

PRAGMATIC FUNCTION OF “PO” IN MULTILINGUAL ONLINE DISCOURSE

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Date of Publication: July 30, 2026

ABSTRACT: This study explores the use of the Tagalog politeness marker *po* in English and Bislish online academic interactions between a university instructor and her undergraduate students in a state university in the Philippines. Drawing from a semester-long exchange via Facebook Messenger, it examines how *po* is pragmatically and sociolinguistically deployed in multilingual digital contexts. The study is grounded in Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory and Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory to analyze communicative intent and politeness strategies. Participants included 35 students enrolled in a professional education course. Data were collected from naturally occurring text-based messages exchanged in the class Messenger group chat. Forty-six utterances containing *po* were extracted, manually coded, and analyzed using a three-level qualitative coding scheme that examined sentence position, speech act type, and pragmatic function. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns of politeness strategies. Findings show that *po* was used primarily in requests, apologies, acknowledgments, and greetings, often positioned mid-sentence or at the end. It served both positive and negative politeness functions, helping speakers express deference, mitigate imposition, and maintain rapport in the absence of nonverbal cues. The results underscore how *po* functions as a culturally embedded but flexible politeness marker, illustrating the persistence of local norms in digital academic communication across languages.

Keywords: politeness marker; digital discourse; multilingual pragmatics; Bislish

I. INTRODUCTION

Filipino students increasingly embed the politeness marker *po* into English or regional language utterances, especially when addressing instructors or authority figures [1]. This reflects a culturally grounded strategy shaped by social norms and relational contexts in digital environments [2].

Despite English being the dominant medium of instruction in Philippine universities, the continued use of *po* in academic communication signals a deeper sociolinguistic process [3].

Drawing from naturally occurring instructor-student Facebook Messenger exchanges over a semester, this research responds to the need for a more culturally-attuned view of politeness in online academic settings and advocates hybrid strategies as legitimate expressions of identity and social awareness [2].

The Filipino politeness marker *po* holds a central place in both the grammatical and pragmatic features of Tagalog and other Philippine languages [4]. Grammatically, *po* is a discourse particle that does not change the syntactic structure or literal meaning of an utterance, but contributes a layer of social meaning [5]. It appears at the end of sentence, or after pronouns and verbs and in utterances involving acts that are considered face-threatening and thus require mitigation [1, 4]. While English and Filipino serve as official languages of instruction, students often code-switch and integrate regional languages such as Bisaya in informal and digital settings [3, 6].

According to Canagarajah [7], such localized usages should not be considered as errors but as evidence of the speakers' linguistic agency or their capacity to negotiate meaning. It is seen as a sophisticated tool for navigating identity, intimacy, and authority in a digital setting [8].

Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to understand the function of the politeness marker *po* in online academic interactions and answer the following:

1. Where is *po* used in English or Bislish sentences in everyday Filipino online academic interactions?

2. What are the pragmatic functions of *po* when used in non-Tagalog contexts like Bislish or in English?
3. In what types of speech acts is *po* commonly used?
4. How do speakers perceive the cultural significance of *po* when used in non-Tagalog sentences such as English and Bislish?

This research is grounded in context-driven pragmatics which considers how culture-specific norms shape the interpretation and use of language in context [9].

To conceptualize how linguistic resources function in digital environments, this study draws on broad theoretical frameworks in pragmatics and sociolinguistics, particularly Speech Act Theory [10] and the Politeness Theory [11, 12].

These provide the lens for analyzing the communicative intent and face management strategies. Furthermore, Canagarajah's [7] translingual paradigm and Thurlow's [8] digital discourse framework serve as overarching conceptual foundations, framing code-meshing and localized language choices not as errors, but as expressions of identity and rapport.

While these frameworks offer general interpretative lenses, directly comparable empirical research has begun to document how Filipino speakers navigate politeness in computer mediated communication (CMC). Briones and Liwanag [3] examined politeness strategies in email correspondences while Correo [13] identified politeness strategies in asynchronous environments. Researches are also examining local particle usage and code-switching [1, 2]. Building upon these studies, this paper focuses specifically on the micro-level pragmatic deployment of the single politeness particle *po* within real-time, synchronous, multilingual (English and Bislish) Facebook Messenger instructor-student exchanges and requests [14].

II. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a qualitative discourse analysis design, specifically grounded in Herring's [15] Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) framework to investigate the

use of the politeness marker *po* in non-Tagalog digital communication among university students and their instructor. CMDA provides the methodological foundation for analyzing logs of naturally-occurring, text-based interactions within the academic digital environment through a linguistic lens, and as well as micro-level language features alongside social dynamics like politeness.

