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## **Politeness as a communicative value: corpus research**

### **Ввічливість як комунікативна цінність: корпусне дослідження**

**Summary.** *Language is the most important means of forming and sustaining human knowledge about the world. In the process of interacting with the objective world, individuals capture the results of its understanding with the help of words. Since language conveys a specific way of conceptualizing the world unique to it, its units reflect a particular system of views shared by its speakers. Moreover, language reflects the world and culture of the people who speak it, preserving this in linguistic units while simultaneously shaping its speakers. As individuals acquire a language, they begin to perceive the world through the perspective suggested by their native tongue and adopt the conceptualization of the world inherent in their culture. Language records, preserves, and transmits from generation to generation the system of values upon which a specific culture is based, serving as one of its most essential characteristics.*

*The present article examines the lexeme “politeness” as a communicative value in modern English, employing a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative and qualitative research techniques. Quantitative methods include frequency analysis and n-gram modeling to identify common collocations of “politeness” within the enTenTen21 corpus. Word clouds visually represent the frequency and relationships of these collocations, emphasizing their significance in various contexts. Qualitative analysis explores the social, cultural, and linguistic dimensions of “politeness”, analyzing its functions in domains such as gender, power, social justice, digital communication, and child development.*

*The findings demonstrate that “politeness” functions as both a linguistic characteristic and a social construct, rooted in cultural norms and values. The study reveals its role in regulating behaviour, maintaining social harmony, and reflecting cultural attitudes toward communication. Corpus contexts also include workplace communication, where “politeness” facilitates professionalism, and digital interactions, in which traditional etiquette often erodes. Additionally, the analysis points to the influence of gender aspects and power structures on the verbalization of politeness.*

*A comprehensive examination of collocations with the lexeme “politeness” reveals how specific pairings reflect habitual language use and cultural priorities. The word cloud provides a dynamic way to visualize the semantic relationships*

*of politeness with its contextual lexemes. At its core is politeness, surrounded by lexemes, which belong to the same semantic field or share similar contextual usage. The present corpus research highlights the connections of politeness with other communicative values such as gentleness, prudence, humility, etc.*

**Key words:** *politeness, communicative value, corpus research, Sketch Engine, collocation.*

**Анотація.** Мова є найважливішим засобом накопичення та збереження людських знань про світ. У процесі взаємодії з об'єктивним світом людина фіксує результати його розуміння за допомогою слів. Оскільки мова передає особливий, властивий лише їй спосіб концептуалізації світу, її одиниці відображають певну систему поглядів, яку поділяють її носії. Більше того, мова відображає світ і культуру народу, який нею розмовляє, закріплюючи це в мовних одиницях і водночас впливає на формування її носіїв. Опановуючи мову, людина починає сприймати світ крізь призму, закладену в її рідній мові, і переймає концептуалізацію світу, притаманну її культурі. Мова фіксує, зберігає і передає з покоління в покоління систему цінностей, на яких ґрунтується певна культура, виступаючи однією з її найсуттєвіших характеристик.

У цій статті розглядається лексема «*politeness*» як комунікативна цінність у сучасній англійській мові із застосуванням комбінованого підходу, який об'єднує кількісні та якісні методи дослідження. Кількісні методи включають частотний аналіз та моделювання *n*-грами для виявлення найпоширеніших словосполучень з лексемою «*politeness*» у корпусі *enTenTen21*. Хмари слів візуально представляють частоту та взаємозв'язки цих словосполучень, підкреслюючи їхню значущість у різних контекстах. Якісний аналіз досліджує соціальні, культурні та лінгвістичні аспекти ввічливості, аналізуючи її функції в таких сферах, як гендер, влада, соціальна справедливість, цифрова комунікація та виховання дітей.

Результати дослідження свідчать, що ввічливість функціонує і як лінгвістична характеристика, і як соціальний конструкт, закладений у культурних нормах і цінностях. Дослідження розкриває її роль у регуляції поведінки, збереженні соціальної гармонії та відображенні культурної складової комунікації. Контексти корпусу також включають спілкування на робочому місці, де ввічливість сприяє професіоналізму, і цифрову взаємодію, де традиційний етикет часто втрачає свою актуальність. Крім того, аналіз вказує на вплив гендерних аспектів і владних структур на вербалізацію ввічливості.

