

## Politeness and Impolite Strategies in the Language use among the Undergraduates of Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka Chinwe Udoh

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper examined the uses of politeness and impolite strategies in the language of conversation of 400 level students of the departments of Theatre and Film Studies, Religion and Human Relations and English Language and Literature of Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Using Brown and Levinson theory of politeness, the researcher used participant observation and tape recording as a source of data collection through random sampling. The data were analyzed using qualitative approach. The findings of the study showed that students used all the four politeness strategies- off-record, positive, negative and bald-on record politeness strategies- appropriately. The study also revealed that bald-on record strategies are mostly used with friends and mates and that the “face” of students are threatened in conversations between friends and lecturers.

Keywords: Politeness, Impolite, Strategies, Language use and Undergraduates

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### INTRODUCTION

Language is a powerful means by which human beings communicate their thoughts, give orders or suggestions or ideas and for every other interactional purposes. It is used to bind people and to serve as a means of identification. Language is used in context, which aids in interpreting the meaning underlying the language use [1,2,3,4,5]. Language is viewed as a tool for accomplishing specific ends; an instrument to achieve things. Thus, Holtgraves asserts that “to ‘use’ language is to perform an action, and it is a meaningful action, with consequences for the speaker, the hearer, and the conversation of which it is a part [6,7,8]. The aspect of linguistics which studies language as used in context is pragmatics. Pragmatics is the study of language use in contextual situations. For Yule, pragmatics is “the study of the ‘invisible’ meaning, or how we recognize what is meant even when it isn’t actually said or written”[9,10,11,12]. For

Igwedibia, pragmatics is concerned with how people use language within a context, in real-life situation (90). In the use of language to communicate, people use certain linguistic items or terms to make others feel good [13]. The term which is used to refer to the act of making another person feel good or not offended is technically called politeness. Politeness, according to the Oxford Advanced Learners, Dictionary, 9<sup>th</sup> edition, refers to having or showing goodmanners and respect for the feelings of others [14,15]. Politeness is defined as showing concern for people’s ‘face’ [16,17]. For Holtgraves, politeness is a technical concept, a theoretical construct invoked as a means of explaining the link between language use and the social context. Hence, politeness is an interface of linguistics, social and cognitive processes [18,19,20]. Politeness in language is showing consideration for others [21,22,23,24,25].

### OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study aims at unveiling the various politeness and impolite strategies which Nigerian users of the English Language, specifically the undergraduates of

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, utilize in their interactional discourses as they are faced with situations that demands politeness on their day-to-day activities.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent do the undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, use various politeness strategies?
2. In what manner do the communications of undergraduates pose impolite or face

Conceptual Framework  
Politeness

When people speak with consideration of how others would feel is described as politeness; linguistic politeness. The concept of politeness has been given definitions from different angles by scholars and linguists reflecting its significant importance. Politeness is an important and essential reason for modifying the blatant imposition of one's wishes on others (Holmes and Maria 3). They went further to say that politeness is treating others with consideration (6). Leech opines that politeness is a form of communicative behavior found very generally in human languages and among human cultures (3). Politeness in an interaction is the means employed to

show awareness of another person's face (Osisanwo 102). For Yule, politeness is "the means employed to show awareness of another person's face" (60). According to Holmes, being polite or applying linguistic politeness means selecting linguistic forms that express the appropriate degree of social distance or recognize relevant power or status difference (270). The linguist further adds that being polite involves taking account of the feelings of others (281). Thus, politeness is being courteous and showing consideration in other not to hurt an addressee's feeling, especially in conversations.

