Politeness Strategies and Address System in Igbo and Isoko

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating politeness strategies in Igbo and Isoko with a view to finding out how these two speech communities handle the various strategies, honorific as well as address format in kinship relationships. Brown and Levinson's face-saving view of politeness which draws heavily from Goffman's concept face and interaction order will be used as the theoretical frame work. The researcher finds out that the two speech communities under study are both conscious of negative face and affronts to politeness, favours indirectness and off-record strategies better than bald-record strategies. Also, the speech communities use culture-specific honorific and address terms specifically in relation with parent, elders, spouses, age mates and siblings. Furthermore, it is observed from the findings that contrary to what the modern age may de-culturize people into especially in the use of first names, the two speech communities under study still maintain the inbuilt cultural respect in observing and or maintaining politeness strategies, honorific and address system.

Keywords: Face; face-threatening acts; honorific; face-saving view; politeness strategies address terms.

1) Introduction

Conversation is a basic characteristic of face to face interaction in all human societies. Conversation as a way of life is

man's second nature. Human conversation is a complex fact that demands conscious efforts of the speakers to work out intersubjective understandings, associate with one another as well as maintain strong individual and group relationships. In all spheres of life there is always need for effective conversation and to achieve it requires tact which Goffman (1974) terms interaction order. Goffman asserts that the maintenance of 'self' and 'face' is a condition for interaction in connection with the needs of 'self' and 'other' which can take the following rituals: Interpersonal rituals-avoidance; presentational rituals and institutional rituals which are social establishments that determine the construction of private and public self-image. Interpersonal, avoidance rituals are forms of deference that lead the actor to keep at a distance from the recipient. For instance, as a public figure 'self' requires maintaining distance but as a private person, intimacy is preferable. Presentational rituals are acts through which the individual makes explicit attestations to a recipient concerning how they regard them – honorific and address terms. Presentational and avoidance rituals are somewhat related to institutional rituals- social establishments or institutions people find themselves which can symbolize certain favoured aspects of self and face. Institutionally and or culturally as mentioned above assigned roles as well as physically divide self into public and private, making conversation restricted and formal or casual and informal respectively. For instance, my father being the governor of our state assumes two different selves at home and in office.

In this work the researcher's concern is to study observed politeness strategies, address terms and honorific in selected areas of Igbo and Isoko cultures to find out how these two cultures allay affronts to face needs in kinship relationships s well as how people related by blood observe politeness when addressing each other, what address terms are meant for each kinship status together with

how maintaining this conversation order helps to achieve friendly coexistence. Giving rise to what Brown and Levinson (1987) refer to as 'face-work', it is claimed that people consciously work at these interpersonal relationships.

The basis for politeness theory propounded by Brown and Levinson (1987) is Goffman's concept of face to account for how rational participants achieve interactional success. To achieve this is to observe politeness strategies and application of appropriate address terms that preserve the face of participants in interaction/conversation. Scholars have studied conversational strategies which started in United States of America by Harvey sack, an American sociolinguist in the1960s and it has grown into a sophisticated field of discourse in language studies. Different scholars have also postulated various hypothesis as well as theories in that regard such as, Leech, (1983) politeness principles or maxims; Lakoff, (1973) conversational maxim view of politeness; Brown and Levinson's (1987) face-saving view and 'first-order politeness' suggested by Watts et al (1992: 3) which explains how politeness is perceived in a given culture. Sifiano's (1999) work also shows that intercultural differences may have great impact on politeness strategies. This study therefore focuses on the politeness strategies and address terms used in two distinct cultures in Nigeria-Igbo and Isoko languages in order to find how they observe politeness conventions and address system in their kinship relationships together with how face work is enacted in the two languages.

The major data-gathering technique in this study is participant observation, recordings and personal note. These two cultures respect elderly such that it is usually expected that the younger person will always take the lead in greeting the elder one using appropriate honorifics. The researcher selected some samples

of data that best illustrate the different politeness strategies and address terms as they obtain in the cultures/languages under study.