Всебічний аналіз словосполучень з лексемою «*politeness*» виявив, як певні словосполучення відображають повсякденне використання мови та культурні орієнтири. Хмара слів дозволяє динамічно візуалізувати семантичні зв'язки між ввічливістю та її контекстуальними лексемами. В центрі *politeness* оточена словами, що належать до того ж семантичного поля або характеризуються подібним контекстуальним ужитком. Представлене корпусне дослідження виокремлює зв'язки ввічливості з іншими комунікативними цінностями, такими як делікатність, розсудливість, скромність тощо.

**Ключові слова:** *ввічливість, комунікативна цінність, корпусне дослідження, Sketch Engine, колокація.*

**Introduction.** *Politeness* in linguistics has been a significant area of research since the 1970s, since Brown and Levinson's seminal work. The concept of politeness is closely related to speech etiquette, though not all components of it fall under the notion of politeness [2, p. 384]. In his work "The Pragmatics of Politeness", Leech offers a comprehensive examination of politeness phenomenon in English, presenting it as a form of communicative altruism and exploring various speech acts associated with politeness [9]. The study of politeness in English as a second language is particularly important, as learners often struggle with sociolinguistic features influenced by culture, gender, language style, and domain [4, p. 93]. Current advancements in *politeness* research include examining polite language usage in interactional contexts, exploring impolite interactions, and investigating the biological underpinnings of face and politeness in human sociality.

Recent corpus-based studies have also explored politeness in various contexts. Pan examines politeness strategies used by Thai EFL learners, finding a preference for negative politeness and limited strategy use [12]. Oliver develops a method for identifying politeness metalanguage in Shakespeare's plays, uncovering 234 forms across 4,023 instances [11]. Islentyeva et al. analyze common politeness markers (please, thank you, thanks, sorry) in spoken British English, revealing their primary use in core senses like requests and apologies [6]. Friginal investigates politeness markers in aviation and customer service interactions, focusing on their distribution across socio-cultural structures and task dimensions [3]. Furthermore, the scholars demonstrate the versatility of the corpus-based approach in examining politeness in different languages, time periods, and contexts, providing data on linguistic patterns, cultural norms, and communication strategies.

**Methods and material.** The study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research techniques. Quantitative methods involve frequency analysis and the use of n-grams to identify the most common collocations of *politeness* in the corpus. The frequency of these lexemes is then analyzed and presented graphically through word clouds, which highlight the most common words and their relationships. Qualitative methods include exploring the social, cultural, and linguistic contexts in which *politeness* is used, examining its functions in various communication domains such as gender, power, social justice, and child development. Corpus tools are employed to identify and analyze related words, helping to explore the meanings and associations of *politeness* as a communicative value in contemporary English.

The data is obtained from the English Web Corpus (enTenTen), a part of Sketch Engine [13], which is a large-scale linguistic resource consisting

of texts gathered from the Internet. It is part of the TenTen corpus family, which encompasses corpora in over 40 languages, all created using advanced technology designed to capture linguistically valuable content from the web. The enTenTen21 corpus, the most recent version, contains 52 billion words. These texts were collected between October-December 2021 and January 2022.

**Results and discussion.** It is widely recognized that cultural values can be divided into two primary categories: material and spiritual. The material category includes a range of exceptional works of intellectual, artistic, and religious creation, such as paintings, literature, architectural monuments, and handicrafts. The spiritual category, on the other hand, encompasses the social experience of society, particularly the principles of life activity that have proven to be the most effective and socially productive. These include customs, traditions, cognitive stereotypes, values, assessments, images, opinions, and interpretations – essentially, the core norms of behaviour and judgment that foster social integration and mutual understanding within a community. In essence, spiritual values reflect the process through which society adapts itself to the social environment and establishes the ideals to guide human relationships and behaviour.

While many of the values accumulated over history are universal, their significance and ranking on the value scale differ across cultures [16]. This cultural variation defines the distinctiveness, peculiarity, and uniqueness of each society. Shared cultural values and traditions, together with language, are considered to be some of the key indicators of an ethnic group. Every culture is based on its own system of values, which serve as guiding principles for life and ultimately define the essence of that society. For example, Eastern cultures prioritize the unity of society and the individual, family, respect for elders, self-improvement, interdependence, and modesty, while Western ones emphasize the distinction between the individual and society, prioritizing individual over collective values, independence, personal freedom, and equality.

