

A PRAGMATIC SURVEY OF NIGERIAN EXPRESSION OF POLITENESS

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ABSTRACT: *This paper investigates politeness as a pragmatic principle in the conversation venture. The paper explores the scholarly views on politeness and concluded in view of those submissions that Nigeria as a country has adopted English for use to meet its local needs. As a result, Nigerians pragmatically have developed unique and consistent ways of expressing politeness. So, the paper draws examples from actual speech situations of some Nigerians who speak popular Nigerian English in places of social interactions, uses them to show some of the strategies adopted by Nigerians to express politeness. The results of the survey shows that Nigerian ways of expressing politeness are in tandem with politeness strategies as generally postulated by scholars on the subject, thus, reconfirming politeness as a reality in most conversational discourse.*

KEYWORDS: Pragmatics, Survey, Nigerian Expression And Politeness

INTRODUCTION:

What is Pragmatics?

Pragmatics is an aspect of language study which focuses on the users of language - how humans in societies use their language in communication. Its development as an aspect of linguistics began in the early sixties and seventies when linguists began to shift their focus from the dogmatic approach of Chomsky and his followers as evidenced in the works of scholars such as Ross and Lakoff. Pragmatics seek to investigate such issues that are ignored in syntax, semantics and phonology. Any answer to what meaning is needs to be derived, or reconstructed, from the actions of language-users that are situated and embodied in particular contexts, such as cultural, historical, social, perspectival and recollective ones. Pragmatics, on the other hand, is basically concerned with how people use language within a context, in real-life situation with the utterance as its unit of analysis. In pragmatics, we study how factors such as time, place and social relationship between speakers affect the ways in which language is used to perform different function. Thus, to J.L. Austin, language is action, and much of the interactions between humans are based on verbal action like when we request, promise, swear, apologize, etc. A key distinction in methodology and approach in pragmatics is that it uses utterance (real life/actual) to draw or attribute meaning through the social force.

Morris quoted in Schmitt (2002: 75) defines pragmatics as the science of the relation of sign to their interpreters; Pragmatics does not necessarily approach language as a system per se, but is concerned with language from the perspective of the interrelationship between language form, message and user. It is, therefore, the task of pragmatics, to study meaning that linguistic expressions receive in use, to explain how participants in a dialogue grasp the meaning of words and phrases in context.

Grice (1967:89) formulated the co-operative principle in pragmatics which is effected through certain maxims a communicator is presumed to abide by such as truthfulness, informativeness, relevance and style. The methodology for doing pragmatics centers on using the social context of an utterance to assign meaning far and beyond just linguistic content. It places value on extra linguistic features such as tone, gestures, pitch, etc to attribute meaning. Because pragmatics does that, it brings to bear such elements as politeness, communicative principle, speech acts, face, implicatures, etc. Meaning here is perceived by the users of language from what context determines. For example, someone with a friend walk pass a restaurant, and the friend remarks that he has not eaten in hours. Far and beyond the semantic and syntactic meaning of that statement, here, the utterance means that they go into the restaurant and eat. So, unless the conversational partner understands the pragmatics force in the situation, there may be misunderstanding. Saeed (2007: 17) clearly puts it about pragmatics thus:

If in an investigation explicit reference is made to the speaker, or, to put it in more general term, to the user of a language, then we assign it to the field of pragmatics. (Whether in this case reference to designa is made or not make no different for this classification).

Pragmatics covers a wide range of scope to include such aspects as deixis-meaning that which points to something in general, or in its narrow sense the contextual meaning of pronouns or in a broader sense, what a speaker means by a particular utterance in a given context. It also considers the logical meaning of a sentence or the meanings that are logically connected or entailed by a sentence- presupposition. Pragmatics posits that by an utterance, a speaker not only says something but performs an act of informing, explaining, arguing, appreciating, stating, etc. A study that evolves into performatives, a hypothesis of Speech Acts which holds that a speech event embodies three acts: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary (Austine and Searle quoted in Mey, 2003). Also on the pragmatic investigation is implicature: referring to an indirect or implicit meaning of an utterance derived from context that is not present from its conventional use. The success of communication is hinted on the communicative and cooperative principles that assume that communication is made possible because interlocutors cooperate in the conversation by contributing to an ongoing discourse,

(Grice quoted in Leech 1983). Every interactant chooses to respect or disrespect how their fellow interactants feel by their words (preserve a positive face or negative face - a tendency imbedded in the politeness principle (Leech, 1983).

