture, typically favour indirect communication (Purnama & Sartini, 2023; Matthes et al., 2025). In contrast, Americans, shaped by low-context culture, tend to use direct communication (Purnama & Sartini, 2023; Li et al., 2025). These likely influence how netizens in each country express dissatisfaction to their governments. The YouTube channels of two major news media outlets, Kompas TV (Indonesia) and CNN (United States), provide linguistically and culturally distinct public discourse spaces. Therefore, a cross-cultural pragmatic analysis of their comment sections offers a clear framework for investigating how criticism is expressed in digital environments.

Previous research has investigated criticism in diverse contexts. Purnama & Sartini (2023) compared criticism of COVID-19 responses in IDN Times and The New York Times, highlighting differences in speech act functions and cultural norms in Indonesian and American communication. Suganda et al. (2025) analysed negative criticism in online news comments about Indonesia's new capital (IKN), focusing on speech acts and stance-taking. Zhu (2025) compared criticism

strategies in Korean and Mandarin in a professional reality show, focusing on language, social status, and the use of direct versus indirect form. Alshakhanbeh & Alghazo (2022) identified criticism from Jordanian social media users on Facebook and Twitter responding to government policies, focusing on gender and socio-political context. Dai & Chen (2024) categorised types and pragmatic functions of ostensible criticism in Mandarin to explore underlying socio-cultural factors. Suwignyo et al. (2024) analysed impoliteness strategies in criticism by Javanese-background EFL learners, considering social status, relational distance, and degree of imposition. Wang et al. (2025) investigated how the Mandarin expression *'bùshì wǒ shuō nǐ'* conveys criticism through prosodic and pragmatic features.

A substantial body of pragmatic research on YouTube comment sections has also been studied. Firdaus & Prayitno (2024) identified forms and degrees of politeness in comments on Erick Thohir's channel. Huda et al. (2024) analysed adherence to and violations of politeness principles in comments on KompasTV's coverage of the 2024 Indonesian presidential debates. Huda & Janah (2023) analysed politeness in comments on an *Indonesia Lawyers Club* video about electoral fraud allegations. Hida (2025) examined impoliteness by identifying the most frequent maxim violations in response to Gibran Rakabuming's monologue on Indonesia's demographic bonus and youth generation. Hambali et al. (2024) examine expressive acts in comments on One Direction's YouTube channel. Pramujiono et al. (2023) use a cyberpragmatic framework to examine Indonesians' emotive language in response to YouTube posts. Sandre et al. (2026) use Martin and White's appraisal theory to examine evaluative language in English-language comments on educational YouTube videos. Asnawi (2026) adopted a forensic-pragmatic approach to analyse defamatory speech acts on social media, connecting linguistic analysis to legal and social outcomes. These studies show that YouTube comment sections provide a valuable resource for pragmatic research, including politeness, impoliteness, expressive functions, emotive language, and legal aspects.

While the previous studies have made valuable contributions, pragmatic research on critical speeches remains limited, especially in Indonesia. Additionally, previous studies on digital criticism and politeness in Indonesia have not directly compared Indonesian and American discourse during the same crisis-communication event on digital platforms. This study builds on speech act (Searle, 1969) and politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987) theories by comparing the YouTube comment sections of Indonesian and American news media during the COVID-19 pandemic. It explores how platform features and heightened emotions affect cultural communication norms in previously undocumented ways. Instead of assuming Hall's high-and low-context framework applies directly, it tests whether these patterns persist, weaken, or change in a digital, asynchronous, and global environment. Therefore, this study raises three central questions: 1) What forms of criticism do Indonesian netizens on Kompas TV and American netizens on CNN use when responding to their governments' handling of COVID-19? 2) What pragmatic strategies do netizens from each country use to express criticism? 3) How do the critical patterns of Indonesian and American netizens compare from a cross-cultural pragmatic perspective?

This study aims to analyse how Indonesians and Americans express criticism on YouTube regarding governmental responses to COVID-19. It compares criticism in Indonesian and English from a cross-cultural pragmatic perspective and explores how cultural context influences online critical expression. Theoretically, this study advances pragmatic analysis of criticism, broadens cross-cultural pragmatics in social media research, and contributes to the literature on evaluative speech acts in both languages. Practically, it serves as a reference for linguistics, pragmatics, cultural studies, and digital media research, and offers insights for media practitioners seeking to understand cross-cultural public responses.

