

Mitigating Criticism through Digital Irony: A Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis of the Spy X Family Manga Comment Section on Shonen Jump+

Mohammad Ali

Universitas Komputer Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia

Aceng Ruhendi Saifullah

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia

Ruswan Dallyono

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

The move from print to digital manga has made new interactive spaces, like comment sections. In these anonymous spaces, criticizing the plot often results in Face-Threatening Acts (FTA). This research investigates the utilization of irony by Japanese manga readers to counteract criticism. We integrate Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) with Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory to analyze orthographic manipulation and the performativity of *yakuwarigo*, a stylized role-playing language employed to denote character types in fiction. Our data was taken from the 100 best comments from Chapters 130 of *Spy x Family* on Shonen Jump+. The results show that readers don't like to be directly criticized. Instead, they show their displeasure by changing the spelling and using fake *yakuwarigo*. This serves two purposes: it is off-record politeness to make comments about creators less harsh and positive politeness to strengthen the fandom's solidarity. Consequently, our research indicates that *yakuwarigo* has transitioned from a fictional character trait to a "pragmatic mask" for social negotiation in reality. Additionally, our research elucidates the mechanisms by which online communities alleviate verbal aggression and enhance cultural cohesion, thereby cultivating a peaceful and inclusive digital ecosystem (SDG 16).

Keywords: *CMDA, Digital Manga, Politeness Theory, Digital Irony, Yakuwarigo*

INTRODUCTION

People who like Japanese pop culture, especially manga, now mostly use digital platforms that make it easy for communicating with each other. Modern platforms do more than merely distribute content; they also offer digital affordances like comment sections that encourage people to participate in conversations. Through the lens of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), Herring (2004) suggests that this digital environment

has a big effect on the language and strategies that its users choose. In anonymous online spaces where there are no nonverbal cues, conversations about manga storylines can quickly turn into places where people argue. In this case, digital irony is an important language tool for readers to use to deal with criticism and face-threatening acts (FTAs).

Several previous studies have highlighted the dynamics of politeness and linguistic manipulation in this digital space. Ngo and Cubelo (2024) found that anonymous interactions often encourage netizens to express themselves more emotionally, which can easily lead to violations of pragmatic politeness maxims. In the Japanese digital context, Liu (2017) observed that anonymity causes users to frequently disregard others' "face," thereby giving rise to aggressive comments. Nurjaleka et al. (2021) state that to navigate and mitigate such conflicts, Japanese netizens have developed distinctively culturally rooted strategies of off-record and positive politeness. Fukushima (2024) also asserts that Japanese netizens still possess a strong desire to maintain group harmony, often by disguising criticism with humor.

One of the most prominent phenomena in the negotiation of digital politeness in Japan involves orthographic manipulation. Gunawan, Yuniarsih, and Setiawati (2024) show that orthographic manipulation (such as the use of *ateji*) is frequently used to convey emphasis and layered meaning in written communication. The other ways to negotiate digital politeness, *Yakuwarigo* (Kinsui, 2003), which is psychologically associated with specific fictional character archetypes in Japanese pop media and extensively studied as a form of linguistic stereotyping within manga or anime (Rahardjo, 2021; Kloutvorová, 2021), are also used. King, Ren, & Idemaru (2021), Rizaldi & Ali (2024), and Zahra & Masrokhah (2025) demonstrate that a character's dialect and linguistic style play a significant role in shaping audience perception.

However, there remains a striking research gap. Few studies have examined how these fictional elements are "borrowed" by real readers in their online interactions. To address this gap, this study focuses on the comment sections of the *Spy x Family* manga on the Shonen Jump+ platform. The study aims to identify forms of digital linguistic manipulation and to analyze their functions as strategies for mitigating FTA while also serving as tools for building group solidarity amid fandom debates.

To address these objectives, this study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach that integrates the CMDA framework with sociolinguistic pragmatics. The corpus is limited to the top 100 comments from Chapters 130 of *Spy x Family* to capture the dominant discourse validated by the community. The data were then analyzed based on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987) to uncover the pragmatic functions of the linguistic anomalies identified.

The results of the analysis indicate that, rather than voicing criticism directly, Japanese readers actively avoid overt aggression. They channel their dissatisfaction by manipulating orthographic conventions and using artificial *yakuwarigo*. This strategy serves as a form of off-record politeness to soften threats against creators and simultaneously as positive politeness to reinforce the internal identity of the fandom.

