

POLITENESS IN SERVICE ENCOUNTERS: A STUDY OF NIGERIAN PIDGIN

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Abstract

The study identifies and describes politeness strategies in Nigerian Pidgin service encounters. The study applies descriptive qualitative research. Data was collected in Warri, a cosmopolitan city in Delta State, Southern Nigeria from six service encounter settings: restaurants, hair dressing saloons, fuel stations, boutiques, market stalls and supermarkets. It is in the form of recorded conversations between service providers and their customers. Seventy service encounters were observed. The data was then transcribed and different realizations of politeness strategies were identified and described using Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson's model of politeness. The study shows that the most frequently used strategy is the positive politeness strategy of greeting while the least used are seeking agreement and promises. For negative politeness, deference strategies constitute the most used strategies while apologies are the least used.

Keywords: Politeness, service encounters, Nigerian Pidgin, positive politeness, negative politeness

Introduction

Politeness is a culturally defined phenomenon which can be described as the application of good manners in social interaction. It involves taking account of the feelings of others

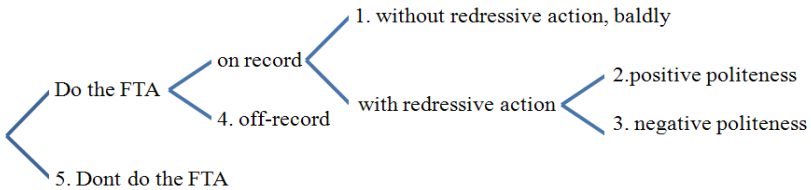
and making them feel comfortable. Kuang, Lau and Ang (2012) believe that politeness is a key element in service encounters particularly from service providers as they are the first line of people meeting prospective customers.

Politeness phenomena have become a fruitful field of linguistic research over the last three decades. Studies have dealt with a broad range of issues such as the universality and culturally specific nature of linguistic politeness (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2006.), gendered politeness practices (Brown, 1980; Holmes, 1995; Lakoff, 1975; Mills, 2000, 2003) and the concept of face in the interaction of cultural, social and regional groups in a variety of contexts (Bailey,1997; Callahan, 2006; Kidwel,2000).One area that has received little attention in the field of politeness is the examination of politeness strategies in Nigerian Pidgin service encounters. It is this gap in knowledge that this study intends to fill. Although the data contains instances of impoliteness, this study focuses on politeness alone.

Theoretical Framework

The particular model to be adopted for this study is that proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Their theory revolves around the following aspects: face, face work and acts that threaten face, sociological variables influencing face threat, and five general ways or super strategies of counterbalancing face threat with specific linguistic strategies. Their notion of face consists of two opposing wants: (i) negative face, the want that one's action be unimpeded by others, and (ii) positive face, the want that one's wants be desirable to others. To them, the amount and kind of politeness that is required for a certain conversational activity is determined by the 'weightiness' (the serious of the offence) that doing the act may cause. They suggest two main strategies –positive politeness strategies and negative politeness strategies-realizable in linguistic forms to

satisfy the two face needs. Positive politeness strategies function to satisfy the positive face needs while negative politeness strategies satisfy negative face needs of conversational partners. Brown and Levinson argue that their concept of politeness is universal.



(Fig. 1: Possible strategies of performing FTAs (Brown and Levinson, 1987)

Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative design. The data consist of a corpus of audio-recorded service encounters taken from a variety of interactional contexts. The service encounters last from 2-5 minutes and the data collection period is six months in total. During the data collection process, seventy service encounters are observed. The participants who were recorded for this study consist of adult Nigerian Pidgin speakers from different walks of life.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The data was coded and classified according to the categories of positive and negative politeness by Brown and Levinson. For positive politeness, the data reveals twelve strategies for positive politeness and three strategies for negative politeness. This is seen in Table 1 below. The frequency distribution of these strategies can also be found in the table. It shows that the

greeting strategy is the most frequently (23 times: 32.86%) used, followed by Give gifts to Hearer/Thanking (7times:10%). The data also shows that interlocutors also used in-group identity markers or language to enhance solidarity. This was used (20) twentytimes (28.57%). The least frequent positive politeness strategies used are Agreement, Assert knowledge of hearer’s wants and Promise (2.86%, 4.29% and2.86% respectively). For negative politeness , only three negative politeness strategies are identified with the most frequent strategy being the use of deference strategies(56.60%) while the use of the apologize strategy constitutes the least(15.09%).

