

THE USE OF POLITENESS STRATEGIES FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS BY WIVES IN AWKA**Ifunanya Blessing Attado**

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Abstract

This study investigated firsthand the use of politeness strategies by wives in Awka. It specifically x-rayed the frequency of the five politeness strategies— off the record, bald-on-record, positive politeness strategies, negative politeness strategies, and do not do the FTA – in different situations. The sample for this study comprises 50 wives residing or working in Awka. A deductive research approach was used for this research. The researcher adopted a quantitative approach was used in carrying out this research. The researcher also used Google form questionnaire to generate and distribute structured, close-ended questions to all members of the sample population. The research questions were analysed using percentage values and graphical representations. The findings validated the researcher's hypothesis that conflict and conflict resolution are an essential part of every marriage relationship and that the intelligent use of politeness strategies alleviated marital conflict. 70% of wives in Awka use the bald-on-record strategy and 82% of husbands do not have their face threatened by this. Wives should be consistent in using the appropriate politeness strategy per time for effective communication.

Keywords: Politeness strategies, Face Threatening Acts, bald-on-record, off the record, marital conflict.

Introduction

Relationships are vital for humanity. Whether it be falling in love, standing before a jury, or drawing up a business agreement, the choice of language is vital. Without the instrumentality of language, it would have been impossible to communicate one's thoughts effectively to another individual. Instead, thoughts would have remained thoughts. Austin's Speech Act Theory, Grice's Conversational Maxims, and Goffman's concept of Face seek to cover the scope of human communication, especially the gray areas. They point to the fact that language shapes relationships and societies – even marriages.

Ideally, a marriage officially begins and ends with the use of words. The expression of the desire to be married to another independent individual, the verbal affirmation of one's intentions to be married to one's betrothed before a group of witnesses (marriage vows), and the termination of a marital relationship by a divorce or by death are all achieved via the use of carefully selected words. However, as is expected of every relationship, conflict is bound to arise intermittently, especially because both spouses are, first of all, individuals having their own will and coming from vastly different backgrounds. As Ozad et al. (2020) rightly assert, conflict is a must-have in every relationship and it is its management rather than its occurrence that can break or make a relationship.

Initially, politeness strategies were considered by some scholars such as Al-hindawi and Alkhazaali to be inconsequential and irrelevant, having no place in the dynamics of actual conversations (Al-hindawi & Alkhazaali, 2016). This paper intends to disprove these unfounded assertions, validate the practical relevance of politeness theory in everyday life, examine how often married couples usually employ it, and determine its usefulness and effectiveness. This end goal is fundamental to the researcher because the researcher considers the politeness theory an ingenious composition. Moreover, the researcher had often used these politeness strategies long before knowing what they were officially designated. As a result, the researcher hopes to see the proliferation of healthier marriage relationships with more intentional use of politeness strategies.

Undoubtedly, the Politeness Theory was already in use long before Brown and Levinson proposed it in the 19th century, as seen in the excerpt of Abraham's 20th century BCE conversation with God in the Bible, which serves as a spiritual book and a historical document. From the passage recorded in

Genesis chapter 18 verses 17 to 33, we see God deciding against not doing the FTA (in verse 17), Abraham using the bald on-record strategy in his first response to God (verses 23 to 25), and Abraham subsequently using negative politeness strategies during his petition to God (verses 27, and 30 to 32). We also see how the dynamics of power, distance, and rank play out in their conversation.

Communication is the lifeline of every relationship. Communication occurs virtually on every occasion of human contact through language (Yang, 2021). Marriage is a social institution that thrives on compatibility and communication. As Edger (1996) posits in Ozad et al., (2020), marital communication is a must-have for any marriage to be successful as poor marital communication often leads to a myriad of marital problems that may eventually culminate into separation or divorce. The research conducted by Amadi, U. & Amadi, F. (2014) and Ibeh et al. (2013) reveal that poor marital communication is one of the factors responsible for marital conflict in Nigeria. Other factors include: sexual incompatibility, social incompatibility, and lack of mutual respect. The ability to correctly choose the politeness strategy to use per time, albeit subconsciously, helps one master the art and skill of communication.