2)   **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on politeness theory of Brown and Levinson's (1987) face-saving view which will be used to analyse and link the major dimensions of social interaction with the ways people talk with one another. Three basic notions, which are of utmost importance to politeness, are postulated in this model; and they are:

  i.   Face
 ii.   Face-threatening acts
iii.   Politeness strategies.

Brown and Levinson's model of politeness is symbolized in what they referred to as model person (MP), that:

> …consists in a wilful fluent speaker of a natural language, further endowed with two special properties-rationality and face. By 'rationality' we mean something specific- the availability to our MP of a precisely definable model of reasoning from ends to the means that will achieve those ends. By 'face' we mean something quite specific again: our MP is endowed with two particular wants- roughly, the want to be unimpeded of the want to be approved of in certain respects (1987, p.58 quoted in Malmkjaer, 2002, Mey, 2001)

Brown and Levinson argued for the universality and culture specific dimensions of face, because this notion of face appears to pervade much of the concerns of this model, it is important to emphasize more on its profound implications to the theory of

politeness; the potential of some illocutionary acts to damage the hearers' and speakers' positive and negative face, which is also called ''face-threatening acts-FTA'' and the various strategies that are applied to alleviate affronts to face.

3)   Face and Face - Threatening Acts

Face means taking into cognizance the account the way others feel when we talk to them. Brown and Levinson in developing more Goffman's work, pointed out two central themes of politeness – "rationality and face" (1987:61). They defined face as the public self-image that every model person wants to claim for themselves, and that politeness presupposes that every model person as a rational being must show awareness of another person's face during conversation.

There are two types of face, positive (solidarity face) and negative (power face) face. The first one is positive face which is the desire to gain approval from others. It is the desire to be praised, liked, admired, hailed and esteemed highly. The second one is negative face which can be considered as the desire to have freedom and not to be imposed by others. It is the basic claim to territories, personal preserve, and rights to non-distraction that is freedom of action. It is your right to your liberty, actions, choice etc. Considering politeness strategy in any community involves assessing social relationships among the dimensions of social distance, solidarity, and status. People need to understand and be aware of the social values of society in order to be considered as speaking politely

Participants should work at saving face both for self and others as well as to avoid threats to face. Our utterances therefore can contain illocutionary acts which are regarded as face-

threatening. When an illocutionary act runs contrary to the face wants of the hearer and /or the speaker, it becomes face threatening to that participant. Face -threatening acts are said to congenitally damage the self-image of the participants during conversation according to Brown and Levinson (1987:70) and to avoid to be tagged impolite, we strive to relieve them through politeness strategies.

4)   Politeness Strategies

Politeness strategies determine three contextual factors, first, it takes account of the power relations between the speaker and hearer; second, it considers the social distance between the listener and the speaker, and last, it deals with how great the face threatening act is. Generally, people determine to be cooperative in their conversation. The number of strategies people use depends on how people perceive their FTAs in every conversation according to their culture.

Words that are face-threatening need softening or relieving statement of verbal repair. Because such illocutionary acts are inevitable in conversations, people that are polite strive to soften them or use indirectness. Brown and Levinson outlined four main types of politeness strategies in order to save the hearer's face when face – threatening acts are obvious or desired. Thus:

1. **Bald on -record strategy**: In the light of this strategy, the speaker sticks to Gricean maxims of the cooperative principle as Brown and Levinson (1987:94) posit, "For our study, we can treat the bald on-record strategy as speaking in conformity with Grice's maxims." This strategy does not minimize the threat to the hearer's face; it is used when the speaker's desire to do the FTA with maximum efficiency is

more than his desire to satisfy the hearer's face (95). For instance, if one needs to use a pen and tells the boss, *Ooh I want to use your pen*. Such an approach is more appropriately used in situations where the speaker is in close relationship with the hearer, may family or close friend.