POSITIVE POLITENESS			NEGATIVE POLITENESS		
Strategy Type	Number	Frequency/ Percentage	Strategy Type	Number	Frequency/ Percentage
Greetings	23	32.86	Deference/ Honorifics	30	56.60
Seeking agreement	2	2.86	Minimizing the imposition	15	28.30
Assert knowledge of hearer’s wants	3	4.29	Apologize	8	15.09
Give Reasons	4	5.71			
Give gifts to Hearer/ Thanking	7	10.00			

Notice/ Attend to H's interest	4	5.71			
Promise	2	2.86			
Small Talk	4	5.71			
In-group identity markers.	20	28.57			
Joke	1	1.43			
Total	70	100.00	Total	53	100.00

Table 1 Distribution of Positive and Negative Politeness Strategies

Positive Politeness

Notice/Attend to H's Interest

This strategy suggests that speaker is to take notice of the addressee's condition, physical changes or states as well as the physical items he/she has in his/her possession. This is seen in the conversation below:

Example 1(At a fuel station)

SP: Mama. You no drive? Na Keke you enter? You don tire to drive?

CUS: Yes o. Driving tire me.

Promise

Brown and Levinson(1987,p.125) state that promises “claim that whatever H wants, S wants for him and will help him to obtain it,” so as to “illustrate S's good intentions in satisfying

H's positive-face wants". An example is seen in Example (2) where the hair dresser promises to improve the quality of her customer's hair.

Example 2(At the hair dressing saloon)

SP: After this one, she go braid hair. I go stretch am. She no go retouch the hair.

Some time, even you go surprise when you see the hair. You sef go regret wetin make you retouch your hair.

The statement above shows that the speaker (i.e. the hair stylist) has acknowledged that a particular customer wants to improve her hair quality and promises that the treatment she recommends will satisfy this want.

Greetings

In the Nigerian society, greeting exchanges are mostly initiated by the younger people to older ones or by lower status people to higher status ones. In a context involving equals, either party could greet first. The opening sequences of most interactions in the data are characterized by greetings as seen below:

Example 3 (At a supermarket)

SP: Welcome ma .Wetin you want?

CUS: Give me Lady soap

In this example, the service provider initiates the greeting by welcoming the customer to her shop. This is common in service encounter settings and each instance of the greeting gives face support to both parties. Besides acknowledging the presence of other people, greetings can also be used to establish rapport before moving to on discuss major issues. Other greeting terms

found in the data are the use of “How now? “How far?” “Welcome” and ‘Welldone” by interlocutors.

Seek Agreement

This is done by choosing a safe topic or by finding aspects of a topic that can be agreed upon. For instance, if the speaker does not agree or approve of some aspect of an action, or the action as a whole, he/she finds something in it to agree upon.

Example 4(In a salon)

SP: I wan make your natural hair come out. After all, you dey use weave on cover am. Shey you hear?

In the utterance above, the positive face redress manifests itself in the structure of the utterance. First the problematic hair issue is introduced. The utterance ‘After all, you dey use weave on cover am’ is face threatening since it may cause the customer some inconvenience .However, the threat is mitigated by the following expression ‘Shey you hear?’ to further persuade the customer .

Give Gifts to Hearer

Discourse participants appreciate one another and show gratitude for something done. The commonest form of appreciation is “Thank you’ as seen in the example below:

Example 5(In a boutique)

CUS: How much for dis shirt?

SP: One thousand eight hundred naira.

CUS: No o.

SP: How much you get?

CUS: Plus dat jeans give me two thousand, five hundred naira.

SP: Ha, you wan drive me from market.

CUS: Give me one thousand, five hundred for the shirt, the jeans, two thousand.

SP: Bros na two thousand, eight hundred I get last.

SP: Oya give me three thousand because I know you.

CUS: Ok, thank you bros.

Assert Knowledge of Hearer's Wants

Example 6(In a market stall)

SP: Mummy, see this one. Na this type all the students wey wan do practical dey buy

CUS: The shine shine for the material too much. E go dey gum person bodi.

SP: No, dis na the original. E no dey fall comot o. Na as e be e go be.

CUS: As e be so na how much?

SP: Seven fifty ma.

Sympathy

This is subsumed under Brown and Levinson's strategy 15 'Give gifts to H'. According to them 'a speaker may satisfy H's positive face wants to be liked, admired, cared about and listened to'(129) . This is illustrated in the following conversation:

Example 7(In a restaurant)

CUS: Salt too plenti for the Egusi soup. Na manage I manage take eat am.

SP: Eh sorry o, Mesef I no dey add plenty salt for my soup apart from when I steam de meat. E be like sey na my children add over salt for de meat'

Give Reasons

By adopting this strategy, the speaker lets the hearer know why he/she wants what he/she wants, so that the hearer can see that the potentially face-threatening act is actually reasonable. Accordingly, the speaker assumes that the hearer has no good reason not to cooperate.

Example 8(In a hair dressing saloon)

SP: I like dat one pass

CUS: E dey different. Make I see am

SP: I like dis one pass. Na im plenty pass.

CUS:E no mean anything for woman head.

SP: E mean o. As woman, you must buy the weave-on weydey in vogue

CUS: I beg sell for me. I no wan de one wey dey in vogue and the wan wey de on board.

