Politeness in Language Use: A Study of Undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

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Abstract

Politeness in language is a very important aspect of communication. This can be referred to as 'tact'. Normally conversation works best if both parties are cooperative. This involves among other things avoiding speaking or behaving in a thoughtless and inconsiderate manner .We each have expectations as to how we should be addressed by the various people we meet in the various contents in which we meet them. The study of politeness is the study of the ways in which these expectations are met or are not. Politeness is regarded as the linguistic expression of social relationships. Being linguistically polite involves speaking to people appropriately especially ones' superior in the light of one's relationship. Given the importance of politeness in social interaction this paper sets out to investigate the politeness strategies students employ and to discover the extent of impoliteness among the students' with their lecturers as well as the repercussions. A non participant observation method was used to ascertain the level of the politeness strategies of students. The theoretical framework used to analyse the discourse was Brown and Levison's Politeness theory. It was discovered that there were situations where students' utterances and actions amount to impoliteness and face threatening

acts (FTA).Such behaviours often lead to frictions and conflicts. The paper concludes that for a harmonious and peaceful co-existence students must avoid face threatening acts in their language use.

Key words: Politeness, face, communication, face threatening acts, social interactions, conflict, imposition

Introduction

Politeness has become a cover term for whatever choices that are made in language use in relation to the need to preserve people's face in general. Politeness is the relationship between how something is said and the addressee's judgement as to how it should be said (Grundy, 2008).Every language has some linguistic items that reflect social characteristics of the speaker, of the addressee or the relation between them. Consequently speech which contains such items tells a hearer how the speaker sees these characteristics and misuse constitutes a violation of the norms that govern speech. According to Bussman (2006) politeness is the specific ways in which speakers as interactants perform speech acts such as requests, commands, elicitations and offers both expressing and reflecting the nature of the relationship between them.

A central concept of politeness theory is "face" which is taken to be important to individuals in both a positive and negative aspect. Face refers to ones public image. It is broadly comparable to self-esteem. One attends to the positive face by endorsing and supporting the interactant's presumed positive self-image as much as possible. Negative face occurs out of a person's need to be treated as an equal or an insider. One preserves the negative face of an interactant by impeding or interfering with his/her actions and values as little as possible. Any act that puts face wants at risk is regarded as a face –threatening act (FTA).

Politeness strategies, then, usually involve indirectness or negative politeness regarded as an attempt to save the addressee's negative face or positive politeness which aims at saving the addressee's positive face. Acts which involve the speaker in breaking away from either of these face-maintaining tendencies are known as face threatening acts. Ordering someone to do something is prima facie threatening to that person's negative face, so where other factors allow it, politeness considerations usually lead us to mitigate and minimize the degree of overt imposition. When an appeal is used the act results to a positive face. Take for instace,

> Please I am sorry to bother you, but would you mind getting me a recharge card of four hundred naira.

Positive face is reflected in numerous other appreciative conversational gambits.

Example: It was good talking to you I'm sure you will excel. Have a nice day.

One of the most interesting aspects of face and politeness and their conventional encoding in the patterns of grammar and usage associated with particular kinds of speech acts is that they differ from culture to culture and from language to language. For instance in the African culture it will be considered an abomination for a younger person to address an older person by his first name. Most often when a younger person addresses an older one as "uncle'' it does not mean that there is a blood relationship between them. It will be regarded as an insult also for a married woman of about sixty years of age to be addressed as Mrs… rather the youth can addresses her as "Mama'' whereas she is not his biological mother. This type of politeness comes out of what is regarded as solidarity face that is showing respect for ones value, behaviour or appreciation. Neither will a student address his /her lecturer by name even if the lecturer were to be a younger person. This is referred to as power face that is respect shown for ones rights. Languages differ in how they express politeness. In English phrases like ('I wonder if I could…, Can you please….) can be used to make requests more polite. Every language and culture has a way of showing appropriateness, proper mannerism and deference in language use .This has major consequences for truly felicitations cross-cultural communication. One can be near-native in ones fluency in a foreign language and yet if one does not have control of the pragmatics of politeness in language, one sounds offensively abrupt in the request or ludicrously flattering in ones compliment (Bussmann, 2006).