Research Setting

The setting of the study was a tertiary level board course offered in a state university in the Philippines. The participants were the instructor and 35 enrolled undergraduate students in one semester of online communication via Facebook Messenger, which served as their primary channel for announcements, clarification of tasks, inquiries, and informal consultations.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select the 35 undergraduate participants and 1 instructor. In qualitative inquiry, purposive sampling allows researchers to intentionally select participants and sites to learn or understand the phenomenon under study based on their ability to serve as information-rich cases [16]. The inclusion criteria are as follows: enrollment in the same course section; active participation in the class Facebook Messenger GC throughout one academic semester; use of English, Bislish, or mixed language or mixed-language utterances containing the politeness marker *po*; and, provision of informed consent for research purposes.

Data Collection and Coding

The data set consisted of a semester-long text-based digital messages [15] in class Facebook Messenger group chat, downloaded and de-identified to ensure confidentiality and ethical handling. Only messages that contained the politeness marker *po* were selected for analysis. Other politeness markers in the utterance where *po* is found were also noted but not analyzed, unless they contributed to the understanding of the context of *po* usage.

The extracted messages were categorized into utterance units, identified and entered into a qualitative data analysis matrix using Microsoft Excel for systematic categorization. A total of 46 utterances were selected for analysis based on the presence of the politeness marker *po* within English or Bislish constructions.

A three-level coding scheme was used: Level 1 was for structural coding, Level 2 was for speech act categorization based on Searle's taxonomy [10], and Level 3 was on Pragmatic and Sociolinguistic functions inspired by Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory [12]. Two coders independently coded the dataset to evaluate inter-coder reliability using Cohen's kappa coefficient [17] to check for inter-coder agreement and consistency, with an inter-coder agreement of 0.89 (Cohen's Kappa) indicating strong consistency. Disagreements were resolved through discussion [18].

Data Analysis

The coded data were subjected to thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes surrounding the use of *po* in multilingual academic communication. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's [19] six-step approach: familiarization,

generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the analysis. Searle's [10] speech act categories were also applied during the coding process. Utterances were preserved in their original linguistic form to maintain fidelity.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical procedures for online environment research were followed in accordance with the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) Ethical Guidelines [20] and Markham and Buchanan's Report on Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research [21]. Because data were collected from a closed, private Facebook Messenger group, explicit informed consent was secured to analyze and archive pre-existing messages [20]. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and explicitly disconnected from academic evaluations. Data security was maintained through anonymization and careful storage. Quoted messages were de-identified and assigned pseudonyms [21].

III. RESULTS

Position of *po*

The position of the politeness marker *po* is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Position of the politeness marker *po*

Position of <i>po</i>	Description	f	Example
Sentence-final	end of the utterance	20	"Good afternoon, ma'am. Thank you <i>po</i> ." "I sent you a message <i>po</i> "
Mid-sentence	after the verb or subject within the sentence	23	"Pwede pa <i>po</i> sa Monday ma'am?" "Gikan <i>po</i> ko sa Talakag ma'am"
Multiple Instances	more than once in one utterance	3	"Yes <i>po</i> ma'am. Willing to wait <i>po</i> . Take care <i>po</i> ."
Total		46	

Po was most often placed at mid-sentence positions (23 utterances) and sentence-final (20 utterances), with a few instances appearing multiple times in one message. Despite its origins in Tagalog, *po* is shown to be pragmatically integrated into English-dominant and code-switched utterances as a conventional marker of politeness. It is used to reflect cultural values such as respect and *pakikisama*, demonstrating how these practices are shaped by social hierarchies and relational expectations [11].

Po coexists with Bisaya and English grammar, as seen in messages like "Pwede pa *po* sa Monday, ma'am?" occurring in mid-sentence as mitigation strategy for potential face-threatening acts such as requests. There was also the observed elongated *po* (e.g. "yes *po* ma'am") with the affective role in showing patience, sincerity or emotional intensity.

Politeness strategies indexed through *po*

The strategies which include *po* within non-Tagalog academic online discourse reflect deeply rooted cultural values and communicative norms, where it serves both positive and negative politeness strategies. Table 2 shows that majority (28 utterances) used the negative politeness strategy to mitigate imposition although there were a few (6) utterances that included a mix of strategies [11].

Table 2. Politeness strategies indexed through *po*

Politeness Strategy	Function	Occurrence	Illustrative Use
Negative Politeness	Mitigate imposition, show deference	28 utterances	“Pwede <i>po</i> sa Monday, ma’am?”
Positive Politeness	Express appreciation, inclusion	12 utterances	“Take care <i>po</i> , ma’am.”
Mixed / Contextual	Simultaneous strategies	6 utterances	“Noted <i>po</i> , thank you and God bless <i>po</i> .”

In making requests or inquiries, *po* performs a negative politeness function by minimizing the imposition of the request and acknowledging the higher status or authority of the instructor. It also operates with positive politeness strategies, particularly in expressions of gratitude (“Thank you *po* ma’am”), greetings, (Good afternoon *po* ma’am”), and solidarity (“Take care *po* ma’am”), enhancing rapport even in a hierarchical setting.