When individuals encounter a different culture, they often react sensitively to variations in value systems, relying on their own perceptions of which values hold importance. This can lead to sharp judgments, evaluations, and the development of ethnic stereotypes. To foster effective communication, it is essential to understand the value systems of other linguistic cultures' members, making this a critical focus in intercultural interactions.

Building on Kosteljik's perspective, values tied to communicative consciousness – defined as “the system that ensures communicative activity” [7, p. 22] – are particularly significant. These values, referred

to as communicative ones, profoundly shape a society’s communicative behaviour and play a key role in the formation of national communication styles. Understanding these values enhances the ability to interpret, predict, and adapt to the communicative behaviour of cross-cultural interlocutors, ultimately facilitating smoother interactions in new cultural environments.

Although a universally accepted definition of communicative value has yet to be established, we understand them as mental dispositions that regulate commonly recognized normative communicative behaviour (both verbal and non-verbal) characteristic of members of a particular ethnocultural community. As mental constructs, communicative values are expressed through complementary signs, which can be both linguistic and non-linguistic. Non-linguistic ones, reflecting communicative values, include ritualized behaviour within a linguistic-cultural community, non-verbal communication cues, symbolic signs, and informative-regulatory markers. Since language acts as the historical retransmitter of cultural values [5, p. 299], communicative values are also expressed in verbalized forms. Linguistic signs of value objectification include lexemes, idioms, proverbs, catchphrases, statements, and various types of texts.

The present research explores how *politeness* is verbalized in various thematic contexts as well as identifies frequent collocations associated with the word, and examines the implications of these findings in sociolinguistic and pragmatic studies. The topics for *politeness* in a web corpus cover a broad scope presented in Table 1.

Table 1

The main themes of *politeness* verbalization

Topics	Examples
1	2
Cultural Norms and Politeness	<i>A little politeness would have warned me to open the door with some clothes on, right?</i>
Politeness in Digital Communication	<i>E-mail is a form of communication, and as such demands politeness, consideration, and niceties.</i>
Politeness and Linguistic Studies	<i>We acquired words by ostention and fast-learning, in a social context of pragmatic use and conventions of discourse, politeness, evasiveness, self-deception, all of it to some extent templated by evolutionary prehistory ...</i>
Politeness in Professional Settings	<i>All-in-all, dealing well with a disgruntled customer comes down to patience, politeness, and understanding.</i>
Gender and Politeness	<i>Air Canada was the first airline to drop traditional politenessfor modern sensitivities when it replaced “ladies and gentlemen” with “everyone” back in 2019.</i>

1	2
Politeness and Power Dynamics	<i>I'm sorry, but this is the second human being I have ever encountered who demanded this kind of faux politeness to be attached to every opinion as if you're apologizing for it.</i>
Politeness and Social Justice	<i>Politeness entails avoiding microaggressions and fostering respectful dialogue to create a more inclusive society.</i>
Historical Perspectives on Politeness	<i>People no longer have a sense of mores, morality, politeness and the general niceties of civilized society.</i>
Children and Politeness	<i>...to teach a child to be polite if you are polite to your children. If we respect them, they naturally respect us. Genuine politeness is nothing more than respect for other people that is learned through symbiosis.</i>

Table 1 reveals how *politeness* is expressed in the English Web 2021 corpus, showing its varied functions and importance in different communication spheres. A significant context in which *politeness* is highlighted is in relation to cultural norms, where it acts as an implicit guide to proper conduct and frequently influences human behaviour or follows social expectations in day-to-day interactions, for instance: “*The language she spoke and her body language all expressed high levels of politeness and refinement in Japanese communication*” [13]. The larger cultural context in which people live shapes this type of *politeness*, serving as a subtly potent behaviour regulator.

The relationship between *politeness* and digital communication is another major issue in the corpus. Traditional social etiquette has been observed to be eroding as technology advances, with online interactions occasionally sacrificing civility. Concerns over how *politeness* changes or is ignored in digital environments are raised by this tendency, which illustrates the conflict between technical advancement and the breakdown of the customs that traditionally governed face-to-face contact: “*Common courtesy, politeness, and appropriate behavior can be overlooked online, so always ask yourself if you would say what you are typing to that person face-to-face before you hit send!*” [13].