The main implication of this study is the theoretical demonstration that *yakuwarigo* has evolved beyond the realm of fiction, transforming into a "pragmatic mask" that is essential for real-world speakers in conducting social negotiations online. Furthermore, these findings make a positive contribution to broader issues, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. Given that anonymous spaces on the internet are highly vulnerable to violence and verbal aggression, this strategy of digital irony represents the cultural intelligence of communities (particularly Japanese fandom) in independently managing online conflicts. Understanding the mechanisms of this cultural conflict resolution is a crucial step toward realizing a globally inclusive, tolerant, and peaceful digital ecosystem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The shift in pop culture consumption from print media to digital platforms has transformed readers from mere passive audiences into active participants. In online community spaces, interactions among fans (fandom) often spark disagreements that have the potential to disrupt harmony. In anonymous digital discourse with minimal non-verbal cues, managing friction caused by differing opinions (especially when critiquing a work)

becomes crucial. Understanding how virtual communities negotiate to prevent verbal aggression is highly relevant today, aligning with the global urgency to create peaceful and inclusive institutions and social spaces (including digital spaces). Therefore, this review will explore prior literature through three thematic frameworks: the affordances of digital space, the dynamics of pragmatic politeness in Japan, and linguistic manipulation as a means of conflict resolution.

This study is grounded in the framework of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) proposed by Herring (2004). Unlike face-to-face conversation, CMDA posits that online interactive behavior is heavily shaped by technological constraints (affordances). In the absence of vocal intonation and body language, internet users are often driven to manipulate written text to represent spoken expression. However, critically, this CMDA theory requires integration with local sociolinguistics to explain why such forms of text manipulation can vary significantly across cultures.

This study also takes some sociocultural perspective. Native Japanese speakers are known to highly value harmony, which is typically expressed through indirect criticism to avoid Face-Threatening Acts (FTA) (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Haristiani, 2022). However, the literature indicates a drastic shift in behavior when speakers enter the anonymous realm of the internet. Liu (2017) and Nishimura (2019) agree that the absence of face-to-face interaction actually encourages Japanese netizens to disregard their interlocutor's "face," making online rudeness not a linguistic failure but a deliberate strategy. Interestingly, despite this high level of aggressiveness, a recent study by Fukushima (2024) found that Japanese netizens still have a desire to maintain group cohesion, often cloaking sharp criticism in humor.

To bridge the paradox between the desire to criticize and the need to maintain harmony (as mentioned by Fukushima), netizens employ linguistic creativity. One such method is orthographic manipulation, such as the use of *ateji*. A study by Gunawan, Yuniarsih, and Setiawati (2024) confirms that *ateji* is not merely a play on letters but a tool for emphasis rich in layered meaning. Additionally, the concept of *yakuwarigo* (role-speak), originally defined by Kinsui (2003) as the stereotypical language of fictional characters, is beginning to receive greater attention. Various studies (such as Maulina, 2020; Zahra & Masrokhah, 2025) have thoroughly analyzed how *yakuwarigo* successfully builds character identity within anime or dramas.

From the literature review above, a significant gap in the discourse is evident. Studies on digital politeness often focus solely on the aggressive nature of anonymity (Liu, 2017; Nishimura, 2019). On the other hand, studies on *yakuwarigo* (Kinsui, 2003; Maulina, 2020; Zahra & Masrokhah, 2025) still confine it exclusively to the realm of fiction, examining only how comic book characters speak. There has been insufficient attention to how this fictional linguistic element is "hacked" or borrowed by real-world speakers (readers) as a "pragmatic mask" to engage in social negotiation and defuse criticism online. This is where the novelty of this research lies.

In conclusion, previous literature has demonstrated that anonymous spaces render conventional politeness parameters more prone to conflict, yet internet users continue to seek ways to mitigate this. Building on the research gap outlined above, this study aims to examine how readers in the real world leverage the limitations of digital space to transform *yakuwarigo* and *ateji* into politeness strategies (mitigating face-saving threats) while fostering solidarity. This critical analysis is expected to offer new perspectives on participatory conflict management rooted in local culture in the digital age.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach that integrates the framework of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) with sociolinguistic pragmatics. The choice of this method is highly relevant and crucial because CMDA provides analytical tools to uncover how technological constraints (digital affordances) shape the linguistic structures of its users. When integrated with Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, this approach allows researchers not only to examine the textual form but also to uncover the pragmatic intentions behind it—particularly how netizens independently devise conflict-resolution strategies and maintain peace in anonymous spaces prone to friction.