2. **Positive Politeness:** This strategy minimizes the threat to the hearer's face thus, the speaker, when applying this strategy, focuses on the hearer's satisfaction and conviction rather than on his desire to do the FTA. This strategy is not only used to redress the FTA, but also to create a kind of social and intimate relation between the hearers (Friess, 2008:115). Using example of pen lending above, the speaker may say, *Is it ok if I use your pen?* Making request this way not only made the hearer's need to be respected but equally expresses solidarity and friendship. Again, when a boss suggests that a subordinate should use his first name in addressing him, this is positive politeness, expressing solidarity and minimizing difference in status.

3. **Negative Politeness:** This strategy is the most common in use among other strategies. It is characterized by Brown and Levinson (1987:70) as ''self-efficient, formality and restraint, with attention to H's- the hearer or redressed self-image centering on his want to be unimpeded''. This strategy minimizes the threat to the hearer's face and attempts to satisfy his negative face. In demanding for the pen as in our previous example, the speaker recognizes that he is imposing on the boss's freedom, and could not help but make the request, as in *I'm sorry to bother you but I just wanted to ask if I can use one of your pens?*

4. **Off-Record strategy:** It is considered the most face-repressive strategy. In compliance with this strategy, there is

more than one possible intention so that the speaker is not able to stick himself to particular intent (Friess, 2008:116). This strategy is regarded the most indirect form of speech acts. In other words, it is practiced to perform unconventionally indirect speech acts such as hint, metaphors and ironies, Cheng and Kong, (2009:95). For example, if want somebody to help you, using this strategy, you may begin with *Are you free right now?* The hearer will take the hint and ask *can I help you?* The speaker can then go on from there to make the request.

Brown and Levinson in Wardhaugh (2006: 276) argue that in human communication either spoken or written, people tend to maintain one another's face continuously. In everyday conversation, we adapt our utterances to different situations. Among friends we may take liberties to say something casual but we may avoid saying things casually and informally that would seem discourteous among strangers. In both situations, we tend to avoid making Baldon Record. This strategy does not minimize the threat to the hearer's face; it is used when the speaker's desire to do the FTA with maximum efficiency more than his desire to satisfy the hearer's face.

5)   Politeness and Rituals

The concept of ritual is more or less present in most study of politeness, as assert Brown and Levinson (1987:43). Politeness is not only connected with constantly recurring linguistic formulae but in particular with recurrent behaviour patterns, which regulate social interaction and gain this function and significance from the specific constellations for which they are obligatory, posit Watts et al (1992:148). As a consequence, the concept of ritual is applied to a

variety of structural and thematic factors: in the dichotomous division of basic strategies of politeness in approach to rituals and avoidance rituals is Werlen (1982) view, in accordance with speech act theoretic criteria in greeting, thanking and excusing rituals or from the perspective of conversation analysis in opening and closing rituals.

However, looking through the literature, one is struck by the fact that in connection with politeness a very superficial concept of ritual is used, according to cf. Hartmarnn (1973:139); Valtl (1986:48f). Primarily this can be traced back to Goffman's influence in explaining his social psychological theory of 'face' as 'sacred thing' (1967:32). Goffman encouraged the comparison with religious rituals and hence sought to grasp the 'little ceremonies of everyday life' heuristically. It is only when one has a closer look at the anthropological literature, Gluckman (1962), Callan (1970), Leach (1976) argue that one realises why politeness can be seen as ritual beyond the Goffman paradigm and what problems this poses for linguistics.

According to Callan (1970:80), ritual represents in a biological sense, a kind of regulation, control and integration, which is transferred from the power conflicts of aggressive behaviour in the animal world to social relationships of sovereignty and territoriality.

- Rituals are fundamentally useful for the "symbolic mastering of situations", is the opinion of Hartmann (1973:139). As such, they encompass 'inter subjectively valid elements acceptable within groups and whole societies, elements which represent something 'else' in their function as a total activity'.
- On the basis of the ceremonial nature of representation, rituals also become formally fixed as action patterns valid as entities which have been completely separated from the original

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signification of the individual part and thus fulfill nothing but expressive pragmatics functions.

