

A Study of Language Politeness in Students' and Lecturers' WhatsApp Conversation: A Sociolinguistic Approach

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Abstract

The emergence of social platforms makes human communication easier without space and time limitations. The study aimed to describe the compliance to the principles of language politeness and violations of the politeness principles in conversation between lecturers and students through WhatsApp messenger. The method used in this study is descriptive-qualitative method. The source of data is from WhatsApp messages exchanged by students and their lecturers which relate to school issues. Some techniques used in conducting this research are; firstly, (1) collecting WhatsApp messages, (2) examining different messages between the two parties, (3) identifying messages related to the obedience and the violation of politeness maxims, (4) analysing the obedience and violation of the politeness maxims, (5) classifying the politeness maxims obeyed or violated, (6) making conclusions. The results of the study conclude that some conversations between lecturers and students have four obedience to the principles of politeness maxims, namely tact maxim, generosity maxim, approbation maxim and sympathy maxim. Also, there were three violations of the principle of politeness in language, namely, tact maxim, agreement maxim and sympathy maxim. Thus, it is observed social variables such as age, social status, gender, power dynamics, context, cultural context affect language politeness between the lecturers and students in the research.

Keywords: Language Politeness, Maxim, Sociolinguistics, WhatsApp, Lecturers and Students

Introduction

Language is one of the mediums used by humans in the process of communication as well as an intermediary in conveying information during interaction on social platforms. However, language is as important aspect of communication that its functions in speech is felt in intimate part of social identity that informs the way people think, experience, and interact with others. On the other hand, communication is the process where a relational process of creating and interpreting the message that elicits a response (Griffin, 2012). Importantly, human communication and socialization are not complete without the means of lingua in social channels.

Social media is a computer-based interactive platforms that facilitate easy access to, and sharing of pieces of information of various contents through virtual networks. With the emergence of internet system, social media became part of the lifestyle of Nigerian people, where people interact, and pass quick important information. The emergence and development of the internet changes the communication way in society (Watie, 2011). Today, it has become an easy, fast and cheap means of communication with large number of users. The various social media platforms like–Whatsapp, Facebook, Telegram, YouTube, Twitter etc, are where people share their feelings, ideas, thoughts, principles, culture etc.

WhatsApp as one of the social media nowadays is widely used for socializing purposes as well as for delivering messages both personally and in group discussions (Indriyant, 2023). Users

can make calls, and send pictures, messages, voice messages, and documents. WhatsApp is an internet-based application that is one of the most popular impacts of the development of information technology. Information sharing, learning and communication are made effective through WhatsApp. Users interact and communicate with each other, and can be used as a discussion forum and dissemination of learning materials, and voice notes. In communication on WhatsApp, people may choose a kind of language to pass across their message, there are also rules that govern the actions, the use of language, and the interpretation of the actions' and utterances' meaning.

Among the rules in communication, is politeness and it is found in all daily communications. Politeness plays an important role in communication. It is an aspect of interpersonal relations that facilitates interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human communication. Thus, politeness is a social phenomenon, a means to achieve good interpersonal relationships, and a norm imposed by social conventions. In social interaction politeness principle has an important aspect when people do the right thing in conversation; using proper and polite language in order to avoid conflict and misunderstanding, and to create effective communication between a speaker and the hearer. For the purpose of this research work, the focus is how to comply with the principles of politeness and to describe obedience with the principles of language politeness and violations of the politeness principles in conversation between lecturers and students through WhatsApp messenger.

Literature review

The concept of politeness

Politeness has a way of smoothing conversation, in social interactions and in specific contexts. Being polite is very important and as such creates good communication between one and others, which entails being careful in using language in communication. Dozie and Otagburuagu (2019) explained that politeness emphasises the interactant's ability to engage in conversation observing the acceptable, social and cultural norms that facilitate a hitch-free interaction. Thus, politeness is a behaviour that is expressed in a good or ethical way. Politeness is a cultural phenomenon, so what is considered polite by one culture may be seen as rude in another cultural context.

In every conversation, there are communication rules. The principle of Politeness maintains social balance and friendliness in relationships through conversation (Rahayu, Tobing and Rohal 2018). However, Leech's politeness principles consist of six maxims, namely; maxim of tact, maxim of generosity, maxim of sympathy, maxim of approbation, maxim agreement, and maxim of modesty. The principles are controlling the action, the lingual used, language used, and interpretation of the act and the speaker's utterance (Dewi, Amin, Nurqalbi, 2023). According to Widya (2017), maxim is a linguistic rule in lingual interaction, the rules governing actions, the use of language, and interpretations of the actions and utterances. The maxim is also referred to as a pragmatic form based on the cooperative principle that involve a person and another, thus, the principle of politeness relates to two conversation participants, namely oneself and others (Indriyanto 2023).