What is Politeness?

In naturally occurring conversations in the use of English by Nigerians, politeness is expressed in varying ways. Generally speaking, politeness, as put by Johnstone (2008:145), is “the ways in which speakers adapt (or fail to adapt) to the fact that their interlocutors, actual or imagined, have social needs like their own”. It is also “by being polite, we conserve our integrity as interlocutors while being considerate of partners’ faces... politeness is a strategy for conversational cooperation with least cost and maximum benefit to all interlocutors” (Mey, 2003:76). Still speaking about politeness, Leech (1991:79) identifies politeness as a principle in which people in the talk exchange are expected to minimize impolite beliefs and maximize polite beliefs. This means, according to Stephen and Kurt-Michael (1999:206) that

people must try to accept others the way they are, and avoid offending them, and help them preserve their face.

Nigerian Expression of Politeness

Nigerians therefore, in their expression of politeness to achieve some desired conversational outcome, adapt different strategies to show politeness. we will return to this shortly. But for now, some of these ways are worthy of mention. These include use of honorifics, indirectness, use of “can”, “would”, use and repetition of “please”, hedges, undue apologies, use of pre-sequences to minimize imposition, phrasing expressions as questions rather than assertions and statements (Jowitt, 2005).

There are different conventions about the use of politeness, as a rhetorical device, which varies from time to time, place to place and culture to culture. However, there are many, perhaps not absolutely exclusive, ways or strategies used to express politeness that are characteristic of, but not exclusive to Nigerians, as shown in the following examples:

1. A: Are you coming for the evening service?

B: Yes Pastor, I will be coming, thank you Pastor.

The situation in the above example is one, in which a pastor asks a member of his church whether the member will be attending an evening service. The member in his answer, to show politeness, answers “Yes Pastor I will be coming” and ends the answer with “thank you Pastor”. This example shows that it is characteristics of most Nigerians to use and repeat titles and honorifics at the beginning and end of utterances to show politeness. One hears more of addresses like “ma, sir, Mr. & Mrs., uncle, oga, aunty, His Excellency, Royal Highness, Doctor, honorable” etc. In a conversation, often between two people of unequal social standing, the one at lower social scale repeats the titles of the one at the upper higher scale (supposedly, superiors and subordinates at work and other social situations). All this is often to show differences and respect, especially in most formal or popular Nigerian usages of English, especially too, between “social sub-ordinates and superiors”. In Nigeria’s culture, it is considered impolite to use people’s (older people, parents, superiors etc) bare names. So, this cultural disposition reflects in Nigerians expression of politeness in their use of English. It shows lack of “culture” and respect to use peoples’ bare names in Nigeria unlike Britain and America.

2. A: Sir, will you be at home tomorrow sir?

B: You can/could come and see me

A: OK, thank you, sir.

Some of the possible implications in the above example are that it is either *A* wants to know whether *B* will be at home, or even that *A* indirectly is asking to go and see *B* at home, or even that *A* and *B* are expected to attend a function. So *A*’s question is a way of finding out whether *B* will be attending the occasion. If *B* will be at home, then he won’t be attending the occasion, etc.

However, from the situation above, *B* makes the second implication of *A*’s question, which is correct too, that *A* wants to visit him, so he says that *A* can come and see him. According to the Coorative Principle, if we take the first, second and third implications together, we can

say that *B*'s answer flouts the maxim of relevance and quality. If *A*'s question is asking for information which *B* understands but refuses to give, then *B*'s answer is irrelevant because he gives a wrong information, and in the same vain, flouts the maxim of quantity because he didn't give the information required, he gives less of the information required and more of the information not required.

However, it is supposed that *B* does so in order to maximize politeness. If *B* simply answers "yes", *A* may judge his brief answer as being impolite, probably that *B* doesn't want to talk to him, or that *B* thinks less of him, etc, hence the short, one-word answer. But by giving the above answer, he is seemed polite and co-operative. *A*'s final response "OK" confirms this. *B* means to say he understands *A*, he has recognized *A*'s social needs, he is concerned about *A*, etc.