The corpus further addresses *politeness* in the context of linguistic studies, showing how it is influenced and taught by social interaction. It demonstrates its complexity, which is both a linguistic characteristic and a social construct having roots in cultural and evolutionary settings, for example: “*Linguistic politeness is a part of our social image, our cultural tradition, although it rarely becomes conscious knowledge*” [13].

In the workplace, being courteous is frequently seen as an essential quality for relationship management and effective leadership. It is linked

to traits like determination, humility, and tolerance – qualities that are critical for settling disputes and preserving peace. This demonstrates how being courteous not only facilitates easy communication between people but also greatly enhances professionalism and respect in leadership settings, for example: *“Politeness, humility, tolerance, and determination were Srila Prabhupada’s leadership trademarks”* [13].

Our corpus analysis shows how *politeness* rules vary in reaction to changing society attitudes toward gender, demonstrating how gender relations also affect the ways of expressing *politeness*. For example, although while discretion, modesty, and politeness are valued qualities for all people, not just women, cultural conditioning can affect the society’s views on particular features. The shifting opinions on these issues show how social expectations and cultural norms influence *politeness*: *“While discretion, modesty, and politeness are always key virtues (for anyone, not just women), the way we think of the female breast is partially culturally conditioned, and I’m convinced that the modern Western view is unhealthy”* [13].

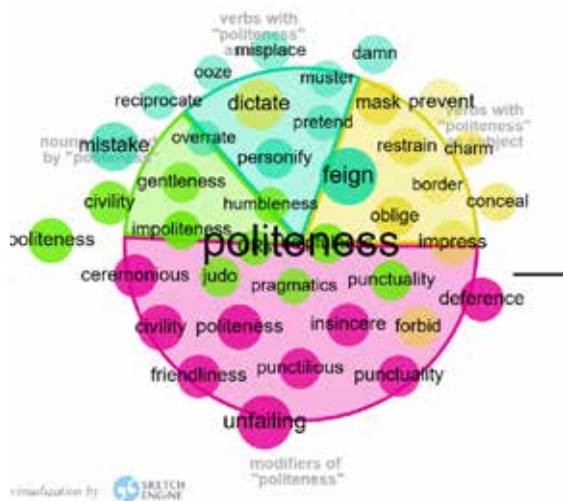
*Politeness* is also examined in light of power dynamics, where it can be used as a tactic to negotiate intricate hierarchies as well as a tool of preserving social harmony, for example: *“That repeated “so” is a brilliant bit of mimicry, capturing not just the change in accent, but the deployment of a certain effusive, patronizing politeness, so characteristic of the British upper classes”* [13]. Power and authority can influence the *politeness*’s enactment in communication, as seen by the instances in which it is employed to conceal or moderate strong beliefs.

Another significant topic is the connection between social justice and courtesy, where *politeness* is presented as a way to promote inclusivity and respect. Here it is viewed as a tool of fostering more inclusive and fair social contexts through minimizing microaggressions and encouraging courteous conversation, demonstrating its potential as a force for social good: *“To that end, I’ve personally interpreted this “whiteness” as: neutrality to cultural bias (dialog, clothing, etc.), politeness, professionalism, common courtesy, and well, just generally being a decent functioning human in society”* [13].

The idea of *politeness* has historically been articulated as something that has changed throughout time. Some experts are of opinion that contemporary society has forgotten the fundamental principles of civility that formerly governed social interactions, for example: *“We may not admit it openly, out of a sense of decency or politeness, but mankind is becoming more and more inhuman day by day”* [13]. This historical perspective invites reflection on how shifts in societal norms and values impact our understanding of *politeness* and its role in maintaining order and civility.

Lastly, the corpus covers the transmission and learning of *politeness*, with a focus on children. Since mutual regard and modelled behaviour foster respect for others, *politeness* is revealed as the one learnt through symbiotic interactions. This viewpoint emphasizes how civility plays a great role in socialization and how crucial it is to foster healthy interpersonal connections from a young age: “*The respect and politeness are some of the things that seem to be missing in children today*” [13].

Analyzing the corpus, among the various types of collocations provided by the n-gram, our focus is on the collocations POLITENESS + Noun. The n-gram below demonstrates the most frequent ones.



**Fig. 1. N-gram collocates with POLITENESS**

The present table shows the collocates belonging to different parts of speech which are most commonly used with POLITENESS.