Forms of Politeness

Being polite in language has ways of its manifestation. The different forms of politeness in interactional discourse include: Verbal Hygiene: like the name implies, this is simply the act of being clean or hygienic linguistically. This term was coined by the linguist Cameron Deborah in the 1990s. Verbal hygiene attempts not to offend people with language use. Instead of describing people as disabled or deformed and also exclusion of people through language, this concept intervenes for correctness by criticizing the word choices. Verbal hygiene employs the use of euphemism and neutral terms in recognizing and minimizing the face threats to addressees. Instead of referring people as short, ugly, and dumb, verbal hygiene posits the use of vertically challenged, cosmetically different and intellectually challenged persons respectively (Holmes 333-334). Verbal hygiene also advocates for the use of neutral and inclusive language as: chairperson, domestic staff, firefighter and founders instead of chairman, housemaid, fireman and founding fathers, for instance. Verbal

hygiene helps reduce friction in conversation and maintain hearers' face. Address Terms/Forms: this refers to the words, phrases, titles or their combination with which people are addressed in any society. Address terms is socio-culturally determined, that is it varies with cultures. Address forms are markers of the extent of relationship of familiarity or unfamiliarity between interlocutors. Ezeifeke opines that address terms are "culture-bound politeness conventions that deal with how participants call on one another in the course of talking to them" (130). The dimensions of formality determine the forms of address. Kinship profession such as auntie, mummy, grandma, bro etc. honorifics such as king, emperor, prof (professor), doc (Dr.), comrade (Comr.), etc.; pet names such as darling, baby, sweetheart; marital status such as Mr., Mrs., Miss, Ms. etc. are instances of address terms in other words address terms addresses people by the first names (FN), last name (LN), title only, title and last name (TLN) and kinship terms.

### Factors Affecting Politeness

Generally, there are factors that contribute to the level of politeness in discourse among conversationalists. Such factors include:

**Relative Age:** the differences in age between conversationalists determines the extent of politeness. For instance, when two adults are in conversation the level of politeness therein is less than when a child talks to an adult because the child would use politer linguistic items.

**Solidarity and Social Distance:** this refers to the level of closeness or familiarity or unfamiliarity between interactants or conversationalists. This contributes to degrees of politeness. Familiarity uses less of polite terms while unfamiliarity uses more of polite terms.

**Rank of Imposition:** this refers to the level of urgency, difficulty/challenging or importance of a situation. The speakers give no consideration to the terms of politeness used because of the desperation to reach out to the hearer(s).

**Degree of familiarity:** the context of situation is a determinant of the manners, styles, tones, diction used by speakers. A formal context will demand more of politeness while an informal situation calls for less form of politeness.

**Relative Status:** this refers to the relationship between conversationalists that shows power, rights and authority. It is usually between persons of different personality, say a superior and a person of a lower status.

### Impoliteness

The concept of impoliteness trailed after the model of politeness propounded by Brown and Levinson in 1987. "Impoliteness is clearly a salient form of social behavior in the sense that it appears to go against the cannons of acceptable, appropriate behavior operative for the ongoing social interaction" [14]. According to [17] as quoted in Culpepper impoliteness is "behavior that is face-aggravating in a particular context" [18]. It refers to "communicative situations where the speaker's purpose is to damage a hearer's face rather than softening face threatening acts" [19]. Impoliteness always involves emotional consequences for the target (victim) [20]. Jonathan Culpepper distinguishes five super-strategies by which impoliteness can be created or received. They are: Bald-On

**Record Impoliteness:** this is when the speaker's deliberate intention is to attack the audience's or addressee's face. **Positive Impoliteness:** this strategy is used for the purpose of damaging the hearer's positive face want, to be accepted or stay connected. **Negative Impoliteness:** this strategy is used to attack the hearer's negative face want. This is achieved through the use of frightening, scorning and ridiculing others. **Sarcasm or Mock Impoliteness:** is the usage of politeness strategies in an insincere way in doing or performing face threatening acts FTA which is for the purpose of damaging the face of others. **Withhold Impoliteness:** this strategy is used when the speaker does not perform politeness where it is expected.