Van Pelt (1997, as cited in Uwom-Ajaegbu et al., 2015, p. 1) asserted that “the happiness of a couple depends largely on the effectiveness of their communication”. He further stated that “how a couple communicates can make or mar their relationship”, and that “communicating effectively will allow the couple to negotiate problem areas, fulfill needs, avoid misunderstandings, and develop intimacy over the years” (Van Pelt, 1997, as cited in Uwom-Ajaegbu et al., 2015, p. 1). Sadly, in between the pressure of a steadfastly rising cost of living which often demands that both couples have a career outside the home and the advent of social media, many couples simply lack the discipline to devote quality time to deepening their communication and relationship.

With many more wives getting an education and taking on paid jobs the dynamics of marital relationships are rapidly changing (Okeke et al., 2017). Despite the attendant challenges wives face in balancing the home and a career or business, many wives today are desirous of being working-class women as it helps them to find their identity – aside being a wife and mother – and to be financially viable to contribute to the smooth running of the home. Sadly, this puts an unhealthy strain on marital relationships. Wives who lack the emotional intelligence to know what politeness strategy to use at different times amidst these external pressures stand the risk of running their marriages to the ground.

Many studies have expatiated on the importance of politeness strategies on interpersonal relationships, with a relative few expounding on its relevance in marital relationships. However, nearly all of these studies have focused on marital relationships outside the Igbo culture. The intent of this study is to show how wives in Awka put the politeness theory to use in their marriages despite having only a subconscious knowledge of the theory.

Research Questions

To sufficiently demonstrate that a basic understanding of Erving's concept of Face and Brown and Levinson's Politeness theory are essential for healthy interpersonal relationships among couples, the researcher came up with the following research questions:

- how often are politeness strategies applied by wives when communicating with their husbands?
- does the choice of politeness strategies used by wives have any effect on conflict management and resolution?

Empirical Review

Generally, the stereotypical assumption that women are politer than men (Brown, 1980, 1993, as cited in Alahmad & Alkasassbeh, 2020) has led to a plethora of studies on the use of linguistic politeness and politeness strategies by female speakers. The fact that women tend to pay more attention to the referential aspect of utterances over the affective makes them politer than men (Holmes, 1995, as cited in Alahmad & Alkasassbeh, 2020; Dozie et al., 2020). This, plus the added responsibility of

sustaining conversations in a marital relationship (Fishman 1983, Soskin & John, 1963, as cited in Holmes, 1993) make women more adept at using politeness strategies.

A study into gender and politeness cum hedging strategies in English among Igbo native speakers in Nigeria demonstrates how males and female respond to greetings, offers, excuses, and breaking of bad news (Dozie et al., 2020). 2,748 individuals took part in the survey – 42% male and 58% female. 60% of men and 40% of women used polite responses, 30% of men and 70% of women used more polite language in their response, while 25% of men and 75% of women used the most polite response possible (Dozie et al., 2020).

In 2019, Ozad et al. carried out a study on conflict resolution among Nigerian couples and their findings showed that relationship failure and divorce are rapidly increasing in Nigeria – over half of the 380 respondents (53.4%) opined that Nigeria had an alarmingly high rate of marriage failure and divorce (Ozad et al., 2020). Their research also revealed the following causes of poor conflict resolution among married couples: lack of close, personal communication (72.6%); lack of dialogic communication (69.4%); lack of communality of differences (72.2%); absence of positive and supportive communication (76.8%); absence of interest, affection, gratitude and apologies communicated (72.2%), and; openness in relationship (36.6%) (Ozad et al., 2020). 5 of the 6 outlined causes of poor conflict resolution highlighted here revolve around communication. In other words, if all issues regarding communication between couples are holistically managed, there would be no unresolved conflicts.

Iftikhar Khokhar, a counseling psychologist and linguist, in 2017, tested major linguistic politeness theories against the marital relationships of bilingual (Urdu and Punjabi speaking) Pakistani couples. During the course of the phenomenological study, Khokhar counseled 227 married couples and discovered that 21 of these couples had marital problems due to linguistic impoliteness (Khokhar, 2017). 5 of these 21 married couples (Group 1) had problems such as “the involvement of other members of the family, infertility issues, difference of age, education and/or family backgrounds and the forced marriage, etc” (Khokhar, 2017, p. 33).