3. *A*: Can we talk?

B: I was thinking if I could come and see you at home.

B meets *A* and tells him he had been wanting to talk to *A*, so *A* ask *B* if they could talk immediately. *B* is declining the immediate offer, and is trying to book a home appointment, but he doesn't want *A* to see it as an imposition or a command which will be impolite, so he does not just say "no, I will come to the house", but gives *A* the option of choosing to let him talk to him immediately or decide otherwise. So, to achieve his politeness goal, he uses the "I was thinking" formula with a conditional phrase to minimize or even mitigate the possible effect or consequence of the supposed decline or imposition. By so doing, he succeeds in saying something like though I would like to talk to you but I should like to do so at home. His approach will make *A* feel nice and respected because he understands *B* as giving him the option to accept or refuse *B*'s coming to his house and talking to him. Hence, by so doing, *B* expresses politeness in his approach.

Both examples 2 and 3 typify how Nigerians express politeness in their use of English. Nigerians use "can/could" to express politeness, to say something like "I am available, you are free to choose to or not to," or something like "if you want to", etc.

4. *A*: I didn't expect this from you.

B: Sorry sir.

The situation is is that *B* has put up a behavior which disappoints *A*. *A* shows his disappointment of *B*'s behaviour, and *B* answers "sorry sir." The addition of "sir" in *B*'s response shows that *B* is at a lower social status. *B* wants to be polite, he doesn't want to explain or argue or to try to justify his behavior, that way, he simply answers: "sorry sir". *B* is showing respect and politeness by regretting his behavior/actions by his answer. This is typical of Nigerians to express politeness by saying "sorry" when they want to tender an apology, make a request, show sympathy, want to be excused or gain attention/permission, etc.

5. *A*: I don't give my books out.

B: Please help me with the book to do my assignment please.

B wants *A*'s book for an assignment, but *A* tells *B* that he doesn't give out his books. *B* in trying to request politely says "please", then makes the request, and ends again with a

‘‘please’’. The use and repetition of ‘‘please’’ expresses politeness in Nigeria. It is very characteristic of Nigerians to use and repeat ‘‘please’’ to make request, give apologies, make appeals and even show sympathy, e.g., ‘‘please accept my apology’’. Sometimes, when they don’t repeat *please*, they use it with the adverb ‘‘kindly’’, as in ‘‘please kindly...’’. So, in the above example (5 above) B’s request is a threat to A’s negative face.

Other ways of expressing politeness by Nigerians are ‘‘I wish I could do better, manage it, it’s nothing’’ when people show them gratitude for their kindness. They do so to uphold the maxim of modesty and preserve their positive face, thereby flouting the co-operative principle’s maxim of quality by saying what is not true but to uphold also, the politeness principle’s maxim of modesty. It shows also that sometime, to be polite, the co-operative principle is flouted and contrary wise. There are other several examples which Nigerians use to show politeness but the ones cited above, it is hoped, to a large extent, suffice to show how Nigerians express politeness in their use of English.

Why People Need to be Polite

We use words, signs, symbols, gestures and even silence to communicate. Interestingly, each time we use any of those, we have a communicative goal we wish to achieve. To achieve our communicative goals, we need to be polite. An aspect of communication often undermined or overlooked! The right signal must be sent correctly so that when interpreted by our interlocutors, the correct response is elicited. Generally, there are certain communicative goals we always wish to elicit: ask a question, express our thoughts, ideas; make a request, commit ourselves to an action, promise, swear, apologize, etc. There is always a better way to do these: the politeness way! More often, interlocutors end up sending the right signal in the wrong manner that discourse partners interpret based on the communicative factors left open by the speaker. This gives rise to misgivings and ill-feelings.

Politeness is one concept in social interaction that could mar communication if not used appropriately. Politeness is the courteous manner that shows respect or shows consideration for other people’s feelings in speech. Politeness is a deliberate effort to save face. By ‘‘face’’, we mean the public self-image that every individual tries to project. Politeness therefore is the effort of interactants to mitigate face threats carried by other interactants in their utterances. Politeness is seen as a battery of social skill whose goal is to ensure that everyone feels affirmed in a social interaction.