### Types of Impoliteness

There are three types of impoliteness proposed by Culpepper. These types share the function of contradicting interpersonal relationships, identities and social norms. They are: **Coercive Impoliteness:** this is a type of impoliteness that is seen when the speaker gains power on the hearer through language (e.g. Keep quiet!).

**Affective Impoliteness:** occurs when the speaker exposes his/her anger towards the hearer and this results in a negative atmosphere between the participants. **Entertaining Impoliteness:** arises when the speaker pokes fun at the addressee and utilizes the target's feeling to obtain amusement.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

## Presentation of Data

Data collection refers to the gathering of specific information which are aimed at proving or refuting a fact or facts arising from the research process. Information were gathered through a primary source with the use of participant observation and also the use of tape recorder. The sources of the data collected for this

study are classroom conversation/ friends chitchats of the 400l students of the English Language and Literature, Theater and Film and Religion and Human Relations Departments of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The conversation comprises student-student interactions and student-lecturer interactions.

## Data Analysis

This is the evaluation of data using analytical reasoning to examine each idea with the aim of drawing conclusions about that information gathered. The data collected will be descriptively analyzed using the following interactional discourse situations:

- a. A turn taking interaction between lecturers and students with the researcher as an observer

- b. A turn taking interaction between students with the researcher as an observer
- c. A turn taking interactional conversation among two participants and a sudden appearance of a third person with the researcher an observer in participation

## Research Question One:

To what extent do the undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, use various politeness strategies? A

RECORDED CONVERSATION BETWEEN TWO STUDENTS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE DEPARTMENT

## Conversation One: Part A:

Student 1: Hey Oma!

Student 2: Babe, what's up?

Student 1: Good. Still on your project?

Student 2: Yes, that's right, what about you?

Student 1: I am still on it too. What chapter are you in?

Student 2: I'm done with chapter one and I've submitted to my supervisor.

Student 1: Nice. Who's your supervisor?

Student 2: Miss Nweke.

Student 1: Who's that again?

Student 2: Speech writing.

Student 1: Oh! That young beautiful lady?

Student 2: Yes

Student 1: Ok.

## Conversation Two: Part A:

A RECORDED CONVERSATION BETWEEN FRIENDSA 400L STUDENT OF ENGLISH DEPT. AND 400L STUDENT OF THEATRE

AND FILM STUDIES DEPT. AT THE PIT THEATRE, THE FACULTY BUILDING

STUDENT 1: Hey! Kizito! (smiles) How far?

STUDENT 2: Hey Jenny! I'm fine. What are you doing in our rehearsal venue?

STUDENT 1: I just came o! You *nko* (what about you)? You came to rehearse too? (smirks)

STUDENT 2: Yes, oh! It is our practice. Not yours. (They both laugh)

STUDENT 1: Okay o!

## Conversation Three; Part A:

A RECORDED CONVERSATION BETWEEN  
TWO THEATRE AND FILM DEPARTMENT  
STUDENTS IN CLASS

:

Student 1: Excuse me, let me go inside.

Student 2: Go where?

Student 1: I want to go inside and sit down.

Student 2: No, you can't.

Student 1: Why?

Student 2: Two persons are in this little space. So you can't sit here.

Student 1: Okay (leaves)

Student 2: Yes

## A Analysis

As it could be seen in the first conversation of Part A, the students made use of off-record politeness strategy in the use of the word "speech writing" which is a hint (sub-strategy) to help the addressee in easy comprehension of the person the speaker is making reference to. Also, there is the use of positive politeness as in the student's use of "How far?" as an in-group language, which is used as linguistic items for greeting. In the second conversation, it is evident that the students applied positive politeness strategy as a form of involvement or solidarity. The sub-strategies include the use of address terms of presuppose familiarity where the students used their

first names as in "Kizito" "Jenny", and also in their in-group language in their form of greeting "How far?" and "nko" (what about you?). In the third conversation, it could be seen that the students applied both bald-on-record, negative and positive politeness strategies. Instances of doing FTAs baldly include the use of: "Go where?", "No, you can't." Positive politeness is evident in the student's use of "Why", which is a positive politeness strategy to ask for (or give) reasons. Negative politeness strategy could be seen in the use of "Excuse me...", as a way of deference; not to intrude.