Politeness is an everyday practice in the language of most speakers. Being linguistically polite is a matter of selecting linguistic forms to recognize social status, power difference, context, age and social distance. Scholars hold the view that politeness facilitates social order, and it is a precondition of human cooperation. However, the description of the term may not be as easy as it looks, as it has become a difficult thing to give an acceptable definition of politeness in

language studies. Thus, there is a disconcerting amount of divergence and lack of clarity concerning the meaning of politeness (Meier 1995: 345).

According to Ajayi (2016), in literature, the concept of politeness has been variously expressed and explained as formality, deference, indirectness, appropriateness, etiquette, and as tact (Fraser, 1990; Kasper, 1994, Meir, 1995 and Thomas, 1995). Lakoff (1995) viewed politeness as a means of saying the socially correct thing. Nwoye (1992) described politeness as a continuing system, and anticipated socially mandatory and acceptable rule of behaviour which individuals engaged in discourse are widely informed about and are expected to perform in line with the acceptable codes of behaviour. Ide (1993) sees politeness as behaviour without friction. However, Dozie and Otagburuagu (2019) emphasize that politeness is about ‘‘interactant’s ability to engage in conversation observing the acceptable, social and cultural norms that facilitate a hitch-free interaction’’. From these definitions above, therefore, we can define politeness as mandatory social and cultural rule which elicit appropriate words and behaviour in an interaction.

Politeness and Social Variables

Certainly, politeness and social variables play a significant role in communication, factors like age, context, cross cultural communication, social status, gender, and power dynamics, influence how people express politeness and interact with each other. These social factors would be considered from the following dimensions:

Politeness and Age

Age is a cultural resource which people in a conversation exploit daily. Culturally age is an important factor in matters of language use and politeness in particular, although it varies from culture to culture. Children are expected to be polite to adults (Holmes 2008). In Nigeria it is culturally mandatory for younger people to be polite to the elders during conversation. Not just in terms of behaviour, but also in pleasantries and choice of words. In situation, utterances, sentence structures indicate seniority, respect, which in turn, signals polite language use. Research has it that interactions are governed by social relationships dominated by age. In Igbo society certain words signal difference in age between the speaker and the hearer examples are; Daada, Deede, Mama, Papa, are used as respect formula, kinship term, honorific appellation, personal name on elderly.

Politeness and Social Status

Human use language to suit their audience, culture and in different context. Politeness reflects cultural norms, respect for social status and influence the choice for address forms, as there are social dimensions that influence what is considered polite in different situations and communities. However, most people tend to express negative politeness more to those they feel are lower in social status. People adjust their language and behaviour base on the perceived status of the person they interact with. According to Holmes (2018) inter-personal relations can be characterized in terms of at least two underlying dimensions, status and solidarity.

Politeness and context

Politeness is context dependent, the level and type of politeness used in communication vary based on factors such as setting, the relationship between the speakers, the topic of conversation, the cultural background, and the purpose of the interaction. Politeness strategies are used depending on the context. People use politeness strategies in a formal setting than in

an informal setting. For instance, the level of formality and deference might differ when speaking with close friend, lecturer, boss or a stranger than when talking with a family member.

Politeness and Gender

Gender is one of the factors that influence language in the world. The major concern in politeness and gender focuses on the way women and men express politeness verbally, there are ways language can be gendered, example through use of title; “mr” use for men and “mrs” for women, pronouns; “she” for females and “he” for male, and nouns: “doctor” is masculine, while “doctora” is feminine in Spanish. Scholars are of the view that men and women speak differently, and women are more polite in communication than men. Factors like biological differences, psychological dispositions and socialization contributed to the difference. In social setting, society expects a kind of better behaviour in language use from women than men. And also to an extent, teaching and enforcement of manners as they affect talking is often considered to be the preserve of women.