Linguistic Politeness

According to Richard and Schmidt (2010), politeness in language study shows how languages express the social distance between speaker and their different role relationships. It is an attempt to establish, maintain and save face during conversation which is carried out in a speech community. The Cambridge Advanced leaner's Dictionary defines politeness as "behaving in a way that is socially correct and shows understanding of and care for others feelings. Nwoye (1992) maintains that being polite is "conforming to socially agreed codes of good conduct.

Social norm view (politeness) assumes that each society has a particular set of social norms consisting of more or less explicit rules that prescribe certain behaviour, a state of affair or a way of thinking in context. A positive evaluation (politeness) arises when an action is in congruence with the norm (Culpepper, 2011). On his own part, Grundy (2008) sees politeness as the exercise of language choice to create a context intended to match the addressee's notion of how he or she should be addressed. In being polite a speaker is attempting to create an implicated context in which he stands in relation to the addressee in respect of the speech act.

Linguistic politeness involves discourse strategies or devices which are perceived or evaluated by other as having been used to maintain harmonious relations

and avoid causing unnecessary friction. Being polite involves adapting sensitively to evolving social relationships. Let us consider the dialogue between the lecturer and a course representative below:

Course Representative:	Good morning, sir.
Lecturer:	Morning, dear. Do I have lectures with you today?
Course Rep:	Yes sir and exams will start on Monday.
Lecturer:	So what?
Course Rep:	Sir, we still have……
Lecturer:	Walk out of my office, Nonsense.

In the above discourse the power face of the addressee is threatened so he feels offended.

According to Leech (1983), some illocutions are inherently impolite while others are inherently polite like offers. This view assumes politeness to be an abstract quality residing in individual expressing lexical items or morphemes without regard for the contextual factors that define what is polite in a given situation whether one is the speaker or the addressee.

It is an accepted norm that those who are subordinate must be polite. Choice of appropriate linguistic forms for directives to family members, friends, colleagues, foreigners and subordinates in this case students involves taking account of the dimensions of social status. This is the heart of politeness behaviour. Politeness involves contributing to social harmony and avoiding social conflict. Watts (2003) reiterates that for polite language usage we might resort to expressions like: the language a person uses to avoid being too direct or language which display respect toward or consideration for other. Language which contains respectful forms like sir, madam, and language which contains certain polite formula utterances like please, thank you, excuse me, and apologies.

One can therefore refer to linguistic politeness as language use that enables smooth communication between participants according to the norms of social interaction and which shows consideration for each other's feelings. Being linguistically polite involves speaking to people appropriately in the light of their relationship. Inappropriate linguistic choices are usually considered as rudeness.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this work is Brown and Lewinson's politeness phenomena. They state:

that every utterance is uniquely designed for its context. Among the aspects of context that are particularly determinate of language choice in the domain of politeness are the power- distance relationship of the interactants and the extent to which a speaker imposes on or requires something of the addressee. In being polite, a speaker is attempting to create an implicated context (the speaker stands in relation x to the addressee in respect of act y (Grundy, 2008).

In their theory they assume a "Model Person" with two kinds of face-the positive and negative face. Positive face is a person's wish to be well thought of. Its manifestations may include the desire to have others admire what we value, the desire to be understood by others and the desire to be treated as a friend and confidant.

Example: A complaint about the quality of someone's work threatens the positive face. Negative face is our wish not to be imposed on by others and to be allowed to go about our business unimpeded and with our rights to free and self-determined action intact (qtd in Grundy, 2008).

Example: Telling students that they cannot see you at the time they expect is a threat to their negative face.

Face Threatening Acts are created when an act of verbal or non-verbal communication runs contrary to the face wants of the addressee and or the speakers. For example when an addressee is criticized, accused, interrupted, insulted, disagreed with or that something he/she cherishes is disapproved of threatening an addressee's negative face include ordering, warning, advising, and threatening.

A speaker's positive face can also be threatened in acts like confessions, apologies, acceptance of a compliment and self-humiliation.

Example: If a student confesses to being involved in examination malpractice.

Analysis and Discussion of Politeness Expressions

The following discourse employed by undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka were analysed in line with the theoretical framework.

Positive Politeness

SAMPLE A:

Student: Good morning Doc.

Lecturer: Good morning Paul, how are you?

Student: Am fine, Sir

Lecturer: Is there any problem?

Student:	Sir, please I was not in class yesterday when the assignment was submitted.
Lecturer:	But Paul you know that I do not allow late submission, so you can forget about it.
Student:	Sir, please I'm so sorry. I took ill and had to go to the hospital, by the time I was through the lecture had been finished. Sir, please accept it from me.
Lecturer:	Make sure this does not repeat itself. Give me the assignment.
Student:	Thank you so much, Sir. God bless you.

The exchange starts with a greeting and an honorific - Doc to signal the power – distance between him and his lecturer before stating his reason for coming to see the lecturer. One discovers that the student in this discourse was able to make linguistic choices to indicate that social relationship. According to Leeche (1983), politeness involves harmonious interactions. He achieves this through the use of polite forms like - Sir, please, and employs the use of apology - I'm sorry in an attempt to make up for the previous action that interfered with the addressee's face wants.

SAMPLE B

Course Rep:	Excuse me, Sir
Lecturer:	Yes, what is it?
Course Rep:	Please Sir, Prof Ekpunobi is waiting
Lecturer:	Oh! Have I exhausted my time?
Course Rep:	(No Response)
Lecturer:	Okay, we see next week-9a.m on the dot. Have a nice weekend.
Students:	Thank you, Sir. Bye.

In this discourse, the utterance is uniquely designed for its context. The student makes use of indirectness in his politeness expression. The student instead of telling the lecturer out rightly that he should leave the class for the next lecturer employs an indirect means by telling him that the next lecturer was waiting and so avoids the positive face of the lecturer being threatened.

SAMPLE C

Student:	(knocks at the Professor's door)
	Prof, please may I come in
Professor:	Come in, please.

Student: Excuse me, mummy, I want to find out if our lectures with you will still hold.

Professor: Is it 12noon, already?

Student: Yes, Prof.

Professor: Am so sorry, I have a meeting with the Dean by 12 and I forgot to tell you.

Student: Ma, no problem, maybe we reschedule it for next week.

Professor: Right, Monday then, same time

Student: Thank you so much, ma. Goodbye.

In this case, the student employs deference and questioning. Deference is a distinct; it is an obligatory choice among variant reflecting the speaker's sense of place or role in a given situation according to social conventions. It refers to the respect shown to other people by virtue of their higher status, greater age, upper influences etc. By using address forms and honorifics, deference is shown. This is commonly reflected in the expressions of our students through the use of address forms: Doc, Prof, even to the extent of the word "mummy" for the older female lecturers. In the above sample, we discover questioning as a strategy which the student employs in his attempt to create an implicated context. Direct questioning is often considered rude and impolite when speaking to a person of higher social standing.

In order to be more polite, the speaker uses indirect question to know if the professor will still have lectures with them. It would have been impolite and rude if the student said; Excuse Ma, it is 12:15p.m, will you still come for our scheduled lecture?

Expressions like: *I'm sorry, Thank you, Excuse me, God bless you*, help to soften the tenor of impositions and also to massage the ego of the hearer.

Face Threatening Acts (Impoliteness)

When an act of verbal or non-verbal communication runs contrary to the face wants of the addressee and or the speaker, a face threatening act is committed. When the addressee's face is threatened or his right impinged on, it is seen as an act of impoliteness. A speaker may be impelled by the degree of power in social distance between him or her and his or her hearer to speak with a degree of unrestricted directness such as giving orders, warning, directness, advice, threats etc without any consideration for his or her hearer's face. A lecturer, for example, has the power to use the following expressions on his or her student:

"Come on, get out of my class"

"Leave my office"

"Will you close that door?"

"I don't think you will ever graduate. It is better you go and find another thing to help your life.

"Mind your work!"

A lecturer may use the following expressions without considering the student's face

SAMPLE A:

Student:	Excuse me, I saw my result in Eng 131 and you gave me E.
Lecturer:	And what about it?
Student:	I know I wrote all the assignments and quiz and I did well in the exam
Lecturer:	Look at this one, will you get out of my office.
Student:	But ma, I want you to look at my script again. I know what I wrote.
Lecturer:	Walk out; I say get out of my office now.
	(The student leaves)

The student in this context failed to make use of language choice in the domain of politeness to show the power-distance relationship between him and the lecturer. By that utterance-

"I did well in the examination and I know what I wrote".

The student had threatened the lecturer's positive face.

SAMPLE B

Lecturer:	Can I see your school fees' receipt?
Student:	"I am not with it"
Lecturer:	What do you mean by that, you will not enter the exam hall until you show evidence of payment.
Student:	But I have been taking exams and I have never been asked to produce it.
Lecturer:	I have finished with you. Stay outside.
Student:	Excuse me o oh, I am a carry-over student and this is my last chance.
Lecturer:	If you don't leave now, I will call the security to come and get you out.

Here, the student is outright rude. The tone lacks respect and there is already an existing conflict between the speaker and the addressee. The utterance runs contrary to the face wants of the addressee and a face threatening act has been committed, the language lacks solidarity and the lecturer feels insulted.

SAMPLE D

Student:	Good morning ma.
Lecturer:	Who are you? A student or what?
Student:	(SILENCE)
Lecturer:	Look at your dressing, make sure I do not see you in class again dressed like this or else I will drive you out.
Student:	Excuse ma, I don't know what is wrong with my dressing.
Lecturer:	E-eh you just don't dress like a prostitute and come for my lecturers. Do you hear me? Being an undergraduate does not mean you should dress indecently
Lecturer:	Am I talking to myself?
Student	(No response)
Lecturer:	Stand up and walk out and I don't want to see you in my class again.
Course Rep?	Where is the Course Rep? (He stands up) Course Rep get me her name and registration number. Nonsense!!

It is an acceptable norm that the student is a subordinate but notes must be taken that face is a very fragile thing which other people can easily damage. We lead unavoidably social lives since we depend on each other. According to Hudson (1980) "face is something that other people give to us, which is why we have to be so careful to give it to them (unless we consciously choose to insult them, which is exceptional behaviour. Giddens maintains that "tact is a sort of protective device which each party involved employs in the expectation that, in return, their own weakness will not be deliberately exposed to general view (qtd in Hudson, 1980).

Conclusion

In social interactions people must constantly make different linguistic choices of what they want to say, how we want to say it and the specific sentence types, words or sounds that best unite the what with the how. Correct choice of appropriate linguistic forms must be used to achieve politeness. Being on the receiving end of politeness affects both the speaker and addressee differently because polite utterances establish correct relationship between the speaker and the addressee. If we do not see the relationship between ourselves and the person who addresses us as they do, we

will be upset by the strategies they employ since these strategies imply the nature of our relationship which is the heart of linguistic politeness.

From the strategies analyzed, it is discovered that a harmonious and peaceful co-existence is achieved through the use of positive polite utterances. Impolite or face threatening acts must be avoided as they lead to impolite responses, misunderstanding, friction and conflict. It was also discovered that some students do not fully understand the correct strategies to employ in certain situations and unknowingly threaten their addressee's face. Students should try to contribute to social harmony in the university by recognizing the power-distance between them and their lecturers .Utterances must be oriented to the positive face of those they interact with.

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