- The value of rituals lies in the regulation of social encounters, in the function of adaptation and accommodation by the individual to his or her community of reference and in overcoming the complexity of real factual situations by reducing them to habitual partial structures which are constitutive in helping the social actor to reconstruct and to project.

These points show that the anthropological understanding of ritual displays a number of points of contact with politeness, but must be considered with a great deal of skepticism as an exclusive explanatory framework. As the pragmatic models have clearly shown, politeness is more than a greeting ritual or a presentation ceremony, i.e., only a small chunk of it may be equated with a basic set of conventional forms that recur stereotypically. The sense and meaning of politeness forms neither lurk in the dark, nor do they have a purely ceremonial value. In contrasts to ritual then, politeness is characterized to a far greater extent by subjective variation, which may break through preconceived barriers without violating the norms and exceeding the bounds of sense.

6)   Politeness and Address System

Address terms are culture bound politeness conventions that deal with how participants call on one another during interaction. Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian linguist coined the term "addressinty" when he claimed that every utterance is "dialogic", that is, addressed to somebody (Mey, 2001:271). Decisions on the forms of address to be used for people rely to a large extent on the dimensions of formality-setting. For example, addressing your father or mother by

their first name, in the same vein, to address a lecturer on first name bases would be considered impolite. In referring to your teacher using title and surname is an expression of negative politeness-preserving the hearer's negative face, the need for their rights not to be mare or trampled upon. Again, addressing your brother as Paulo when he seats as a high court judge presiding over a case you are in attendance is an inappropriate as addressing him as your Excellency during family meeting or the like. Just imagine how odd it would be pragmatically if as students addressing our governor that is on official visit to their school by his first name.

Forms of address are derived from identity in the context, asserts (Holmes, 2008:283). Such address as Prof Ezeh, Dr Chika, Engr Umeh – title + last name for professionals; Mr/Mrs/Miss/Bro + last name for married and unmarried adult male and female respectively; your Excellency, (Mr) Chairman, My Lord (title only); Aunt/Uncle + first name (Uncle Afam) or simply first name (Okwuchukwu, John) all point to what could be considered the proper way of addressing individuals based on the social variables or roles at a particular time or space. Younger people are not expected to address adults by their first names nor would subordinates do the same to their boss. A superior may however indicate willingness to give the subordinate the freedom to address them on first name as please drop the title and call me my name.

Some titles are already stable address terms for some professionals like Doctor for medical doctors, sister for reverend sisters, prof for professors etc. Again, some honorifics like sir, madam, auntie, uncle assumed stable and sufficient address terms for some interactants pending on the social relationships that exist between the addressee and the addresser. It is not uncommon therefore to hear such expressions as auntie, pls can I ask you something? In some parts of Igbo for example, younger siblings

address their elders as dee (male) or daa (female) while most couples reserve some address terms for showing intimacy or detachment. In this study however, the researcher will show various forms of address and honorifics that are dominant for certain kinship relationships in Igbo and Isoko culture and how they speak to the strategies under review

7)   Presentation of Data and Data Analysis

Politeness Strategies in Igbo and Isoko Speech Communities
Baldon–Record:
   This type of politeness strategy is in use without any concern for affront to the addressee and so this politeness strategy must be used in situation where the speaker has a close relationship with the hearer such as mates in the family. Often, there is no mitigation or hedging politeness strategies on the part of the interactants.

1.	**Igbo**	**Isoko**	**Gloss**
i.	Kpachara anya	Ri wo ma	Watch out
ii.	Gee nṭi	Yo ome ta	Hear me out
iii.	Nye m efere ahụ	Ko me o modhe na	Pass me the plate

Positive Politeness:
   This politeness strategy is used in these cultures to make the hearer's face better and good. It also happens where there is a close social distance or intimate relationship among interactants

2.	**Igbo**	**Isoko**	**Gloss**
i.	Ahụ ọdịkwa, I chrọọ enyem aka	Ova rha aherie nu so fiobo	you look sad can I help you

ii.	Meere m ihe	fio obo ha ko me	Do me a favour
iii.	Ị chọkwuo ọzọ, I nwere ike iwere ya	Ru re we who ofa	finish and get another one
iv.	Ọ bụrụ na ọ ga-amasị gị, m bịa	me te fi ti ya zu ogbe diha we	I will just come if you don't mind

Negative politeness:

Negative politeness exists in Igbo an Isoko cultures. It happens when the speaker imposes his will on the hearer. When a father, mother, uncle/aunt addresses a younger family member, negative politeness strategy is observed. Also, it can be observed when elderly relations talk to one another.