Cross-Cultural Pragmatics in Digital Spaces

Cross-cultural pragmatics examines how cultural values influence language use in social interactions (Usmani & Almashham, 2024). Wierzbicka (as cited in Dey, 2023) notes that languages reflect their speakers' cultural values, resulting in different ways of expressing intentions, including criticism. Hall's (1976) cultural context theory distinguishes high-context cultures (such as many Asian societies, including Indonesia), which rely on implicit meaning and shared understanding, from low-context cultures (such as Western societies), which favour explicit and direct communication (Hall in Aririguzoh, 2022; Soğancılar & Dereli, 2025). These cultural orientations persist in digital spaces while adapting to relevant platform features (Jegade, 2025), with users retaining culturally shaped preferences for directness or indirectness in comments (Hall in Kamsinah et al., 2024). However, factors such as character limits, non-synchronicity, public visibility, and anonymity interact with cultural norms to shape online communication. For instance, people from high-context cultures may communicate more explicitly in public comment sections than in private offline interactions (Elfadl et al., 2025). Thus, comment sections constitute distinct interactional spaces in which cultural norms are reshaped by platform features, providing a framework for examining how Indonesians and Americans express criticism on YouTube.

Criticism in Digital Spaces

The study of criticism as a speech act draws on Austin's (1962) theory of speech acts, further developed by Searle (1969). Both view language as performing social actions with specific illocutionary force (Tomasello, 2023; Alsamhori et al., 2025). Searle (1969) identifies criticism as an expressive act that conveys the speaker's attitude and evaluation toward a situation or action. Other scholars define it as expressing dissatisfaction or negative evaluation toward words, actions, objects, or individuals (Wierzbicka, 2003; Hyland, 2000), and as involving accountability for responsible actions (Tracy et al., 1987; Nguyen, 2008; Pillet-Shore, 2016). Although criticism in digital spaces remains underexplored, its

pragmatic function is influenced by online features that enable greater directness and performative expression, while reducing face-to-face accountability. The public and persistent nature of online comments shifts criticism toward self-presentation and audience engagement. As a result, digital criticism should be recognised as a distinct pragmatic act shaped by the structural features of digital platforms.

The Theory of Illocutionary Speech Acts

Illocutionary acts, introduced by John R. Searle (1969), refer to the intended meaning or function of an utterance rather than its grammatical form (Borchmann, 2024). These focus on what the speaker intends to achieve, such as stating, requesting, commanding, or expressing an attitude (Abdalahdi et al., 2023). The communicative function of an utterance depends on its context. Searle (in Afzaal et al., 2024) classifies illocutionary acts into five categories: assertive (expressing belief), directive (prompting action), expressive (conveying feelings or attitudes), commissive (committing to a future action), and declarative (effecting institutional or social changes). This framework classifies the illocutionary force of critical comments, while recognising that it was designed for face-to-face interactions, where illocutionary force is jointly negotiated and confirmed by the hearer. In the YouTube comment sections, feedback is often delayed or missing, and the intended audience is unclear. It may include the criticised government official, other users, or unseen readers. However, this study only focuses on illocutionary force identified through conventionalised linguistic markers such as mood, lexical choice, and syntactic structure.

The Theory of Politeness

Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory provides a pragmatic framework for analysing critical speech acts. It consists of positive face (the desire for acceptance and approval) and negative face (the desire for autonomy). Criticism, a face-threatening act (FTA), often requires politeness to reduce its impact. There are four strategies in politeness: (1) bald-on-record (direct FTA); (2) positive

politeness (seeking solidarity and approval); (3) negative politeness (respecting autonomy); and (4) off-record (using implication or ambiguity). Brown & Levinson's (1987) model of face and politeness, though developed for spoken interaction, remains applicable for the digital environment. Users employ platform-specific features such as emojis and stylistic markers that replace prosody and facial expression (Morsi, 2026). Consequently, politeness on platforms like YouTube involves dynamic negotiation between traditional strategies and digital features that shape how users manage face in responses. Brown & Levinson's (1987) framework is used here to classify the linguistic form and pragmatic force of each utterance based on observable textual features, such as hedges, intensifiers, or direct address.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2023) to investigate cross-cultural pragmatic features of netizens' criticism on YouTube. The qualitative component interprets linguistic phenomena within social media discourse, while the quantitative component provides numerical data to support the findings. Quantitative results are used to illustrate data patterns, with qualitative analysis prioritised to explore meaning, context, and socio-cultural dimensions.