Although not conducted in a physical setting, this study's observations are based on a "digital field," namely, the official Shonen Jump+ manga distribution platform operated by Shueisha (focusing on the original Japanese-language version). The subject of observation is the comment section for the popular manga *Spy x Family*, specifically Chapter 130. These chapter were selected purposively because they contain a plot twist that sparked intense debate and massive emotional reactions from readers, making them an ideal ecosystem for observing the phenomenon of face-threatening acts (FTA) and politeness negotiation.

During the data collection process, the researcher acted as a non-participant observer to ensure that the community's natural discourse remained uninfluenced. Using purposive sampling, the data were limited to the top 100 comments, resulting in a total corpus of 100 textual data points. The criteria for "top comments" were determined based on the platform's algorithm for the highest number of likes or upvotes. This parameter was established because the top comments do not merely represent random individual opinions but rather a representation of communal consensus, validation, and the dominant discourse agreed upon by that fandom ecosystem.

The data analysis procedure was conducted continuously through narrative reading. The first stage focused on identifying and classifying linguistic anomalies in the corpus, particularly those involving orthographic manipulation (such as *ateji* and visual prosody) as well as the performativity of artificial *yakuwarigo*, such as the Kansai-ben dialect. Once classified, the data is analyzed for its pragmatic functions based on the context of the utterance using the Politeness Theory framework. This in-depth analysis aims to dissect how these linguistic anomalies function as FTA mitigation strategies—whether through Off-Record strategies (comic irony/sarcasm) or Positive Politeness (the formation of group solidarity). In the final stage, a comprehensive conclusion is drawn that bridges the relationship between the affordances of digital media and the cultural intelligence innovations of Japanese society in managing online conflicts.

DISCUSSION

The research data found in the field are as follows: Based on an analysis of a corpus of the top 100 comments from Chapter 130 of the *Spy x Family* manga on the Shonen Jump+ platform, the results of this study explicitly show that the limitations of digital affordances do not restrict politeness, but rather spur sociolinguistic innovation. Instead of voicing criticism directly (which could potentially trigger cyber conflict), Japanese readers actively manipulate the constraints of digital orthography and employ lexical stereotypes (*yakuwarigo*). These findings are classified into two main pragmatic strategies based on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987): (1) Off-Record Strategies (digital irony) to soften criticism, and (2) Positive Politeness Strategies to express fandom solidarity.

Off-Record Strategies: Mitigating Criticism through *Ateji* and *Yakuwarigo*

In digital discourse, directly criticizing a storyline has the potential to become a highly damaging Face-Threatening Act (FTA), both for the creator (*mangaka*) and fellow readers. In contrast to Liu's (2017) finding that internet anonymity fuels aggressive language, the findings of this study align with Fukushima's (2024) argument, that Japanese netizens still hold a noble desire to maintain group harmony.

To avoid direct face-threatening (Bald On-Record), readers wrap their criticism in comical irony, as seen in Data 1 and 2.

1. Data 1: 普通に恨まれてもおかしくないクソ展開で草
(Futsuu ni uramarete mo okashikunai kuso tenkai de kusa)
A trashy plot development that's only natural to hate, kusa (lol).
2. Data 2:
...ぽっと出の金持ちキャラと結婚しました end とか大炎上案件やんけ (... potto-de no kanemochi kyara to kekkon shimashita end toka daienjyou anken yanke)
...marrying a rich character who just popped out of nowhere (potto-de), that'd be a huge scandal/problem, right

In Data 1, the phrase kuso tenkai (crap plot) is essentially a very direct FTA attack. However, this threat is successfully defused by the use of the digital ateji “草” (kusa / grass) at the end of the sentence. The use of kusa acts as a pragmatic marker (Nishimura, 2019) that transforms the sharp criticism into nothing more than a casual joke. Meanwhile, Data 2 demonstrates the borrowing of yakuwarigo (Kinsui, 2003) by speakers in the real world. The reader borrows the Kansai dialect (Kansai-ben) copula “やんけ” (yanke) to adopt the role of tsukkomi (the “straight man” character in comedy whose job is to deliver criticism). By wearing this “mask” of a fictional persona, criticism is expressed theatrically, proving that digital irony serves as a highly sophisticated instrument for conflict resolution in cyberspace.

Strategies of Positive Politeness: Visual Prosody and In-Group Solidarity

In addition to serving as a space for criticism, digital comment sections have also evolved into arenas for the celebration of collective emotions. Because computer-mediated interactions lack paralinguistic cues (such as tone of voice) (Herring, 2004), readers compensate by creating “visual prosody” through the manipulation of typography.

This phenomenon explicitly embodies Positive Politeness, where netizens exaggerate sympathy to reinforce the internal identity of the fandom.