SP: Abeg go jo. Wetin you know. Buy wetin I show you.

In the example above, the reasons in the data are oriented toward the positive face of the addressee by presupposing his/her wants

and needs. In the dialogue, we can clearly appreciate the persuasive function of language as the speaker tries to win her customer over.

Small Talk

Another strategy of positive politeness referred to by Brown and Levinson as ‘making small talk’ is attested to in the data. The main function of making small talk before actually saying what one wants to say is to ‘avoid intruding on the hearer, for to intrude on the hearer would be to violate one of the implicit contractual terms of conversation’(Adegbija, 1989,p.3). Such small talk functions as a mediator between the speaker and his /her actual message and the hearer; it purposefully fills the gap, thereby reducing the abruptness proceeding directly to one’s message. This is seen in the conversation below:

Example 9(In a medicine store)

SP: Madam, good evening. You wan buy sometin?

CUS: Ehh. Good evening.

SP: Long time I neva see you. Where you dey now?

CUS: I travel before.

SP: Welcome. How dat side?

CUS: Fine. You get antibiotics

In this example and similar ones in the data, the use of small talk functions to reduce the abruptness of the interaction.

In-group identity markers.

By using in-group membership markers, the speaker stresses his or her common ground with the hearer .

Example 10(In a boutique)

CUS:Bros, welldone! I dey hail o bros.

SP: Eh my oga, welcome. Wetin dey happen na?

Jokes

As jokes are generally based on shared background knowledge and values, they are a positive politeness strategy aimed at putting the hearer at ease or to soften the face threatening act.

Example 11 (In a Hair dressing saloon)

CUS: I no go take dis money o.

SP: Wetin do am?

CUS: E tear. Give me another one.

SP: Na God money. For offering.

CUS: Abeg give me. If you wan give God money, go heaven

In this exchange, the customer refuses to collect the torn naira note given to her as change by the hair dresser. Instead she demands for the newer notes in the hair dresser's possession. The hair dresser refuses, saying that she is reserving the new notes to be used as offering in church on Sunday(*God money*).The customer , bent on collecting the new naira notes from her replies: *If you wan give God money , go heaven'* and collects the money from her.

NEGATIVE POLITENESS

Deference

Deference is a double sided phenomenon which finds manifestation either in the lowering of the self or the raising of the other or both at a time. Yule (1985:60) calls it ‘formal politeness’ in which compliments, greetings and modes of address or honorifics are included. Ofori (2016:31) observes that “the use of deferential honorific terms of address forms is one of the techniques used as persuasive strategies especially in bargaining talk exchanges”. The most common honorifics in the data are *Mummy*, *Madam*, *Oga*, *Aunty*, *Ma*, and *Sir*. These terms have become verbal manifestations of politeness in service encounters discourse as reflected in the example below:

Example 12 (In a hair dressing saloon)

CUS: How now?

SP: Mummy, Good afternoon.

CUS: Na only you dey here?

SP: Na only me dey o. You wan do your hair?

CUS: Yes

SP: (To attendant) Help Mummy loose her hair.

Brown and Levinson (1987) also note that address forms are used to convey in group membership. The most common forms used by the service providers in the data are ‘Customer’, ‘Bros’ and ‘Chairman’.

Apologize

By apologizing, the speaker indicates his/her reluctance to commit the face-threatening act while actually committing it;

this to some extent redresses the imposition. This can be done by admitting frankly what kind of impingement is expected, by indicating reluctance, by asking for forgiveness, or by giving an overwhelming reason for why the hearer has to commit the face-threatening act.

Example 13 (In a restaurant)

CUS: Madam, salt too plenti for the Egusi soup. Na manage I manage take eat am.

SP: Eh sorry o. Me sef I no dey add plenty salt for my soup apart from when I steam de meat. E be like sey na my children add over salt for de meat. Abeg no vex.

CUS: No wahala. Just take note in case of next time

Minimizing the Imposition

In this case, the speaker implies that the imposition is not great by using a culturally acceptable word or expression to do so. In Nigerian Pidgin, this can often be seen in the use of ‘Abeg or Helep me (Help me)’ to minimize the imposition of the request as in 17 :

Example 14 (In a drugstore)

CUS: Auntie, abeg check this paper for me. Wetin be this one. 100 mg?

SP: All of them na 100mg.

The foregoing shows that politeness is about being tactful and considerate for the plight of others in any social interaction. This affirms that everybody has a ‘face’ to protect in every social interaction.

Conclusion

This study was concerned with politeness in Nigerian Pidgin service encounters. It has shown that every language use is a reflection of the norms of the socio-cultural environment in which it functions. It has shown that social factors like solidarity, social status, age, power, distance affect politeness strategies in Nigerian Pidgin. It has also shown that there are socio-cultural manifestations of politeness in Nigerian Pidgin and illustrated how politeness is expressed in greetings, thanks, apologies and deference .

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