The absence of politeness is what is considered often as ‘‘rudeness’’ or ‘‘boastfulness’’ or even ‘‘lack of manners or approach’’. When people carry face threatening acts, they speak in a manner that inherently damage the face of their hearers, thereby conveying that they do not care about how others feel, provided they say their minds!

In most social relationships today, the basic cause of arguments, disagreements, fights, lack of collaborative and collective effort is as a result of people speaking in manners that present them as showing the desire of being unimpeded in their actions. Such people therefore become assertive, imposing, domineering, commandeering, aggressive, dictating and harsh. They, either as a result of position or false self image, feel so important that they think everyone else should respect them. To them, why should they request, beg, appeal, persuade or even say *please* or *sorry*.

It is simply out of courtesy for a superior to say to his subordinate: ‘‘could you possibly do this or that for me?, please do this or that, I’ll appreciate if you do this’’, etc. These are

outright orders in polite manners. The subordinates know that their superiors could have simply commanded them but they chose to show regards for them; their feelings, and hence, they (subordinates) would not flout those polite directives.

When people are polite, it is easy for them to get whatever they want, because when people know that you appreciate them and have regard for them, they are pleased to willingly and cheerfully do things for you. When people, especially leaders are polite, it is very easy for them to mobilize and coordinate people toward greater and common good. When people are polite, they get respected and boost their public self image. The cause for frictions and conflicts in homes, relationships, societies/organizations is due to lack of politeness. People claim "right" and speak to whosoever they want in whatsoever way, and, they expect to be respected. If you speak to someone impolitely and s/he in turn responds impolitely, the next thing would be a fight! So, respect and politeness go hand-in-hand. They are two sides of the same coin.

We can learn to be polite and then decide afterward which is best: to be polite or impolite? What would stop one from mitigating direct orders, commands, directives, etc by choosing from a mass of polite expressions like: I wish you do..., could you consider..., can you get this/that for me?, you right, but I see it this way..., what if we look at this option?, kindly sit down, could you keep silent, I wish you could adjust..., you are so nice, but I think you'll look better if..., I'm sorry, I don't mean to hurt you but it's just that it's difficult...I wish I could do/accept that..., that's very kind of you but..., you make quite a lot of sense, but I think...,etc.

Just imagine how you will feel if people show that they affirm and accept you by according you some respect in their speech. It won't make you any important to be blunt, frank, direct and unimpeded, instead, it will reduce you; tag you rude, proud/boastful, snobbish, uncaring, mannerless and uncultured.

CONCLUSION

It is also important to note in conclusion that the above examples in the Nigerian context underscore the fact conversation is a social activity in which language plays a decisive role. Nigerian forms of politeness are so patterned in order to enhance smooth social intercourse, and in consideration for others. People try to avoid argument/disagreement by agreeing even when they really do not agree (for the sake of politeness). This means that interlocutors try to accept each other's topics, allow others to have their say and give their opinion a fair hearing without challenging or interrupting them too often. They want to make each other feel at ease, they are prepared to give full attention and are interested in what others think, agree with them as far and as often as is possible, because social harmony is only possible if there are things we can agree on (Gee, 1).

Nigeria is known for high phatic communion, so, it is Nigerians aspect of polite behavior too to repay compliments because silence is impolite and causes conversational breakdown. Most Nigerians are, particularly in showing politeness, careful as to when and when not to speak, what to talk about to whom and in what manner. This is also because the culture calls for respect for elders, etc. Nigerians try to avoid flouting the norms of smooth conversation, avoid being abusive, rude, confrontational, blunt and direct. They try to establish a common ground for social harmony.

Nigerians, unconsciously, I suppose, obey Lakoff's rules of politeness. They try not to impose on others, try to get people to do things by being polite, choosing forms of expression that do not impose on others. They give their interlocutors freedom to react. They do not get too informative so as not to be rude, and they flatter, especially in the political scene. Their forms of politeness sometimes directly contravene the co-operative principle, thereby overruling it.

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