## Research Question Two

In what manner do the communications of undergraduates pose impolite or face threatening acts? A CONVERSATION

BETWEEN A LECTURER AND A STUDENT IN CLASS ROOM BOTH IN RELIGION DEPARTMENT

## Conversation One: Part B

Lecturer: Hey you! Can you tell me the story of the movie, *Lucifer*?

Student: I don't know it.

Lecturer: You will tell us because you have watched it. (moves to the front of the class)

Student: (kept silent and after a while says) Can I sit down now?

Lecturer: (silence for a while) No, because you didn't answer my question.

## Conversation Two: Part B

Lecturer: Let's take some more topics because we do not have much time left before exam starts.

Student 1: No! Your time is up!

Student 2: We have another class.

Lecturer: So I should leave?

Student 1: Yes, Sir...

Lecturer: No problem. Read up the remaining parts and see you on exam day (leaves).

## B Analysis

In this interactional discourse situations above, it could be seen that the student avoided to use the right strategy in the appropriate context which brought about threat to face of the addressee. The

student when baldly and ignored the use of redressive politeness strategy in that context. The use of "I don't know it" and "Can I sit down now?" appeared face threatening whereas the context

demanded the use of redressive politeness strategies most particularly to show the distance between the speaker and hearer. In the second conversation, the student also avoided the use of redressive politeness strategies which

acted as a threat to the face of the hearer. Thus, the student went baldy in their utterances: "No! Your time is up!" (an imperative) and "We have another class" (being direct), which are face threatening to the addressee.

#### FINDINGS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

##### DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The data that were presented and analyzed in above in this research paper examined the diverse ways students utilize the different politeness strategies-four politeness strategies according to [13], in their language usages in any particular socio-cultural or contextual discourse situations, here, the school context is used. This study revealed that each and every one of politeness strategy requires different context of use for appropriateness and frictionless interactional discourses. The inappropriate utilization of a politeness strategy in a wrong context can be face threatening to the hearer, whereas the right application of correct politeness

strategy in appropriate socio-cultural world saves the addressees' faces. The findings of this study carried out by the researcher are: [1] The students employ all the four politeness strategies- off-record politeness strategies, positive politeness strategies, bald-on-record politeness strategies and negative politeness strategies- in their interactions as the context demands [2]. The students adopt bald-on-record strategies in conversations mostly with their friends and mates [3]. The study established that student's face is threatened during their interaction with their friends and in conversation with lecturers/staff.

##### CONCLUSION

The term politeness is very prevalent in linguistic usages in virtually all cultures. It could be seen as the act of organizing and expressing actions through language in such a way that the language is courteous, inoffensive and conforming to the existing social expectations in order to produce cooperative interactional discourses. It could be seen also as the speakers' consideration of the feelings and public self-image of others or

addressees. According to Holmes, being polite involves taking account of the feelings of others and being polite and applying linguistic politeness means selecting linguistic forms that express the appropriate degree of social distance or recognize relevant power or status difference [9]. For Osisanwo, politeness is a means employed to show awareness of another person's face [12].

##### RECOMMENDATIONS

Students need to be aware of the various forms of politeness to employ in their usage of language in any interactional discourse situation. It is against the backdrop of inappropriate use of politeness that this study on strategies and forms of politeness among undergraduates was carried out. Therefore, the recommendations given below become paramount in order to have frictionless conversation:

1. Students should keep abreast with the different politeness strategies and apply them appropriately.
2. The introduction of pragmatics as a course in all the departments of universities in Nigeria as pragmatics is the study of language in context of use and everyone uses language.

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