“Couples in group 1 are all aged between 28 to 35 years, have university level education, have been married for about 4 to 8 years, have 1 to 3 children and their marriages are both loved and arranged ones. All five hail from urban, middle-class, bilingual (Urdu and Punjabi) speaking, moderately Islamic families of Lahore” (Khokhar, 2017, p. 33). However, both Khokhar and the participants agreed that “linguistic politeness played the most crucial role and the interference of other factors was perceived to be minimal” (Khokhar, 2017, p. 33). He trained these 21 couples in linguistic politeness and this brought about significant healing to their marriages (Khokhar, 2017). 16 of these 21 couples (Group 2) “come from a variety of family backgrounds, are aged between 21 to 44 years, have been married for 1 to 16, have differences of qualification and age-gap and live in varied family structures” (Khokhar, 2017, p. 33). As with the couples in Group 1, their training in linguistic politeness was also of immense help to their marriages (Khokhar, 2017). It is enlightening to note that simply educating these couples on politeness strategies and on how to apply them in conflict resolution made significant improvements in their marriages.

Furthermore, Ibeh et al. (2013) carried out a research on the causes and resolution of marital disharmony among couples in Enugu state using a sample population of 300. From their research, 10 key factors were identified – infertility, lack of trust, sexual deprivation, early marriage, finance, communication gap, infidelity, refusal of wives to submit to their husbands, poor academic exposure, and unmet expectations – with communication gap being the 6th most common factor (Ibeh et al., 2013). Avoiding idleness, using a family counselor, listening carefully, developing a positive attitude towards disharmony, communicating their feelings (whether love or dislike) to each other, learning money management, the mediation of elders, friends and neighbours, skillfully managing in-laws and extended family members, learning communication skills, and maintaining open communication are the strategies highlighted by Ibeh et al. (2013), for conflict management and resolution. A careful look

at the suggested strategies would reveal that 4 out of these 10 strategies revolve around communication.

Meanwhile, in the study carried out by Uwom-Ajaegbu et al. (2015) on the causes and effects of communication breakdown in marriages, 70 of the 92 respondents (all married) strongly agreed that communication is basic in marriage while 15 of the 92 respondents agreed to same. 58 and 10 respondents respectively, strongly agreed and agreed that "effective communication promotes intimacy among couples" (Uwom-Ajaegbu et al., 2015, p. 7). Again, "60 and 10 respondents respectively, strongly agreed and agreed that maintaining an open line of communication between couples reduces marital instability" (Uwom-Ajaegbu et al., 2015, p. 7).

Ironically, only 25 and 27 of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed that "many conflicts are easily resolved through the use of frank and open discussion" (Uwom-Ajaegbu et al., 2015, p.7). This is a pointer to the fact that many couples may not know how to communicate politely to their spouses especially during frank and open discussions. Many of them do not know how to employ politeness strategies during interpersonal communication so as to de-escalate conflict.

From the literatures reviewed so far, the researcher can say that there are very limited studies that show the resultant effects of specific politeness strategies when applied in a marital relationship. Indeed, politeness strategies play an important role in conflict de-escalation and resolution. But what are the resultant effects of specific politeness strategies when applied in a marriage? This is what this research intends to uncover.

Theoretical Framework

This study will anchor on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. Politeness is a part of our social life; it is a principle of everyday interaction (Schnabel, 2019). Generally speaking, politeness is a culturally appropriate social behaviour of taking note and care of the feelings of other people (McIntosh, 2013, as cited in Khokar, 2017). Politeness can be communicated both verbally (by using positive and honorific language) and non-verbally through the use of relevant actions (Leech, 1983; Shibatani, 1990; Fukada & Asato, 2004; as cited in Yang, 2021). Similarly, politeness in linguistics is the "use of language in conversation as is appropriately considerate for the feelings and desires of the interlocutors and is intended to develop or maintain good interpersonal relationships" (Huang, 2001; Sharifian, 2017; Van Olmen, 2017; as cited in Khokar, 2017).

The theory of politeness is highly relevant in both pragmatics (Grice's conversational maxims) and interactional sociolinguistics (Goffman's concept of face and interaction order) (Ezeifeke, 2018). Politeness theory posits that the politeness strategy used in every speech act mainly depends on power, distance, and rank (Universal Class, n.d.). Power refers to the perceived power dynamics (superior/subordinate) between speaker and hearer; distance refers to the amount of formality or familiarity between speaker and hearer; and rank refers to the degree of sensitivity of the topic within that culture (Universal Class, n.d.). Politeness theory in Linguistics helps speakers (and writers) to use language as a tool to minimize and mitigate face loss in communication (Schnabel, 2019).