Politeness and Cross-Cultural Context

The norms of politeness expressed in one culture may not be the same as expressed in another culture in cross-cultural communication, it is very important to understand the different ways that politeness is expressed and interpreted in different cultures. There are no definite concepts about politeness and ethics in a culture because every language reflects a different culture in communication (Yule cited from Nurhayati, 2014). Different cultures have different ways of carrying out their speech acts such as turning down requests, greeting, criticizing, making requests and so on. Such polite usages and behaviour vary from culture to culture, in Igbo culture speaking when an elder is speaking is considered rude and disrespectful. Mey (2001) opines that there are certain behaviours which may be counted as polite in some culture, but judged as impolite in another culture. In other words, other cultures do not express their politeness the way it is done in a particular linguistic environment, however, one important thing is that the language user must know how to express or function in the language in a culturally acceptable way in order to show politeness.

Politeness and Power Dynamics

Language is entwined in social power in a number of ways: it indexes power, expresses power, and language is involved whenever there is contention over and challenge to power (Kress 1990). On the other hand, O’ Grady, William, Archibald and Katambaet (2011) are of the opinion that power is concerned with how the participants in an interaction construe the ability of one to dominate, control or in some other way affects the other. The expression of power by a speaker may stem from the speaker’s power in terms of position, social prestige, knowledge, wealth. Holmes (2008) admits that whatever the source may be, high power tends to attract deferential behaviour, including linguistic deference or negative politeness. Therefore, one can regard deference as the respect or honour that we give or show others by virtue of their age, social status and economic status. She goes further to say that more formal address terms are frequently appropriate to superiors and to those who have more power and authority display it in a particular context, while subordinates are treated impolitely with impunity, interrupted, talked over, ignored and even subtly insulted. The power dimension is thus an important tool for analysing the politeness patterns which characterize different groups.

Research Methodology

The method used in this research study is descriptive-qualitative method. The data is in the form of written messages exchanged by students and their lecturers during conversation on WhatsApp messenger. The domain of data is a conversation between lecturers and students of department of linguistics. In this research, the interaction between the lecturer and students that consists of different conversations bothering on issue and difficulties students face will be the focus on the politeness principles. The sources of data are from three lecturers, a documentation of conversation between them and students are gotten. There are some techniques used in conducting this research. Firstly, (1) observing different conversations between the two parties. (2) Identifying utterance related to the obedience and the violation of politeness maxims. (3) Analysing the obedience and violation of the politeness maxims. (4) Classifying the politeness maxims obeyed or violated. Finally, (5) making conclusions.

Results and Discussion

Result

The results of the research on acts of language politeness on interactions between lecturers and students were studied from Sociolinguistics perspective to understand the obedience and violations of the principles of language politeness and to factor out the social variables that facilitate and affect language politeness in conversation between lecturers and students.

Obedience with the Principles of Language Politeness in Conversation between lecturers and Students WhatsApp Messenger

Tact Maxim

Data 1:

Social status: Lecturer and student

Gender: Female ; female

Time : May 24, 2023, at 16:43 pm

Place: WhatsApp Messenger

Context: A conversation is between a lecturer and a student who wants to have personal discussion at the convenient of the lecturer.

Student : Good evening ma, please when can you be in school? I want to see you for something.

Lecturer :Okay, Check me on Friday by 1 pm.

Student: Alright ma, God bless you.

The start of conversation is marked with greeting “Good evening ma” and use of pronoun “ma”, these are forms of respect and self-esteem for the lecturer as reflected in the difference in their social status, age and context. It is observed from the conversation above, the message of the student was so polite with no intention to force the lecturer, and that gives the lecturer the flexibility in answering the question with a good reply. Also, the student use of an auxiliary verb “can” in asking a question minimizes cost to the lecturer and maximizes the benefit to the lecturer. Therefore tact maxim was duly applied.

Generosity Maxim

Data 2

Social status: Lecturer and student

Gender: Female ; female

Time : June 19, 2023, at 12:02 pm

Place: WhatsApp Messenger

Context: A conversation was between a lecturer and a student, the student was asking her lecturer if she can bring her assignment to her lecturer’s office.

Student : Good afternoon ma, my name is (Student's name), your 100L student, Ma I miss your assignment. Please can I bring it to your office on Monday?

Lecturer: Which assignment? Why didn't you submit with others?

Student : LIN 151 ma, please ma I wasn't around then, was very sick and admitted in hospital that's why.

Lecturer: Alright, submit through your course Rep.

Student: Thanks ma.

In the dialogue above, the participants respect the other, the form of respect is seen reducing benefits to oneself and maximizing benefits to other parties. So both parties apply the generosity maxim. Firstly, the student applies generosity maxim to minimize benefits to herself and maximize cost to herself when she made a request "LIN 151 ma, please can I bring it to your office on Monday?" and also, the student burdened the cost of the conversation to herself by this statement "please ma I wasn't around then, was very sick and admitted in hospital that's why". The lecturer on her part shows generosity when she asks the student to submit through her course representative. From the data, it shows that students prefer to be generous in the conversation which might be due to the authority of the lecturer and the social distance between students and lecturers.