3.	**Igbo**	**Isoko**	**Gloss**
i.	Ebee ka ụlọ John dị biko?	Ohese uwho John o ro?	Where is John's house?
ii.	I nwere ike iwetere m akwụkwọ ahụ?	Whe se re obe na ze?	Could you pass the book?

Address System:

There are linguistic items that used to refer to or call the attention of addressees in face-to-face interaction. They are usually used by speakers to appeal to or designate addresses while interacting. Address terms are important linguistic items in Igbo and Isoko languages which encode the social status of interactions and the relationship that exists between the addressee and the addressor. These linguistic items appear in various forms in kinship relationships.

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4.		**Igbo**	**Isoko**	**Gloss**
	i.	Dibụlọ	Uzo me	My head
	ii.	Nwunye m	Aye me	My wife
	iii.	Onye be m	Aye	My woman
	iv.	Nne	Inene	Mother
	v.	Nna	Baba	Father
	vi.	Deede	Oniat oseme	Uncle
	vii.	Daada	Orievo orime	Aunt
	viii.	Nwa nwanne m nwoke	Omete orievo oseme	Nephew
	ix.	Nwanne m nwoke	Onirvo omoza	Brother
	x.	Nwanne m nwanyị	Onievo omote	Sister

In respect to age, in Igbo and Isoko cultures, the practice is to avoid calling older person by name both in family and in the wider community circle.

8) Discussion

It is seen from the above data that the Igbo and Isoko cultures share similarities in the enactment of politeness conventions distinctively in kinship terms of address and how they avoid face threatening acts. For instance, in Igbo and Isoko respectively, we have ***Ahụ ọdịkwa, Ị chọrọ enyem aka*** : ***Ovo rha aherie nuso fiobo onirvo*** 'How are you, do you need assistance'. Unlike in some cultures where first name bases are dominant in addressing parents and elders, the Igbo and Isoko languages reserve special address terms that do not only relieve face affronts but also accord respect to individuals based on the roles they have assumed in the cultures under study, As in ***Deede, gee m ntị*** : ***Oniat oseme yo ometa*** 'Uncle,

hear from me' in Igbo and Isoko respectively. It shows that kinship bonds are very strong and thus members approach others with some kind of deference to avoid undue imposition and make interaction more harmonic, as in Igbo and Isoko respectively ***Nwanne m nwoke, kpachara anya*** : ***Onirvo omoza ri wo ma*** 'My brother, be careful'. It is apparent that in addressing parents, children do not use bald-on record strategy. Parent-child relationship may be more appropriate in this instance where children either drop hints of illocutionary acts to achieve uptake from their parents or minimising imposition by relieving with some tag questions or be direct when they know that the directness of the illocutionary force will be of benefit to the parents as in, where is John's house in a situation where knowing John's house takes precedence over all other consideration because of the expedience of the situation. Bald on-record politeness strategies are mostly paramount among siblings and peers such as cousins, nieces and nephews.

An interesting part of this analysis however is the address terms of spouses. Where wife uses such honorifics as "my head/master/head of my house" for the husband and the husband seems to give the wife more condescending terms as "the person of my house, my woman in both cultures.

Therefore, in conclusion, politeness and address system are significant factors of human interaction, as no rational person may want to infringe on another's face. Face is a mask that should not be damaged in interaction and any such damage especially among people who share same kinship relations may lead to rancour, discord as well as interpersonal misunderstanding. Therefore, for human interaction to flow smoothly, illocutionary acts that threatens face should be relieved and more indirectness employed in human interactions.

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