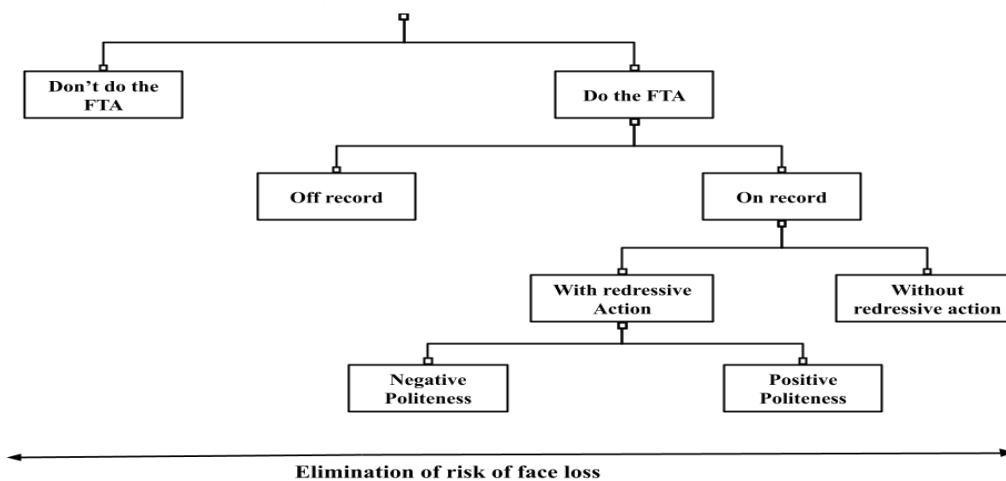
Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) challenge a speaker or hearer's preferred Face, propelling him to be embarrassed or angry or changing his preferred Face (Schnabel, 2019). They "inherently damage the self-image of the participants in interaction" (Ezeifeke, 2018, p. 122). Politeness strategies can convert a Face Threatening Act into a Face Saving Act, redeem a Face Threatening act, and aid the speaker or hearer to maintain their preferred Face. As Megaman (2018) states, Face Threatening Acts can be verbal, para-verbal (via the use of tone, inflection, etc.), or non-verbal (facial expressions, body language, etc). There are positive Face Threatening Acts and Negative Face Threatening Acts.

Positive Face Threatening Acts threaten the hearer's positive Face, showing him (the hearer) that he is not approved of. For the speaker, they are acts that threaten his positive Face, such as confession of wrong, apologies, self-humiliation, etc. (Ezeifeke, 2018). Negative Face Threatening Acts (for the hearer) are acts that put pressure on the hearer to perform or not to perform an action, order, request,

suggestion, promise etc., or even a speaker's sentiments of compliments, envy, admiration, hate, etc. over the hearer's possessions; (for the speaker) they are acts that induce or imposes on the speaker to succumb to the will of the hearer via acts such as saying "thank you", making or accepting an apology, making excuses, responding to the hearer's violation of social etiquette, etc. (Ezeifeke, 2018). Intentionally choosing the words used during speech helps the speaker in correctly choosing a politeness strategy.

Politeness strategies are divided into two: positive politeness strategy (the use of language that creates closeness) and negative politeness strategy (the use of indirect language and hedging by the speaker to emphasize the hearer's liberty to say "no" and not feel that he is being imposed upon) (Schnabel, 2019). The illustration in Figure 1 highlights four politeness strategies by Brown and Levinson: bald-on-record (used for emergencies, instructions, little or no desire to maintain Face, etc.); positive politeness (claims of common ground, sense of cooperation, sympathy, jokes, etc.); negative politeness (indirectness, hedges/mitigation, impersonal, general rules, etc.); and off-record/indirect strategy (Ezeifeke, 2018).

Figure 1
 A chart on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory by Schnabel.



Note. Source: (Still from Schnabel's YouTube video on *Politeness in Linguistics: an Overview*).

Brown and Levinson later disclaimed the fifth strategy (do not do the FTA) because it is a decision against using any FTAs. Communication cannot be realized, and there is no linguistic content to x-ray (Ezeifeke, 2018). Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness would be used in analysing communication between couples in order to decipher which strategy is most frequently used as well as the resultant effects of the use of each of these strategies on the marital relationship. This study will test the effectiveness of this theory by analysing each sequence of outcomes that result from each politeness strategy applied.