One of the most frequent collocations is *utmost politeness* (see Figure 2), which ranks 13th among the most often used thematic collocations in the discourse. It is characterized by the highest score of 4,0. The significance of the score lies in its ability to highlight which collocations are more tightly linked and thus more meaningful or typical in the language. Moreover, the score of the collocation *utmost politeness* suggests that these two words are strongly associated in the corpus, meaning that *utmost* is frequently used to modify *politeness*. This high score also implies that *utmost politeness* is not just a random pairing of



Table 2

### The most frequent collocations related to POLITENESS

Collocations with POLITENESS	Frequency of use	Score
politeness strategies	666	1,8
politeness theory	347	1,5
negative politeness	189	1,2
basic politeness	180	0,3
positive politeness	167	0,4
true politeness	162	0,3
extreme politeness	155	1,6
mere politeness	152	2,4
to express politeness	151	0,7
excessive politeness	147	2,8
formal politeness	145	1,5
linguistic politeness	123	3,6
utmost politeness	122	4,0
exaggerated politeness	115	5,3
British politeness	113	0,1
false politeness	87	0,8
politeness norms	73	2,3

Corpus	sentence
1. joyceonline.com	<=At the grounds everyone was treated with <b>utmost politeness</b> .>/p>
2. alnaseem.org	<=George treated me with <b>utmost politeness</b> thereafter.>/p>
3. readcentral.com	<=The man rose with the <b>utmost politeness</b> .>/p>
4. helloscena.nl	<=The Patriots were received with the <b>utmost politeness</b> .>/p>
5. apnews.edu	<=He received me with the <b>utmost politeness</b> .>/p>
6. leindorff.com	<=Here is absolute barbarity being carried out with the <b>utmost politeness</b> .>/p>
7. hollywood.com	<=Even Canadian Superheroes treated him with <b>utmost politeness</b> .>/p>
8. hastingsspress.co.uk	<=Throughout we have met with the <b>utmost politeness</b> & consideration from everyone.>/p>
9. gamebooks.org	<=Part of the game's fascination is observing such creative vengeance served with <b>utmost politeness</b> .>/p>
10. ipse/harvest.its	<=It's well known that <b>utmost politeness</b> and courtesy rule supreme within Japanese culture.>/p>
11. ston.robo.jp	<=He spoke with the <b>utmost politeness</b> , but in it was an order.>/p>
12. kaneesoku.org	<=It is best to treat other dancers with the <b>utmost politeness</b> at all times.>/p>
13. guillemot.com	<=We ask, with <b>utmost politeness</b> , that each of you respect this policy.>/p>
14. mactanmentary	<=Inquire – with <b>utmost politeness</b> – about the note on your file regarding an upgrade.>/p>
15. bolaji.com	<=I said with <b>utmost politeness</b> .>/p>
16. ruyibapt.com	<=He always speaks with <b>utmost politeness</b> and remains totally ambiguous about what exactly he's saying.>/p>
17. kaneesoku.org	<=The narrative is intense, but my interactions with stranger players is always of the <b>utmost politeness</b> .>/p>
18. ballcraft.com	<=I believe I always received them with the <b>utmost politeness</b> and sustained my character tolerably well.>/p>
19. resident.org	<=I hope the <b>utmost politeness</b> and respect will be shown to these officers on their arrival.>/p>
20. error.com	<=If they did so, I bet it will have been done with the <b>utmost politeness</b> .>/p>

Fig. 2. Concordance **UTMOST POLITENESS**

words but rather a fixed or highly habitual collocation that often appears together in various texts.

Other most frequent collocations with *politeness* include *politeness strategies*, *politeness theory*, and *negative politeness*, which are commonly found in academic discussions, particularly in sociolinguistics and pragmatics. These collocations prove that *politeness* is frequently discussed in theoretical terms and often in relation to the strategies employed to maintain it in communication. Other common collocations like *mere politeness*, *excessive politeness*, and *utmost politeness* verbalize the varying degrees of this phenomenon, suggesting that it is often framed as something that can be intensified or overdone. The frequency of these collocations indicates that *politeness* is not just about maintaining respect or decorum but can be seen as a spectrum of social behaviour and can vary in intensity depending on the context.

The collocation *linguistic politeness* is also significant, pointing to the fact that language plays a key role in the expression of *politeness*. This refers us to studies in pragmatics, where the structure of language is considered essential to polite interaction. Other culturally specific collocations such as *British politeness* and *false politeness* reflect the idea that *politeness* is shaped by cultural norms, and its notion can be seen as either authentic or insincere depending on the situation. The relatively low frequency of these collocations suggests that while these structures are relevant in specific discussions, they are less central compared to broader, more theoretical terms.