1. Data 3:

ヨルさんかわいいー————
(Yoru-san kawaii————)
Yor-san is so cute————

2. Data 4:

巻き髪ヨルさん可愛いすぎる!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
(Makigami Yoru-san kawaii sugiru!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!)
Yor-san with curly hair is way too cute!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

3. Data 5:

やばい妄想が現実になった👄👄👄👄キス、えこれロイドとヨルさんの...? だよね??? もうやばい人生楽しいありがとうー
(Yabai mōsō ga genjitsu ni natta 👄👄👄👄 kisu, e kore Roido to Yoru-san no...? Dayone???? Mō yabai jinsei tanoshii arigatōー)
Oh my god, my delusion became a reality 👄👄👄👄 a kiss, eh is this Loid and Yor-san's...? Right????
Oh man, life is fun, thank youー

The absence of vocal intonation is replaced by extreme vowel elongation using chōonpu (ー) and the repetition of exclamation marks (! ! ! ! !). From a politeness perspective, this deliberate violation of standard spelling rules serves to showcase an outpouring of emotion (euphoria). Furthermore, the repetition of crying emojis (👄👄👄👄) in Data 5 functions as a digital kinesic (body language) substitute. By allowing themselves to appear emotionally vulnerable, readers actively invite sympathy from other netizens, creating strong social cohesion within the group.

Overall, this analysis demonstrates that Japanese netizens are not merely passive consumers of text. The limitations of the platform actually drive them to innovate independently to mitigate the potential for verbal violence. This ability to mitigate linguistic aggression and maintain communal cohesion in the virtual space is a micro-reflection of the values of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16. The practice of cyber-politeness demonstrated by this fandom community serves as tangible evidence that a peaceful, non-violent, and inclusive digital institutional ecosystem can be built through the linguistic and cultural literacy of its members.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The limitations of affordances in anonymous digital spaces have proven not to erode the values of linguistic politeness, but rather to spur complex pragmatic innovations. Rather than disrupting harmony through verbal aggression when critiquing a comic narrative, Japanese netizens avoid open conflict (Face-Threatening Acts) by creating digital irony. Orthographic manipulations such as *ateji* and the performativity of *yakuwarigo* (role-playing language) no longer reside exclusively within the realm of fictional texts. The main findings of this study demonstrate a shift in the sociolinguistic paradigm: real-world speakers actively represent themselves by borrowing these fictional “masks” as pragmatic shields. Through Off-Record and Positive politeness strategies, this linguistic ingenuity successfully mitigates potential friction, softens criticism of creators, and simultaneously reinforces collective solidarity and empathy within the fandom community.

The implications of these findings offer significant theoretical contributions to the fields of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) and pragmatics. This study expands the scope of *yakuwarigo* from merely a tool for constructing fictional characters to a tangible instrument of social negotiation in cyber communication. At the practical and social levels, this mechanism for preserving digital harmony offers fundamental insights aligned with the pillars of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16. This community-driven conflict prevention strategy demonstrates that a peaceful, inclusive digital ecosystem free from verbal violence can be realized through users’ cultural literacy and resilience.

Based on these implications, this study recommends policy interventions for digital platform developers and cyber ethics formulators. Rather than relying solely on rigid algorithmic moderation of profanity, content governance policies need to consider a culturally intelligent approach that recognizes irony and local sociolinguistic contexts. Furthermore, to expand the research roadmap in this field, future studies are strongly encouraged to examine similar phenomena across platforms with different algorithmic architectures (such as the more open X/Twitter) or to compare conflict resolution strategies among fan communities from different demographics and countries.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mohammad Ali, email: mo.ali@email.unikom.ac.id

Mohammad Ali is a researcher affiliated with Universitas Komputer Indonesia (UNIKOM). His academic expertise centers on Japanese linguistics and translation studies. He specializes in the linguistic analysis of Japanese comics (manga), with a particular focus on unique orthographic and semantic phenomena such as ateji and onomatopoeia.

Aceng Ruhendi Saifullah is a Professor of Linguistics at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI). His extensive research focuses on forensic linguistics, pragmatics, semiotics, and critical discourse analysis. He frequently investigates the intersection of language and law, analyzing cyberbullying, defamation, political rhetoric, and internet memes to uncover digital power dynamics.

Ruswan Dallyono is a scholar at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI) specializing in applied linguistics. His research interests encompass academic discourse, multimodal analysis, cognitive semantics, and language education. He actively publishes on rhetorical devices in academic writing, educational technology implementation, and the linguistic evaluation of instructional materials.