Another key function is its role as a face-saving device in potentially face threatening acts, such as late light messages (“Sorry for disturbing your evening *po*”). Retaining its sociolinguistic status as a bridge between language use and cultural practice shows that even non-Tagalog users recognize it to be culturally specific and functionally adaptable.

Speech Acts where *po* is used

Drawing on Searle’s [10] taxonomy, the speech acts fall into several categories as presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Speech acts where *po* is used

Speech Act Type	f	Example Utterances
Acknowledgments / Updates	13	“I’ve sent the file <i>po</i> , ma’am.”
Requests / Clarifications	12	“Pwede pa <i>po</i> sa Monday, ma’am?”
Expressions of Gratitude	8	“Thank you <i>po</i> , ma’am!”
Apologies / Justifications	4	“Sorry for disturbing your evening <i>po</i> .”
Greetings / Valedictions	5	“Good afternoon <i>po</i> , ma’am.”
Others / Self-identifications	4	“Taga Talakag <i>po</i> ko, ma’am.”
Total	46	

Acknowledgments and updates constitute a significant portion of the data (13 utterances) as in “I’ve sent the file *po*, ma’am.” and “Noted *po* ma’am” illustrating how *po* is used to respectfully affirm understanding information. This is closely related to expressions of gratitude amplifying politeness and respect, as seen in “Thank you so much *po* ma’am!”

Request include utterances like “*Mag ask lang po mi if madayon ang demo?*” where *po* is employed to mitigate the imposition of asking for a favor or clarification, and recognizing the instructor’s authority.

It is also found in greetings and well-wishes (5 utterances), including “Good morning *po*, ma’am” and “God bless you always *po*” while engaging with the instructor courteously. In apologies such as “Sorry for disturbing your evening *po*” the

marker works to reduce potential offense. These highlight how *po* operates as a functional marker of politeness, relational sensitivity, and hierarchical awareness.

Perceptions of the Cultural significance of *po*

Participants perceive the politeness marker *po* to transcend its Tagalog linguistic origins and function despite being embedded within English or Bislish utterances. *Po* is seen as symbolically charged expression of Filipino values [11], supported by norms of respect, harmonious social interaction, and a sense of propriety [22].

In English utterances, *po* is often used even with other politeness strategies in English, showing it as pragmatically motivated rather than grammatically required.

In Bislish, *po* is used to assert the speaker’s regional identities while aligning with broader national values. Utterances such as “Taga-Jasaan *po* ko ma’am” reflects a hybrid identity [23], showing translingual practice or a dynamic blending of languages for social relationships.

In digital contexts where the tone and non-verbal cues and body language are absent, *po* serves as a textual politeness strategy, and its repetition or elongation and sentence-final placement reinforce its role as a visible relational marker.

IV. DISCUSSION

Originally an exclusive Tagalog politeness marker, *po* remains a salient linguistic feature even when embedded in English and Bislish utterances and illustrates symbolic and pragmatic function, supporting observations from Bautista [22] and [24] that *po* is a culturally embedded marker of politeness rather than a strictly language-bound feature.

From a speech act perspective [10], the presence of *po* in requests and questions aligns with its function to soften utterances and a means of reducing imposition and signaling deference. This exemplifies Brown and Levinson’s [11] negative politeness strategy used when avoiding imposition to the listener’s autonomy, resonating with Filipino values of *pakikisama* or harmonious interpersonal relationship [25]. This dual role indicates that *po* functions as a deferential and affiliative device.

Po is a pragmatic tool that bridges linguistic gaps and sustains social hierarchy even when the context is non-Tagalog, showing that digital spaces reflect, rather than dilute, culturally situated communicative practices. The strategic placement of *po* where the sentence-final positioning is most frequently observed demonstrates its flexible transfer of cultural framing into the structure of non-Tagalog utterances [13, 26].

V. CONCLUSION

The following are the conclusions of the study:

- Po* is consistently embedded in English and Bislish messages, showing that cultural markers remain active even in English-dominated online environments.
- The pragmatic functions of *po* include mitigating imposition, reinforcing politeness, expressing gratitude, and asserting in-group solidarity, suggesting its strategic deployment across languages.

- c. It is most commonly inserted in speech acts involving greetings, requests, apologies, and acknowledgments related to the management of face and social relationships.
- d. Students perceive *po* as indispensable in signaling respect and politeness.

These findings contribute to a more grounded understanding of politeness, where multilingualism and norms intersect.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following practical and scholarly recommendations are given:

1. Institutions should include modules or inputs on linguistic diversity awareness and Filipino politeness norms different programs and curricula for understanding and awareness.
2. Institutions should aim to craft online communication guidelines that accommodate local communicative practices and reflect multilingual realities.
3. Future studies should explore similar politeness markers across other languages of the country and investigate how they function in academic settings.

VI. REFERENCES

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