The collocations *exaggerated politeness* and *extreme politeness* show that *politeness* is not only seen as a positive attribute but also as something that can be perceived as excessive or insincere, which often points to a desire to establish social distance or reinforce social hierarchies. These collocations are more likely to appear in discussions about the potential pitfalls or overuse of *politeness*, which may not always meet the social expectations or desired outcomes of communication.

In addition to the frequency of word usage, the thesaurus has been used for our corpus research. A thesaurus is a list of words together with their frequency and similarity score. Its main function is to find which words occur in the same context as the one under analysis. In this way, Sketch Engine also selects collocates with the same grammatical relations [10, p. 24–29]. In addition, this function makes it possible to visualize words similar in context in the form of a cloud (Fig. 3).

Thus, in a word cloud, the core is represented by the lemma of a given word surrounded by the lexemes belonging to the same semantic field or have similar contextual usage. The frequency of the word use affects its



**Fig. 3. Thesaurus of the word POLITENESS  
in the English Web 2021 corpus**

location in the cloud: the higher the frequency, the closer the word is to the cloud's centre [1, p. 193–207].

In the word cloud for POLITENESS, the following lexemes are highlighted: *civility*, *modesty*, *decorum*, *decency*, *friendliness*, *gentleness*, *graciousness*, *calmness*, *prudence*, *helpfulness*, *attentiveness*, *composure*, *candor*, *truthfulness*, *respectability*, *tact*, *punctuality*, *propriety*, *cheerfulness*, *self-control*, *self-restraint*, *selflessness*, *humility*, *self-discipline*, and *sportsmanship*. The innovative aspect of this feature is that it enables the researcher to explore the semantic relationships of the lexeme POLITENESS and its interaction with other words in context.

Word Sketch Difference is an enhancement of the word sketch tool. It creates Word Sketches for two words and allows for a comparison, making it easy to identify variations in their usage [15, p. 162]. This feature is particularly valuable for examining closely related synonyms, antonyms, or words within the same semantic domain (Fig. 4).

The collocates highlighted in green are typically associated with the green lemma, while those in red are more commonly linked with the red lemma. The white collocates, on the other hand, are frequently combined with both lemmas.

Thus, it is clear that *politeness* usually co-occurs with *civility*, *courtesy*, *decorum*, *formality*, and *deference*. Its antonym *impoliteness* is used in the same contexts with the lexeme *incivility*. Both words under study co-occur with *arrogance*, *politeness*, *aggression*, and *rudeness*.

**Conclusions.** Any culture is based on a system of values that serves as fundamental life guidelines and ultimately defines the culture of a given society. These values are verbally expressed, making them amenable to



**Fig. 4. The opposition of lemmas POLITENESS and IMPOLITENESS**

linguistic analysis and instrumental for studying linguistic consciousness. The mentality of any people is characterized by a system of core values that manifests their way of life, language, and communicative behaviour. While acknowledging the importance of studying the entire value system of various linguocultures' representatives, we assign particular significance to the ones related to communicative consciousness, which underpin the everyday activities of members of an ethnocultural society. Knowledge of these values greatly facilitates understanding, predicting, and accurately interpreting the behaviour of another culture representatives.

The present research dealt with the varied verbalizations of *politeness* in the English Web 2021 corpus. The analysis of the corpus contexts points to the importance of *politeness* not only in daily communication but also within digital, professional, and gender-related spheres. As social, technical, and cultural norms develop, *politeness* becomes a fundamental component that regulates interpersonal relationships and societal expectations.

The findings reveal clear characteristics that illustrate how *politeness* is applied in a variety of contexts, from professional settings to digital communication and cultural conventions. Its inclusion within discussions of power dynamics, social justice, and historical perspectives also reveals its adaptability and relevance across different contexts. The examination of frequent collocations further supports the idea that *politeness* is shaped

by cultural values, communication strategies, and social structures. The significant presence of terms such as *politeness strategies*, *linguistic politeness*, and *negative politeness* reveals the academic focus on politeness in sociolinguistics and pragmatics. The abovementioned collocations highlight the theoretical aspects of *politeness* and its role in maintaining social relationships.

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