Approbation Maxim

Data 3

Social status: Lecturer and student

Gender: Female ; female

Time : July 20-21th, 2023, at 06:09 pm- 11:16 am.

Place: WhatsApp Messenger

Context: The student contacting her project supervisor to help her check her final result.

Student : Good evening ma'am....., please can you help me check my final result, I haven't seen any yet. I heard department is working on our result for Nysc.

Lecturer: Okay, try remind me tomorrow.

Student: Okay ma, thank you so much.

Student: Good morning ma'am, I am reminding you of my result thing.

Lecturer: Congratulations, (scores and grades withheld), your final year results are excellent.

Student: Wow...jezzz, thanks so much ma'am.

Lecturer: Uwc, start preparing for NYSC, you people's results are being compiled.

Student: Ok ma'am, thanks so much, I do appreciate ma (praying emoji)

In the conversation both the lecturer's and student's statement show praise to each other, the lecturer saying "congratulation,..... ,your final year results are excellent", and the student responding the lecturer's "thanks so much, I do appreciate ma", can be categorized as the use of approbation maxim. The statement from the student shows that she expresses praise to her lecturer for giving assistance to her on her results. It minimizes dispraise of others and maximize praise of others. Obedience of the maxim of appreciation is in the form of saying thank you as a form of appreciation when help is rendered, culturally appreciation is expected when help is rendered.

Sympathy Maxim

Data 4

Social status: Lecturer and student

Gender: Female ; female

Time : March 16, 2023, at 11:09- 11:16 am.

Place: WhatsApp Messenger

Context: The student contacting her project supervisor to know if the lecturer is done with correction on her project work during an election break.

Student : Good morning ma, sorry ma I just want to know if you are done going through my work?

Lecturer: Yes, I told you to proceed, continue writing.

Student: Oh okay ma, thank you. Hope you are good?

Lecturer: I am not good ooo, Buhari and Emefiele have dealt with me immeasurably.

Student: Chaii ma, I understand. I feel your pains. They dealt with all of us, hopefully everything has started gradually returning to normal, we will be fine.

Lecturer: Thanks for your concern.

In the utterance of the student above, it can be seen the student maximises her attitude sympathy on the economic situation during the Nigerian election period where stringent monetary policy affected everyone, an attitude of antipathy will be regarded as a disrespectful attitude. So, she sympathizes with her lecturer by using sentences like “Chaii Ma, I understand” and “I feel your pains”, it shows how the student sympathizes with the teacher. Furthermore, “chaii” as a word is an exclamation marker often used to express a condolence and sympathy on people, it also denotes empathy. This is to say politeness principle in language conveys an attitude of sympathy for others often express a sense of courtesy towards others. In the dialogue, the student minimizes antipathy between self and other and maximizes sympathy between self and other as projected by the utterance “they dealt with all of us”. The data show that students always succeed in fulfilling sympathy maxim although based on the context of conversation.

Violation of the Principles of Language Politeness in Conversation between Lecturers and Students WhatsApp Messenger

Violation of Tact Maxim

Data 5:

Social Status: Students/Lecturer

Gender : Male and Female lecturer

Time: Morning, August 10, 2023, 11:00 am

Place: WhatsApp messenger.

Context: In a conversation where a student demanded to see her results from her courses adviser.

Speech form:

Student: Hello ma, good morning , am in school now, I want to check my first year results.

Lecturer: I don't show result to students again, wait till the school app starts working, okay.

Student: I really need to see my result ma I need to go back by tomorrow.

Lecturer: I am not school app, the instruction is wait when it starts working.

Student: Hmmmmm

In the speech data 5, it can be seen that student's utterance appeared so rude and the tone is impolite to the lecturer when the student started the conversation with “hello ma” is an inappropriate language to use in Nigerian context when talking to someone higher than you, hello is often used in conversation between people of equal status. The second instance of impoliteness is “I'm in school now (like a control), I want to check my result” and a reply “Hummmmm”, the language reflect impoliteness and anger which is evident in his command word “now”. In the utterance, the male student did not adhere to tact maxim where he is to minimize cost to other and maximize the benefit to the hearer, this is so because of gender, linguistically men are impolite especially to opposite sex. This clearly reduces the advantage of the interlocutor and offend the interlocutor which gave rise to the reply “I am not school app”,

Data 6

Social Status: Students/Lecturer

Gender: Female and Female

Time: Morning, June 13, 2023, 13:00 pm

Place: WhatsApp messenger.