Methodology

For the research methodology, the researcher used a deductive and quantitative approach. The researcher's hypotheses are that: conflict and conflict resolution are essential parts of every marital relationship, and; wives who deliberately use Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) and politeness strategies enjoy better conflict resolutions in their marriages. The researcher studied a sample population of fifty (50) wives living or working in Awka, Anambara State. The researcher also employed a quantitative approach in analysing data collected. The structured data collected was analysed using quantitative data analysis – percentage calculations, pie charts, and graphical representations. The researcher made

use of primary data collection methods – online surveys via Google forms (pictures of which are attached in the appendix) as they could be easily self-managed and they helped to ensure data accuracy especially because of the provisions for anonymity.

Research Findings

In keeping with the study’s objectives, research questions, and analysis of data, the following major findings were made:

Research Question 1: How often are politeness strategies applied by wives when communicating with their husbands?

Wives very often employ politeness strategies when communicating with their husbands. Bald-on-record strategy is used 70% of the time, off-record 22% of the time, and do not do the FTA is used 8% of the time.

Research Question 2: Does the choice of politeness strategies used by wives have any effect on conflict management and resolution?

Yes, how a wife communicates to her husband as well as the choice of politeness strategy used per time can directly affect conflict management – escalation and resolution (as seen in Figure 2). Wives usually adopt a politeness strategy that is in tandem with the response they hope to get from their husbands.

Discussion of Findings

From the data collected and represented in Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4, the practical application of politeness strategies are popular among married couples in Awka and are often employed to achieve a wide range of results. In other words, a wife can mentally predict the kind of response she would get from her husband when she ponders over what politeness strategy to use. We also see that only about 10% of wives in Awka decide not to do the FTA, as seen in Figure 1 and Figure 3. Again, face-saving acts (FSA) are frequently used by wives in Awka to prevent anticipated friction and conflict, as seen in Figure 3. Figure 1 also reveals that most wives in Awka (70%) use the bald-on-record strategy to demand help with domestic chores from their husbands, while 22% use the off-record technique. 8% of these wives would instead not ask for help at all.

Furthermore, husbands in Awka are generally agreeable if their wives use the right politeness strategies. This largely agrees with Ibeh et al., (2013) who assert that communication gap is the 6th most common factor responsible for marital disharmony. Again, 84% of wives in Awka do not think their husbands’ face is threatened during a difficult conversation, and 88% of wives do not feel their Face is being threatened even after a difficult conversation. This statistics contrasts sharply with Uwom-Ajaegbu et al.’s (2015) earlier study in which only 27% of wives strongly agreed that tensions were deescalated after a difficult conversation and 29% of wives casually agreed same.

Husbands in Awka are also very particular about their Face whenever they are out in public with their wives. 52% of wives in Awka think that their husbands feel their Positive Face is being threatened whenever their wives greet them in public using the customary "Igbu Ikpere," while 48% of wives think that their husbands do not particularly mind.