The official YouTube accounts of KompasTV and CNN were selected as data sources to represent Indonesian and English linguistic and cultural contexts. KompasTV (Indonesia) and CNN (United States) were chosen as they have the most subscribers in their respective countries. Both channels also demonstrate strong audience engagement, particularly through comment sections that generate extensive public discourse. Due to the large number of comments, often in the thousands, this study used purposive sampling by selecting the 10 most-engaged videos per channel and, within each, the 10 critical comments with the highest engagement (likes and replies). The high-engagement comments were chosen as

they are the most visible and most likely to shape the perceived tone of public discourse. Data were collected through observation and note-taking (Sudaryanto, 2015), by reviewing targeted posts, reading comment sections, and manually identifying critical utterances. Comments unrelated to COVID-19 government responses or lacking clear criticism were excluded to maintain alignment with the research objectives.

The data were analysed using the equivalence method (Sudaryanto, 2015), assuming that language is inherently linked to social, cultural, and situational contexts. This is effective for cross-cultural pragmatic studies that integrate micro-linguistic analysis, including grammatical and lexical features, with macro-linguistic analysis, including cultural values and contextual norms. The analysis followed three stages. First, each critical utterance was classified using Austin's (1962) speech act theory and Searle's (1969) five speech act types (assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative). This clarified the pragmatic functions of each comment. The utterances were also analysed using Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory to identify the type and strategy of politeness used in criticism. Second, the two datasets were compared to identify similarities and differences in how criticism was expressed across the two languages and cultural contexts. Third, the analysis explored the cultural values and norms underlying these critical expressions, using cross-cultural pragmatic frameworks to interpret the motivations behind the linguistic choices of Indonesian and English-speaking netizens. This integrative approach, which combines micro- and macro-linguistic perspectives, supports the aims of cross-cultural pragmatics. As defined by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989), cross-cultural pragmatics examines how speakers from different cultural backgrounds perform speech acts and express communicative intentions in ways that reflect their cultural orientations.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Results

This chapter presents empirical findings from the pragmatic coding of 100 critical comments on, respectively, ten *KompasTV* YouTube videos and ten *CNN* YouTube videos that address the respective government's handling of COVID-19. Each comment was analysed based on the illocutionary acts (Searle, 1969) and the politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The following sections report the distribution, classification criteria, and interaction of these dimensions across the datasets.

Analysis of Indonesian Netizens' Criticism of KompasTV

Illocutionary Acts

Table 1. The distribution of Indonesians' critical expressions in the comment section of KompasTV

Category	Number	(%)
Assertive	55	55%
Directive	27	27%
Expressive	18	18%
Commissive	0	0%
Declarative	0	0%

Table 1 presents the distribution of illocutionary acts in the KompasTV data. Assertive acts are most common, representing 55 of 100 comments (55%), followed by directive acts (27%) and expressive acts (18%).

The predominance of assertive acts results from the propositional structure of most comments. Most take the form of declarative statements, which commit the speaker to claims about the government's competence, honesty, or consistency. Examples include statements that a policy is contradictory and that a previous promise has been broken. (See Excerpts 1 and 2.)

- (1) *"Di kampung masih ada orang kerja dari Taiwan yang pulang tanpa sepengetahuan Dinkes. Presiden ga tegas. Kim Jong-un, noh, contoh."*

Trans: "Some workers are still returning from Taiwan without the local health office being notified. The president is not strict enough. Look at Kim Jong-un."

- (2) *"Iya, Pak. Dulu Bapak juga bilang begitu, toh? Terus hasilnya apa?"*

Trans: "Yes, sir. You mentioned that before, didn't you? What was the outcome?"

Such utterances assert a state of affairs, rather than request an action or express emotion in isolation. They fulfil Searle's felicity conditions for assertion, as the speaker represents a state of affairs as true and can be held accountable for its truth value.

Directive acts were identified when a comment's illocutionary force aimed to prompt the addressee, such as the president or government, to perform or stop an action. This category includes explicit imperatives, such as demands presented as requests and suggestions in conditional or interrogative form. (See Excerpts 3 and 4.)

- (3) *"Yah kasih, lah, buat mereka yang udah positif. Tunggu apa lagi? Ini nyawa manusia."*

Trans: "Just give it to them, for those who are already positive. What are you waiting for? These are human lives."

- (4) *"Kenapa untuk pasien saja? Saya harap kepada pemerintah, untuk masyarakat di perkampungan bisa dicek kesehatannya."*

Trans: "Why only for patients? I hope the government will ensure that people in rural areas can also have their health checked."

These acts share propositional content that directs the addressee to a future action, whether the demand is softened by an honorific or a conditional clause or not. Mitigation influences politeness but does not change the illocutionary classification.

Expressive acts refer to comments that primarily convey the speaker's psychological state, such as frustration, resignation, contempt, or ridicule, without a clear propositional or directive purpose. These acts are identified by features such as interjections, exclamatory syntax, all-capitals emphasis, onomatopoeic or emotive particles, and utterances that express an emotional stance (e.g., weary resignation, mock pity) rather than stating information or requesting actions. (See Excerpts 5 and 6.)

- (5) *"Ya Allah, di kota ane tinggal, Tangerang, sudah ada yang kena. PEMERINTAH LELET. JOKOWI LELET. KURANG TEGAS. KURANG CEGAT. MAU NUNGGU BERAPA KORBAN LAGI?"*

Trans: "Oh, God. There are already cases in the city where I live, Tangerang. THE GOVERNMENT IS SLOW. JOKOWI IS SLOW. NOT DOING ENOUGH PREVENTION. HOW MANY MORE VICTIMS DO WE HAVE TO WAIT FOR?"

- (6) *"Saya mau menyuarakan suara saya dari lubuk hati yang terdalam, tapi saya takut kena UUD ITE."*

Trans: "I want to voice my opinion from the bottom of my heart, but I'm afraid I could be charged under the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE)."

Several comments were coded as blended acts (e.g., Assertive-Directive, Expressive-Directive), where two illocutionary forces appear within a single utterance. (See Excerpts 7 and 8.)

- (7) *"Katanya Indonesia zero. Kebal sama jahe, jamu, gimana sih? Masker mana? Kartu prakerja simpen aja, Pak. Kami perlu banget masker dan vitamin."*

Trans: "They said Indonesia has zero cases because we are supposedly immune due to ginger and herbal medicine; what is actually going on? Where are the masks? Just keep the pre-employment card, sir. We really need masks and vitamins."

- (8) *"Pemerintah hebat. Mungkin nunggu jutaan terjangkit dulu baru lockdown. Jangan main-main dengan virus ini, lah."*

Trans: "The government is great. Maybe they are waiting for millions to get infected before imposing a lockdown. Don't play around with this virus."

Typically, this involved a factual assertion followed by a related demand, or an emotional outburst ending with a clear call to action. In such instances, both acts were recorded, and the act associated with the main clause or the final, most forceful proposition was marked as dominant for tabulation.

Politeness Strategy

Table 2. The distribution of Indonesians' critical expressions in the comment section of KompasTV

Category	Number	(%)
Off-record	51	51%
Bald-on-record	36	36%
Negative politeness	13	13%

Positive politeness	0	0%
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Table 2 presents the distribution of politeness strategies based on Brown & Levinson’s (1987) framework. In the KompasTV data, off-record strategies were most prevalent (51%), followed by bald on-record strategies (36%), and negative politeness (13%).

Off-record strategies were identified when criticism was implied rather than stated directly, allowing the speaker plausible deniability. These strategies included irony, sarcasm, rhetorical questions that suggest criticism, metaphors and analogies that compare government behaviour to other evaluatively charged domains, and allusions to external texts such as song lyrics or idioms. The main coding criterion was whether the speaker could plausibly deny making a direct criticism if challenged. This plausibility stems from the indirectness of the implicature, as off-record comments were often as substantive as bald on-record statements. (See Excerpts 9 and 10.)

(9) *“Negara kalo dipimpin oleh pemimpin nggak kompeten, niscaya akan hancur.”*
Trans: “If a country is led by an incompetent leader, it will inevitably fall into ruin.”

(10) *“Ini kayak lagunya Rhoma Irama: ‘Kau yang memulai, kau yang mengakhiri. Kau yang berjanji, kau yang mengingkari’.”*
Trans: “This is like Rhoma Irama’s song: ‘You started it, you ended it. You made the promise, you broke it’.”

Bald-on-record strategies are comments in which a face-threatening act is performed without any redressive language. These included direct imperatives without hedges, explicit accusations stated plainly, and utterances intensified by all-capital lettering or profanity. The key criterion is the absence of linguistic devices that soften the act, such as honorifics, conditional clauses, or hedges. Consequently, the illocutionary force targets the addressee with maximum directness and minimal concern for negative face. (See Excerpts 11 and 12.)

(11) *“Ngibul oyyy...”*
Trans: “You’re lying, hey...”

(12) *"Skenario terburuk gimana? Justru gara-gara Jokowi penanganan Covid-19 itu lambat."*

Trans: "What's the worst scenario? In fact, it was because of Jokowi that the Covid-19 response was slow."

Negative politeness was identified through redressive devices that recognise the addressee's desire not to be imposed upon, even when a face-threatening act occurs. Common markers include honorific address terms such as *'Pak'*, *'Bapak'*, and *'Pakde'*, softening particles like *'tolong'* (meaning: please), hedged or conditional framing with the terms *'kalau'* and *'coba'*, and phrasing requests as questions rather than direct commands. (See Excerpts 13 and 14.)

(13) *"Yang kuliah di Tiongkok bilang: 'Di sini, recovery sangat cepat. Kenapa Indonesia lebih memilih memberitakan berita ketakutan?' Bisakah kita memberitakan berita penuh harapan?"*

Trans: "A student in China said: 'Here, the recovery is very fast. Why does Indonesia prefer to report fear-based news?' Can we report more hopeful news?"

(14) *"Pak, bukan virusnya yang saya khawatirkan. Tapi kekonyolan pemerintah terhadap masyarakat yang saya khawatirkan."*

Trans: "Sir, I am not worried about the virus. What I am worried about is the government's foolishness toward the public."

The comments are still considered face-threatening acts, such as demands, accusations, or rebukes. However, they employ linguistic mitigation that distinguishes them from the unmitigated bald-on-record category.

Analysis of American Netizens' Criticism of CNN

Illocutionary Acts

Table 3. The distribution of Americans' critical expressions in the comment section of CNN

Category	Number	(%)
Assertive	64	64%
Directive	20	20%
Expressive	16	16%
Commissive	0	0%
Declarative	0	0%

Table 3 presents the distribution of illocutionary acts in the CNN data. Assertive acts were most common, accounting for 64 out of 100 comments (64%), followed by expressive acts (20%) and directive acts (16%).

The predominance of assertive acts can be attributed to the propositional structure of most comments. These are typically declarative statements in which speakers affirm claims about the President's competence, honesty, or consistency. For example, some statements may assert that a policy 'doesn't add up' or that a promise will not be kept. (See Excerpts 15 and 16.)

(15) "'Help is on the way.' When you hear that from the government, it's usually not good."

(16) "'Re-establishing trust in the federal government', yeah good luck with that."
These utterances assert a state of affairs, describing 'what is the case' rather than requesting an action or expressing emotion in isolation. They also fulfil Searle's felicity conditions for assertives, as the speaker presents a state of affairs as true and can be held accountable for its truth value.

Expressive acts refer to comments that primarily convey the speaker's psychological state, such as ridicule, contempt, or exasperation, without a clearly propositional or directive component. Indicators included interjections, exclamatory syntax, laughing emojis, all-capitals emphasis, and insulting epithets directed at the President's character or competence (e.g., being called an 'empty suit'). (See Excerpts 17 and 18.)

(17) "Man, Saturday Night Live can't even make this any funnier. These actors are hilarious."

(18) "These wealthy people are up generations! But they don't want to help people survive. It's sickening and pure evil!"

In these cases, the comments serve to express an emotional or evaluative stance rather than to assert a verifiable proposition or request a specific action.

Directive acts were identified when a comment's illocutionary force aimed to prompt the president or the government to perform or cease an action. This category includes explicit imperatives, sarcastic demands framed as requests, and suggestions presented in conditional or hedged forms. (See Excerpts 19 and 20.)

- (19) “Bro at this point can we just turn the camera onto the teleprompter so we can read it ourselves?”
(20) “How about you encourage people to wash their hands? People aren’t washing their hands.”

This category is defined by propositional content specifying a future action for the addressee, whether the demand is direct or ironic. The degree of mitigation influences the politeness but does not alter the illocutionary classification. Directive acts were less common than assertive and expressive acts, as most commenters evaluated past or ongoing conduct rather than instructing the addressee.

Politeness Strategy

Table 4. The distribution of Americans' critical expressions in the comment section of CNN

Category	Number	(%)
Off-record	55	55%
Bald-on-record	44	44%
Negative politeness	1	1%
Positive politeness	0	0%

Table 4 presents the distribution of politeness strategies based on Brown & Levinson’s (1987) framework. In the CNN data, off-record strategies account for 55% and bald-on-record strategies for 44%, while negative politeness appears only once (1%).

Off-record strategies were identified when criticism was conveyed indirectly and required inference through implicature, affording the speaker plausible deniability. These included irony, sarcasm, rhetorical questions that imply criticism without explicit assertion, mock quotations that parody the President’s words without literal attribution, and allusions to external texts that suggest an evaluative stance. The main coding criterion was whether the speaker could plausibly deny making a direct criticism if challenged. This results from the indirectness of the implicature rather than its severity, as off-record comments were often equally

critical and frequently more rhetorically elaborate than bald on-record comments. (See Excerpts 21 and 22.)

(21) “What about Santa? Has he been vaccinated? No Christmas this year, until Santa has been vaccinated.”

(22) “If the product is free, you are the product. Period.”

Bald-on-record strategies were identified in comments where the face-threatening act was performed without any redressive language. These include direct imperatives without hedges, explicit accusations, direct address to the president by first name or mocking nickname, and utterances intensified through profanity or blunt evaluations. The key criterion was the absence of mitigating language, such as hedges, appeals to solidarity, or conditional clauses. In these instances, the illocutionary force is delivered to the addressee with maximum directness and minimal concern for the addressee’s negative face. (See Excerpts 23 and 24.)

(23) “It’s okay to think about other countries, Sleepy Joe, but worry about the US first.”

(24) “I don’t really care who you voted for, but this government is an absolute joke.”
Negative politeness strategies, which use redressive devices to recognise the addressee’s negative face during a face-threatening act, appeared only once in the data. (See Excerpt 31.)

(25) “I understand America wants to be generous. But with that 500 million, help the homeless and build houses.”

In this case, a comment used a concessive hedge before demanding that domestic needs take priority over the donation of a foreign vaccine. The infrequency of this strategy, combined with the absence of positive politeness, suggests that most commenters were not concerned with mitigating the face-threatening act.

Discussion

This chapter analyses the research findings using Hall’s (1976) theory of cultural context. The previous chapter shows that both datasets are dominated by assertive speech acts, but differ in politeness strategies and expressions of criticism. The following section will explain these differences in detail.

Comparisons of Illocutionary Acts

The main findings indicate that assertive speech acts dominate both datasets, comprising 55% on KompasTV and 64% on CNN. This suggests that digital criticism often functions as a commitment to the truth of a proposition (Searle, 1969) through evaluative claims about policies, public figures, or policy responses, supporting criticism as an illocutionary act that negatively evaluates actions or statements (Nguyen, 2008). The greater use of assertives by Americans and directives by Indonesians reflects pragmatic and cultural variations in expressing criticism.

Directive Speech Acts

The higher proportion of directives on KompasTV (27%) suggests that Indonesians often express criticism as requests or calls to action directed at the government. This aligns with high-context cultures, which emphasise collective responsibility and social hierarchy (Hall, 1976). Here, the relationship between citizens and the government is seen as a meaningful social bond. Indonesians view themselves as having the legitimacy to make demands of the government as the bearer of public responsibility. This is illustrated by the comment: “*Janganlah begini, Pak. Jadilah bangsa yang independen dan bisa bangkit. Uang para koruptor tolong ditarik, Pak.* (Don’t do this, Sir. Lead us to become an independent nation that can rise. Please take back the money from those corruptors.)” The use of the honorific ‘Pak (Sir)’ maintains the social relationship, even when expressing dissatisfaction. This reflects the polite nature of high-context communication, which integrates message content with the relationship between speaker and addressee (Levinson, 1983 in Hadinata et al., 2025; Yani et al., 2025).

Meanwhile, CNN data shows a lower proportion of directive speech acts (20%), suggesting that Americans tend to express dissatisfaction through factual evaluations rather than commands. This aligns with low-context cultural traits, which value individual autonomy and direct expressions (Hall, 1976; Harris &

Sartini, 2025). In such contexts, speakers usually identify problems without directing others to act.

Expressive Speech Acts

Expressive speech acts comprised 18% of the KompasTV dataset and 16% of the CNN dataset. However, the forms of emotional expression differed. In the KompasTV dataset, emotional expressions were frequently conveyed through religious exclamations such as '*Ya Allah*', capital letters, and emotions like fear and anger, particularly in comments about the ITE Law. This indicates a high-context communication style, where emotional expressions are linked to the broader social context (Hall, 1976; Harris & Sartini, 2025).

CNN's data shows expressive speech acts often include sharp irony, derogatory nicknames such as '*Sleepy Joe*', and direct mockery of the president's competence. These behaviours reflect emotional expression with fewer relational norms, consistent with low-context cultures that value open opinion, individual autonomy, and self-expression over social harmony (Hall, 1976; Harris & Sartini, 2025).

Comparisons of Politeness Strategies

One of this study's key findings is the distribution of politeness strategies. Both datasets display similar patterns: off-record is the most used (51% on KompasTV, 55% on CNN), followed by bald on-record (36% on KompasTV, 44% on CNN). The main difference is in negative politeness, which appears in 13% of KompasTV data but only 1% of CNN data.

Off-Record

Frequent use of off-record in both datasets challenges the stereotype that high-context speakers are indirect while low-context speakers are direct. This indicates that indirectness is a strong cross-cultural tendency in critical discourse on social media. Two perspectives help explain this finding.

From a politeness perspective, off-record provides speakers plausible deniability (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Through sarcasm, rhetorical questions, or

allusions, netizens can criticise without directly assuming responsibility for face-threatening actions. From a cyberpragmatic perspective (Yus, 2011), digital platforms promote irony and humour as forms of social interaction. Satirical or humorous comments typically receive more engagement, such as likes and replies, than direct criticism. This creates a strong rhetorical incentive for users to adopt the off-record strategy, regardless of cultural background.

However, off-record differs qualitatively between the two datasets. In the KompasTV dataset, it often involves cultural allusions, such as quotes from song lyrics, proverbs, or historical analogies, which are fully understood only by those with the same cultural background. This reflects high-context communication, where meaning relies on implicit context and shared knowledge (Hall, 1976). In contrast, there is more explicit irony grounded in verifiable statements in CNN, such as quoting an official statement and then posing a critical question. This makes the message accessible without requiring specific contextual knowledge.

Bald-On-Record

The difference in the bald-on-record usage (44% on CNN and 36% on KompasTV) closely aligns with Hall's (1976) theoretical predictions. In low-context cultures, direct communication is common. Therefore, unmitigated criticism is not always viewed as a major breach of politeness. In contrast, high-context cultures value indirectness, which explains the lower use of bald-on-record on KompasTV.

An example of bald-on-record on CNN, such as '*this government is an absolute joke*', demonstrates criticism without any mitigating language. In low-context cultures, such directness signals honesty and assertiveness. KompasTV also uses bald-on-record statements, as in '*ngibul oyyy... (you're lying hey...)*' or '*PEMERINTAH LELET. JOKOWI LELET (THE GOVERNMENT IS SLOW. JOKOWI IS SLOW.)*' However, on KompasTV, this style usually expresses strong emotion rather than serving as standard communication. The use of capital letters emphasises

emotional intensity. This indicates that indirect speech remains the norm, while direct speech occurs as an emotional response rather than a common practice.

Negative Politeness

The main difference between the two datasets is the use of negative politeness: 13% on KompasTV and 1% on CNN. This indicates a distinct cultural orientation between the two groups of speakers. According to Brown & Levinson (1987), negative politeness acknowledges the addressee's autonomy while conveying potentially face-threatening actions. It is marked by honorifics, softening particles, and conditional speech forms that show respect for the interlocutor's freedom and social status (Wardhaugh & Fuller in Budiarti, 2022).

KompasTV data show negative politeness through frequent use of honorifics as hedges, such as '*Pak*', '*Bapak*', and '*Pakde*', even in critical comments. This reflects a high-context culture, where Indonesians still maintain social hierarchies when expressing dissatisfaction (Febriyani, 2024). Politeness is upheld even when addressing leaders with anger. Meanwhile, the minimal use of negative politeness on CNN (1%) suggests that Americans do not feel obligated to acknowledge the president's status when criticising. In low-context cultures, relationships are more horizontal (Febriyani, 2024), and the president is viewed as a public official open to direct criticism without formal politeness. This supports the idea that low-context communication values equality and freedom of expression (Hall, 1976).

The Perspective of High-Context and Low-Context Theory

Three key findings highlight the relevance of Hall's theory in digital discourse. First, the higher proportion of negative politeness on KompasTV (13%) compared to CNN (1%) indicates a high-context cultural preference for maintaining relational frameworks. The use of honorifics in criticism shows that social norms persist in digital interactions. Second, the greater use of bald-on-record on CNN (44%) versus KompasTV (36%) reflects a low-context cultural tendency to communicate evaluations directly and explicitly. Third, off-record in both datasets reveals

qualitative differences aligned with Hall's (1976) framework. Indonesians more often use implicit local references, such as cultural allusions and proverbs, while Americans tend to use irony based on generally verifiable statements.

These findings reveal complexities that Hall's theory does not fully address. The prevalence of off-record in both datasets, including by Americans, a low-context cultural group, shows that the digital environment independently promotes indirectness. Social media's visibility and broad audience encourage users to express criticism in rhetorical and entertaining ways (Srikandi et al., 2023). This indicates that Hall's theory should be expanded to include a cyberpragmatic perspective (Yus, 2011) to explain digital discourse better. The consistent absence of positive politeness in both datasets is also notable. Brown & Levinson (1987) define positive politeness as emphasising solidarity, closeness, and acceptance between speaker and addressee. Its absence suggests that, when criticising public officials on social media, building solidarity is not a primary concern. This likely results from the asymmetrical and non-collaborative relationship between commentators and public figures. This finding highlights the limitations of applying Brown & Levinson's theory to digital discourse, which is typically one-way. Additionally, the lack of commissive and declarative speech acts in both datasets suggests that YouTube comments, as asynchronous and non-reciprocal discourse, have structural limitations. Speech acts requiring reciprocal commitment or institutional authority are absent because the platform does not support formal commitments. This confirms that genre has a greater influence than cultural variables on speech acts and should be considered when interpreting the results.

CONCLUSION

This study examines criticism in YouTube comments on videos about governmental response to COVID-19, using 100 comments from KompasTV and CNN. The analysis draws on Searle's (1976) illocutionary act theory and Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory.

On KompasTV, assertive acts are the most common illocutionary type, typically conveyed through sarcasm and off-record language that implied criticism. Bald-on-record language primarily appears in emotionally charged outbursts and, less frequently, in direct demands and accusations. Negative politeness, indicated by honorifics and hedges, was used when commenters softened otherwise face-threatening demands. On CNN, assertive acts are dominant and conveyed through sarcasm, with a nearly equal use of off-record and bald-on-record. Expressive acts, marked by direct ridicule and insult, were closely associated with unmitigated bald-on-record language. Mitigating strategies, including negative and positive politeness, are extremely rare and appear in only one comment across the data. Overall, both datasets reveal a similar pragmatic pattern. Commenters primarily present criticism as factual assertions rather than direct demands. The lack of positive politeness suggests the comments are intended as public performances for other viewers, not as genuine engagement with the political figure addressed.

This study uses Searle's and Brown & Levinson's frameworks, originally designed for face-to-face interaction, in a public, asynchronous, and non-reciprocal digital context where recipients are unlikely to read or respond. The findings indicate that in these settings, indirectness through off-record serves less to protect the addressee's face and more as a rhetorical tool. It adds humour, plausible deniability, and persuasive impact for a bystander audience. This can be applied or adapted in future research on digital political discourse. The findings have practical implications for several groups. Platform moderators and policy teams can use explicit criteria to distinguish legitimate accusations and complaints from mockery and insult, helping develop more precise content-moderation guidelines. These protect open criticism of public officials while identifying abusive language. For government communications and public relations professionals, recognising that public criticism is often assertive, sarcastic, and unmitigated can guide official responses to focus on the substance of public concern rather than its tone. In media

literacy education, the coding framework can serve as a teaching tool to help students and general audiences identify the pragmatic strategies, especially irony and implicature, used in online political criticism, thereby strengthening critical engagement with digital political discourse.

Several limitations should be noted. First, each dataset includes only 100 comments from 10 videos, and this study used engagement metrics to select the comments. This method may over-represent performative or algorithmically amplified criticism, including trolling or exaggerated language, and under-represent more typical or less visible critical discourse. Future research should consider stratified sampling across engagement levels or combine engagement-based sampling with qualitative validation, such as interviews or surveys, to better assess the representativeness of digital discourse patterns. Second, coding was conducted through careful manual analysis using clear criteria but was not cross-checked by a second coder. Future research should incorporate formal testing to ensure results can be replicated. Third, both datasets focus on critical comments from a specific phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, so the findings may not apply to other topics, political crises, or time periods.

AI Declaration

The authors declare that Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used only as assistive instruments during the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, Grammarly was used to support language clarity, grammar, and formatting. The AI tool did not generate, fabricate, or manipulate research data, analysis, interpretations, or references. All AI-generated outputs were carefully reviewed, verified, and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript. This use of AI complies with the Publication Ethics and Malpractice Statement of the *Journal of Pragmatics Research*.

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