Context: In a conversation where a student want to submit her project work to her supervisor.

Student: Good afternoon ma, I have been coming to check on you, you are not around, I want to submit my project work, where do I see you.

Lecturer: Really! So I am nowhere to be found? Continue checking till you find me.

According to the statement above, the student sounded impolite as if the lecturer must be available to attend to her anytime she wants without booking appointment, this violates the tact maxim of the politeness principle, which minimizes cost to text partner and maximizes the benefit to text partner.

Violation of Agreement Maxim

Data 7

Social Status: Students/Lecturer

Gender: Female and Female lecturer

Time: Morning, August 13, 2023, 09:00 am

Place: WhatsApp messenger.

Context: In a conversation where a student was directed to meet her course lecturer over her carry course.

Student: Good morning ma.

Lecturer: Who's this please?

Student: Good morning ma. Happy Sunday

I was directed to you concerning a carry over on (course name withheld)

My name is (name withheld) Reg number 20200*****

Lecturer: How do you mean you were directed to me? Go back to the person who did the direction. Don't send a chat to me again.

The conversation above violates the maxim of agreement contained in the conversation as seen from the chat of the lecturer when she said, "how do you mean you were directed to me? Go back to the person who did the direction". Theoretically, the speech is considered impolite because the teacher failed to build an agreement with the student, even though the student adhered to the principles of politeness in language usage, this is as a result of status difference. There is use of interrogation and declarative, which shows less familiarity with each other. The role relationship between lecturer and student is so clear-cut, reason the superior (lecturer) used imperatives to the subordinate (student). The conversation fails to fulfil the principle of consensus maxim because conversation failed to mutually maximize compatibility between student and the lecturer.

Violation of sympathy maxim

Data 8

Social Status: Students/Lecturer

Gender : Female and Female lecturer

Time: Morning, June 22, 2023, 09:00 am

Place: WhatsApp messenger.

Context: In a conversation where a student was asking for a permission from her course lecturer to do an assignment she missed, while away from school.

Student: Good morning ma'am.

Lecturer: Morning

Student: Ma this is (name withheld), ma I missed your quiz and assignment, can I write and bring the assignment to you?

Lecturer: For what? Why didn't you do it when others did theirs?

Student: Ma I resumed late, my mum health was bad.

Lecturer: And you're informing me now. Go read for your exam.

There is a violation of sympathy maxim, this can be seen in the answer to the student from the course lecturer. The lecturer did not express any sympathy to what the student said, maybe due to fact students lie to curry sympathy, so the excerpt shows the lecturer's lack of sympathy for the student. It can be concluded that the dialogue above fails to fulfil the principle of the sympathy maxim because the lecturer didn't maximize sympathy and never minimizes antipathy towards the other. Therefore, the reply could be seen as a violation of sympathy maxim.

Findings

The results of the research carried out on "politeness language conversation of students and lecturers through WhatsApp messenger: A sociolinguistic perspective" are observed to have two parts to the analysis; the obedience and violation of the maxims in accordance to the principle of politeness as it relates to two conversation participants, namely oneself and others. Obedience with the principle of politeness in language is expressed in maxim of tact, maxim of generosity, maxim of approbation, and maxim of sympathy, majorly they were showed by the students to the lecturers except on occasion it was mutually expressed between text partners in maxim of generosity, students adhere to the maxim due to social status and age difference, and context. Furthermore, results show obedience to the principle of politeness create cooperative interactions between lecturers and students and also help students to have positive feelings towards them.

Violations of the Principles of Language Politeness were observed in maxim of tact, maxim of agreement, and maxim of sympathy, the lecturers were observed to violate the maxims on the ground of social status, age, power dynamics, and context. Consequently, they signal negative politeness, and can make students to run away from their lecturers.

Conclusion

Clearly, getting what one wants from speech partner requires knowledge of the rules for expressing oneself appropriately in the relevant social context. Politeness is not only a matter of paying attention to the degree of dignity of others in using language, but being culturally appropriate with language and communicating positively. The evidences from the research show that students are more obedient to language politeness through tact maxim, approbation maxim and generosity maxim, on the other hand, male students and lecturers (impolite) violate politeness principles in WhatsApp conversations between students and lecturers. This may be due to social variables such as status, age, context, gender and power dynamics, and cultural background which encourage obedience or violation of language politeness.

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