Figure 2 Politeness Strategies used by Wives in Making Requests

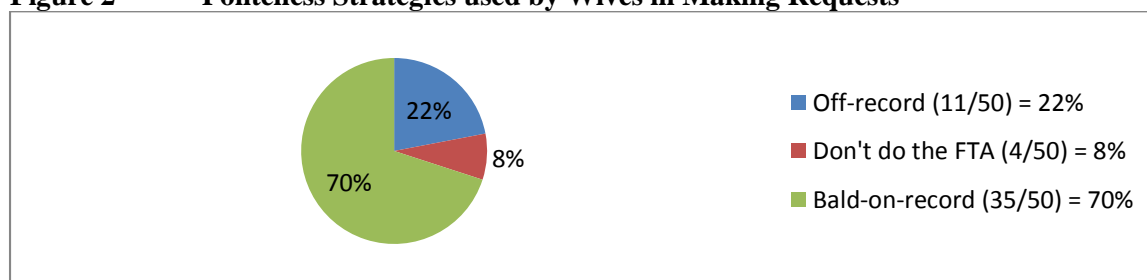


Figure 3 Husband’s Response to Wives’ Request for Help with House Chores

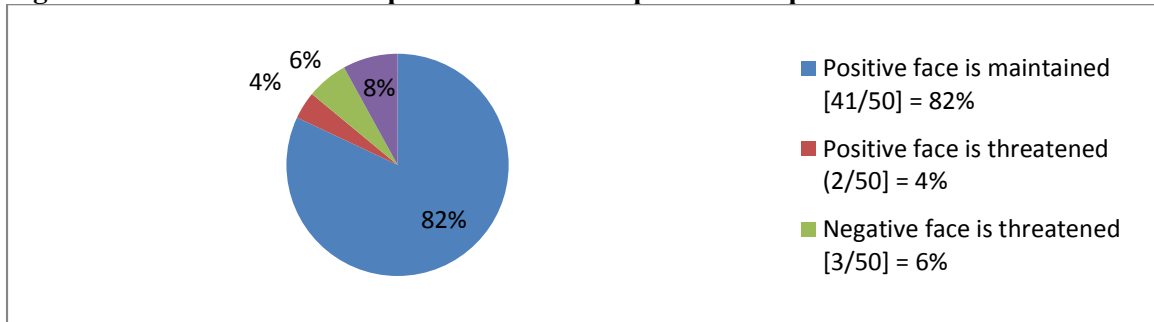
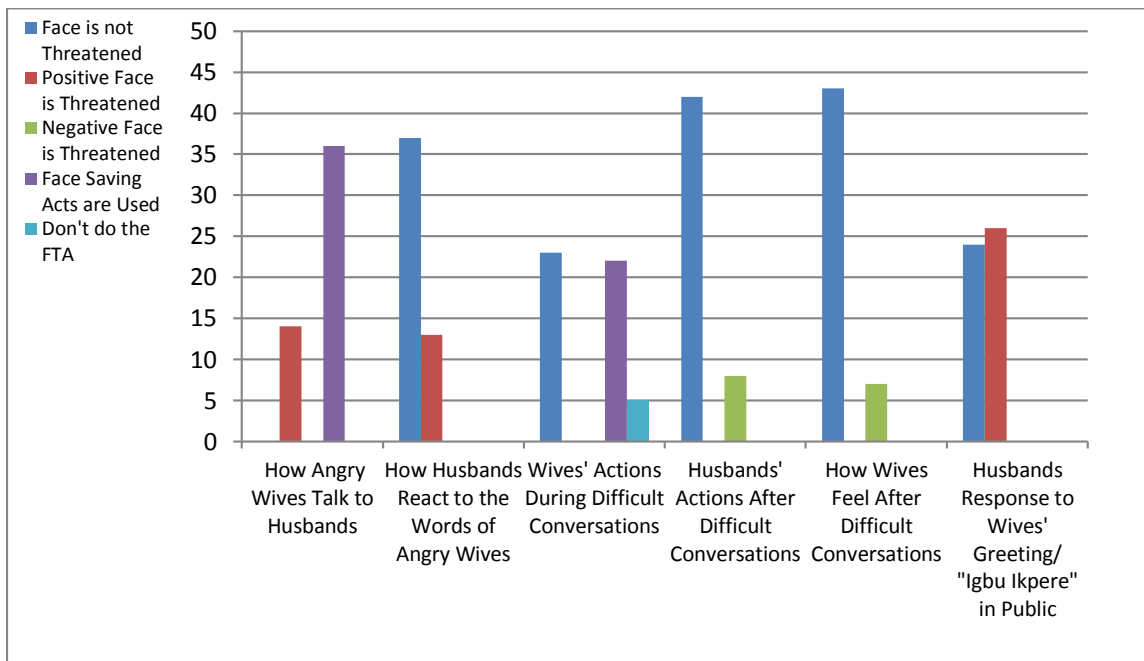


Figure 4 Effects of Various Politeness Strategies in Varying Contexts



Recommendations

Wives (with the help of emotional intelligence) should discern the most appropriate politeness strategy to use per time in their marital relationships with their husbands, as this would significantly prevent and correctly manage marital conflicts as they are bound to occur over time. Wives should not be careless when communicating with their husbands but should be intentional in using politeness strategies. Wives should pay particular attention to the face needs of their husbands when they do not have any requests to make, as this would contribute to getting their desired response when they do have a request.

Conclusion

As this study shows, politeness strategies are vital to conflict de-escalation and resolution in marriages. 70% of wives use the bald-on-record strategy, 22% use the off-record technique. 8% of these wives would rather not do the FTA when it comes to asking their husbands for help with the domestic chores. Erring couples should be encouraged to incorporate politeness strategies to foster unity and maximally manage marital conflicts. The researcher's hypothesis that couples actively used politeness strategies and that this was instrumental to marital success was validated.

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Appendix

Google Form Analytics

The Google form <https://tinyurl.com/politeness-strategy-Awka> was designed by the researcher and randomly distributed to 50 wives resident in Awka. The researcher sent the Google form link to the WhatsApp numbers of the 50 respondents. Screenshots of the analysis of the data collected and analysed via Google forms are displayed below:

