



Appraisal of the Politeness Principle: A Linguistic Analysis of Teacher-Student Conversation

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Abstract

This study is an appraisal the Politeness Principle as used in teacher-student conversation. Human society cannot exist without the instrumentality of language. Language is used by people to communicate with their fellow human beings across domains: schools, hospitals, markets, churches, mosques, homes, etc. Scholars acknowledge the fact that language has positive and negative connotations. The subject of this study (politeness) essentially captures the positive way of deploying language in conversations. Beyond a school setting, language can be used politely, impolitely, as a face-saving act (FSA) and as a face-threatening act (FTA). However, there are usually consequences for misusing language; for example, while impoliteness results in a face-threatening act, politeness prevents it. In language and linguistics, theoretical frameworks are appraised in terms of their applicability, relevance and potency in the elucidation of language use in different categories of texts (genres). Brown and Levinson's View on politeness, anchors this study, and the analyses rely on the Content Analysis Method. The Random Sampling Method is used to select conversational turns from the recorded text. The study concludes that politeness strategies used in the data include agreement, commendation, clarification, indirect speech act, among others. Each of these strategies has specific communicative functions in the entire text.

Keywords: politeness, the Cooperative Principle, speech act, face act, Content Analysis Method, Simple Random Sampling Method, Face Management View

1. INTRODUCTION

This study investigates language use in a domain-based interpersonal communication where language plays a crucial role. Dada (2010, p. 417) submits that "language is a unique property that belongs to the human race. It is a means of communication between two or more people and to a very large extent, the development of man politically, socially, economically, etc., depends on the use of language. Indeed, language permeates all aspects of human endeavor. Language is an integral part of culture, a reflection of many features of a given culture thus, like culture itself, it is a leader of behavior, which can be enhanced through direct or indirect contact. The formal and functional complexity of language is such a distinctive human trait that many scholars think the designation "homo loquat" (man the speaking animal) to be a better way of identifying the species than any other simple criterion (Such as tool using) that has been suggested." According to Bosco et al. (2004, pp. 467-468), a conversation is "a two-fold activity in which the participants form utterances that are products of shared meaning, and such utterances produce felicitous results to the communicative event." Like other natural human conversations, teacher-student conversations are initiated, developed or terminated through different discourse strategies. These strategies make conversations coherent¹.

2. Literature Review

In this section of the paper, we examine two theoretical concepts: face act and politeness.

2.1 Face Act

Bossan Rita (2017) cites Brown and Levinson who identify two types of face namely: positive face and negative face. Positive face is concerned with an individual's desire not only to be recognized and respected in society, but also to have positive self-image. Negative face concerns a person's desire for freedom of action and freedom from imposition. According to Bossan Rita (ibid.) Brown and Levinson:

Identify two types of face act: face threatening act (FTA henceforth) and face saving act (FSA henceforth). FTA occurs when one participant says something that represents a threat to another person's self-image. FSA on the other hand is the opposite of FTA. It ensues whenever one of the participants in a discourse says something that lessens the possible threat to another's face. There are three superordinate and one opting out strategies of performing an FTA:

a. Performing FTA without redress:

Do the act bald-on-record. This is observed in speaking directly or very directly, in the most direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way possible without any attempt whatsoever to mitigate the illocutionary force inherent in an act, regardless of the rating of the imposition. By implication, the act will be in full conformity with the Gricean maxims: quantity, quality, manner, and relation. For example, an utterance like Leave the house does not say more or less than is required (quantity), is maximally efficient in so far as it is non-spurious (quality), it is relevant (relation) and it avoids ambiguity and obscurity (manner). It is also significant that in performing such an act, a speaker shows little concern for the hearer's face. This is because the speaker in this context will highly likely to focus on the propositional content of the message; thereby provide no effort to reduce the impact of the FTAs, and are likely to shock the addressee, embarrass them, or make them feel uncomfortable. Examples of this strategy abound where the power differential or role relation is asymmetrical, e.g. military setting, law court, and so on. It is also observed in a discourse where the speaker holds high relative power and fears no threat to his own face from the addressee.

b. Performing FTA with redress: this is when the act is performed with no threat to the addressee's face intended. This can be done in two ways: performing FTA with redress using positive politeness strategy and performing FTA with redress using negative politeness strategy. Performing FTA with redress using positive politeness strategy (which appeals to the addressee's desire to be liked and approved of). It is frequently employed in groups of friends, or where people in the given social situation know each other fairly well. They usually attempt to minimize the distance between interlocutors by expressing friendliness and solid interest in the hearer's need to be respected, in other words, to minimize the FTA. For example, you look nice today. What an elegant suit you are putting ... Other manifestations include where a speaker avoids disagreement, is optimistic, extends praise, gives sympathy, hedges opinion, etc.

In other respects, performing an FTA with redress using negative politeness is obvious when a speaker aims to orient him/herself towards a hearer's negative face – which appeals to the hearer's desire not to be impeded or put upon, to be left free to act as he or she chooses. Generally, negative politeness manifests in the use of conventional politeness markers, deference markers, minimizing imposition, being indirect etc. However, Simpson (1989) modifying Brown and Levinson ... identifies seven major strategies of using negative politeness:

- i. Hedge e.g. I'm sorry but I must ask you to leave my office.
- ii. Indicate permission e.g. The situation in the country is harsh. I will understand if you could not lend me N5, 000.
- iii. Minimize imposition, e.g. I need a little favour from you.
- iv. Indicate deference, e.g. I am ashamed but to have to ask you this favour.
- v. Apologize e.g. I don't mean to bother you.
- vi. Impersonalize, e.g. we regret to inform you.
- vii. Acknowledge the debt, e.g. I would be eternally grateful if.

(Simpson, 174-176)

c. Performing FTA using off record politeness: this is observed when ambiguous or vague, sarcastic or jocular. In this case, the utterance bears an implicature that evades clarity and thus can be immediately dismissed because, theoretically, the speaker doesn't commit him/herself to a specific intent ...

d. Do not perform FTA: do not perform the act at all. This has to do with "saying nothing" i.e. "opting out" ... all a speaker has to do is resist or renounce his/her wish to make an utterance that risks being face-threatening ... This is especially observed in situations when a speaker decides to say nothing and genuinely wishes to let the matter drop ...

2.2 Politeness

Bossan Rita (2017, pp. 45-61) cites Pizziconi who makes an elaborate submission on politeness:

In ordinary, daily contexts of use, members of speech communities possess clear metalinguistic beliefs about, and are capable of, immediate and intuitive assessments of what constitutes polite versus rude, tactful versus offensive behaviour. Politeness in this sense is equivalent to a normative notion of appropriateness. Hence, the principles of politeness were

developed to account for face to face interaction. Thomas ... observes that these strategies may not only include strategic use of the conventional politeness strategies e.g. rapport, deference, courtesy, etc., but also include a range of other strategies including many forms of conventional and non-conventional indirectness. Nevertheless, the linguistic realizations of politeness are inextricably linked to the respective cultural context of usage. Generally, politeness involves two entities: self and other. Self is the speaker, the encoder, the addresser or the sender while other is the decoder, the addressee, the receiver or any other participant, covert or overt. The theory that undergirds the principles of politeness, especially Brown and Levinson's (1978 and 1987) Face Saving and Face Threatening Acts is Goffman (1967) Theory of Face².

For more insights on politeness in discourse, see Leech's Conversational Maxim View, cited in Bossan Rita (ibid.).

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Brown and Levinson's (1978) Face Management View (1978; 1989) is the theoretical framework of this study. See 2.1 above for tips on the theory.

The selection of conversational turns (micro-structures) from the entire recorded utterances (macro-structures) is based on the presence of: face-saving acts and face-threatening acts, politeness strategies and cooperative dispositions of the participants. We contend that the small quantity of conversational turns selected for analysis will suffice because this study is hinged on the Projection Principle (cf. Adejare 1992, p. 14) which states that from the selection of micro structures from a text, an acceptable conclusion can be made about the phenomena being investigated. The Content Analysis Method (cf. Babbie 1986, p. 157) views the Content Analysis Method as an appropriate method for analyzing any form of communication. Used frequently in the study of such artifacts as books, magazines, poems, newspaper features, songs, paintings, letters, laws and other printed matters, the Content Analysis Method is suitable for the study of communications and for answering the classical communication research questions: "Who says what, to whom, why, how, and with what effect?"

4. Presentation and Analysis of Data

In the following sections (4.1 and 4.2 respectively), we present the data and analyze them.

4.1 Presentation of Data

A recorded teacher-student conversation which took place in a school constitutes the data of this study. We present the adjacency pairs below:

TEACHER: I deserve the respect you give to your father. You cannot come into my office and just say: "Good morning." Am I a "sir" or not?

STUDENT: Sorry sir. I thought you heard me when I said: "Good morning sir?" The Yorubas give respect to elders. I was probably not loud enough.

TEACHER: So, what can I do for you? Open the door. You can now sit and speak.

STUDENT: It is not how you see it? I do not mean to provoke you. I prefer the Debating Society, although there are other clubs in the school. I strongly believe that my membership can improve my confidence and skills in public speaking. I actually appreciate your choice of club for me, sir. You want the best for me without any strings attached.

TEACHER: Go on. Have you finished talking? Why do you feel guilty? Why should you be sorry? People have freedom of choice in anything. I commend you for trusting your decision. All the clubs in this school are useful. Just be free to choose for personal reasons. Mary, you are an adult. I can still guide you if you wish, no matter the club. We are your teachers. We are your friends, and ehm ...

STUDENT: I really appreciate you, sir. Ah! Mr. Richard does not come late to class and this is 10 a.m.

TEACHER: Neither do I come late to class. Why not hurry for the class? But did I hear you say Mr. Richard? Are you claiming not to be aware that he has been on leave since the beginning of this month, and has not been coming to school?

STUDENT: That's true. I mistakenly said Mr. Richard instead of Mr. Rinard, the Mathematics teacher. Sometimes, I have problems with remembering similar names. I actually know you are aware that Mr. Rinard is the Mathematics teacher. I could have simply mentioned the subject, and you would still give me the permission to go for the class.

TEACHER: Never mind, Rose. I also have problems with remembering similar names. We are humans. We all do ...

4.2 Analyses of Data

The analyses of the utterances (henceforth U.1-U.9) are done below:

U.1

Given the fact that politeness is a conventional behaviour, the friction in U.1 is not incidental. As a demonstration of politeness, if a person enters an office, he/she is expected to greet the person(s) therein. Therefore, by greeting the teacher, the student is being polite. The reaction of the teacher implies that he is conscious of the difference in status between him and his interlocutor (the student). He therefore expects to be addressed as "sir". Humans have self-consciousness about their personality (social status), and this view underpins the dynamics of politeness in teacher-

student interaction. The participants understand the implicatures that are generated when respect (politeness) is not shown to a person that deserves. This view corroborates Austin's (1962) notion of "uptake" which has to do with how an utterance is understood by the hearer. The role of shared knowledge in the illocutionary force and interpretation of a polite or impolite utterance is essentially about pragmatic presupposition. In U.1, the teacher uses a direct speech act to agitate (threaten the face of the addressee). The utterance "Am I a "sir"?" is a rhetorical question, and the addressee understands its illocutionary force as "condemning". Hence in dealing with each other, our utterances may be oriented to the positive or to the negative face of those we interact with. To demonstrate politeness, participants of discourse sometimes rely on the use of indirect speech acts. An indirect speech act is rightly inferred by the addressee through different inference strategies, including the use of pragmatic presupposition. Levinson (1983) opines that "pragmatic presupposition is the relation between a speaker and the appropriateness of a sentence in a context." Mastery of the conventions of the language being used for a particular communicative event, is crucial for the interpretation of utterances. For example, the teacher and the student knows that "sir" is used alongside a greeting (speech act) when a master-subordinate relationship (e.g. teacher-student) obtains in a communicative event. The language that conveys any on-going communicative event is what Acheoah (2015) calls the Operative Language (OL). Just as the teacher knows the suitability of "sir" in the greeting, he knows the appropriate forms of English sentences that constitute requests, questions, statements, etc. due to his mastery of the Operative Language (English).

U.2

In U.2, the student expresses apology even though she is condemned for an offence that she did not commit. This is a display of politeness, considering the fact that her interlocutor is above her in social status. Politeness is at the extreme when a person apologizes despite his/her innocence. It is a discourse behaviour that shows humility, and facilitates the progress of a conversation. In U.2, the teacher's accommodating disposition gives the accused person (student) an opportunity to make herself understood. The student avoids disagreement by saying that "her voice was probably not loud enough". This is a politeness strategy (clarification). This strategy appeases the addressee (face saving act). Being polite is a form of cooperative behaviour. If participants of discourse choose to intensify a disagreement, communication terminates. In U.2, we see that the illocutionary acts performed by uttering an utterance are indeed, intentional acts. The intentional nature of illocutionary acts is captured by David Harrah, cited in Savas L. T. (1994, p. 375) who notes that "most speech acts seem to be focused and directed. They are intended as coming from the agent and going to the receivers or audience. They are intended to have a certain point, and they are intended to be construed as having a certain point."

U.3

U.3 reveals that politeness can be shown towards one's interlocutor by non-verbal means of communication. For example, the teacher shows warm regards to the student by offering her the opportunity to sit and feel relaxed before even talking. In a teacher-student relationship, this is optional; it is not impolite for the teacher to deprive the student of sitting. Politeness towards the student can be inferred from the teacher's desire that the door should be opened; it is a way of ensuring that the student's feelings (e.g. desire to be safe in the presence of an opposite sex) are accepted and protected. Invariably, the teacher protects his self-image. In being polite or impolite, discourse participants are influenced by presuppositions revolving around their mental states (thoughts, feelings and emotions). In other words, participants of discourse "read into" one another's minds and make appropriate presuppositions based on the context of the communication. Chilton (2005a, pp. 19-52) submits that "cognitive pragmatics is defined as a study of mental states of the interlocutors, their beliefs, desires, goals, and intentions ... produced and interpreted by human individuals interacting with one another ... If language use (discourse) is, as the tenets of CDA assert, connected to the construction of knowledge about social objects, identities, processes, etc., then that construction can only be taking place in the minds of (interacting) individuals."

U.4

In U.4, the student uses "pleading" and "apology" as politeness strategies, even though she has the right to decide her own choice of a school club/society. The participants obey turn-taking convention of conversation; there is no topic interruption. This is a politeness strategy. Mey (2001) posits that "cooperation is a complex concept involving many layers of interactive behavior including politeness and 'face'. By being polite, we conserve our integrity as interlocutors while being considerate of our partners' faces – in one fell sweep. Politeness is our strategy for conversational cooperation with least cost and maximum benefit to all interlocutors." In addition, Mey (ibid.) cites Leech who submits that "[S]ome illocutions (e.g., orders) are inherently impolite, and others (e.g., offers) are inherently polite ... This view assumes politeness to be an abstract quality, residing in individual expressions, lexical items or morphemes without regard for the particular circumstances that govern their use. Being 'inherently' polite implies being polite, without regard for the contextual factors that define what is polite in a given situation." The use of language in U.4 captures the focused nature of speech act; an utterance is determined by speaker-meaning and speaker-motive.

U.5

In U.5, the teacher commends the student for having confidence (trust) in her own decision – choice of a school club/society. The teacher minimizes imposition and distance by using commendation as a politeness strategy. In certain context of communication, commendation is the opposite of outright dismissal of people’s choice or feelings. Speaker’s measure the possible effects of their language use on their addressees, as they select language that is germane to the psychological context of the communicative event. As part of the conventions of speaking, a speaker’s choice of words is determined by speaker-hearer relationship as well as the psychological underpinning of the communicative event. Psychological background helps discourse participants to weigh the possible effects of what they want to utter, on the addressees. According to Benders (1982, pp. 329-348), “coherent conversation involves both the coordinated production of illocutionary acts and the management of the potential perlocutionary effects of utterances.” The utterance “I can still guide you if you wish” amplifies the teacher’s strong belief that people’s decision should be respected. The teacher’s utterance implies that without the student’s permission, he does not think he is in the right position to guide her. This is an indirect speech act, and it elevates the teacher’s politeness towards the student. By expressing his optimism that the student can achieve her aims of joining the Debating Club, the teacher minimizes imposition. The teacher’s politeness strategies relax the tense psychological atmosphere of the conversation.

U.6

In U.6, an indirect speech act is used as a politeness strategy; the student wishes to avoid the discomfort of remaining with the teacher, and therefore mentions Mr. Jacob’s punctuality to class. Considering the fact that there is an issue to settle between the two participants, a direct speech act such as “I have to leave now because my next class is Mr. Jacob’s class and it is time” can be a face threatening act. In terms of the Cooperative Principle of conversation, the conversational turns in U.6 are appropriate endings. Appropriate beginning, middle and endings in interactions, foster intertextuality. Like other conversational strings, teacher-student interaction shows intertextuality (one text reads another). Impoliteness can disrupt these features of conversation, and bring the conversation to an unexpected end.

U.7

The utterance “Neither do I come late to class” is informed by the speaker’s intention to project a positive self-image about himself. The speaker is not comfortable with the positive remarks (commendation) made about Mr. Richard. It is something everybody wants. The utterance is face-threatening to the addressee. However, the addressee does not want to be seen as somebody who does not care about the feelings and desires of his interlocutor. Indeed, participants of discourse are conscious of the meanings their utterances convey. A pragmatic utterance is that which is “easy to mean” – that is, it is easy to process for meaning, because its topic relevance can be worked out by the addressee. According to Keith Allan (1986), when a speaker utters an utterance, the hearer should be able to locate the world-spoken-of. This is also what Bach and Harnish (1979) call Communicative Presumption (CP). The illocutionary force of the utterance “Why not hurry for the class?” is “assenting” and it functions as a politeness strategy (agreement). Illocutionary acts are often speaker-meaning-laden. According to Savas L. T. (1994, p. 1), “the study of illocutionary act should be acknowledged as an indispensable component of the study of meaning.”

U.8

In order to make her request acceptable and non-face-threatening, the student hedges (negative politeness) the teacher and ascribes to him, a good attribute – the attribute of being a considerate person. This illocutionary strategy is an indirect speech act because the primary illocutionary act of the utterance is not to praise the teacher, but to get his approval. In this text, it is obvious that teacher-student conversation is immersed in speech act, which is the core of pragmatics. Speakers choose what to say based on how they think their utterances can affect the hearers. Austin (1962) posits that speech act can be: locutionary act (the utterance of a sentence with determinate sense and reference; illocutionary act (the making of a statement, offer, promise, etc. in uttering a sentence by virtue of the conventional ‘force’ associated with it or with its explicit per formative paraphrase); and perlocutionary act (the bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence, such effects, being special to the circumstances of utterance.

U.9

The teacher’s politeness strategy in U.9 is “avoid blame”; he did not blame the student for the error. Rather than blaming the student, he establishes teacher-student bond by saying he is not above the error that the student made. The possibility that the student may be telling a lie, elevates the teacher’s politeness towards her. In this text, we see the participants “doing things with words” as they deploy discrete speech acts. Speech acts make it possible for language users to do things with words. The actions performed with words are the illocutionary goals or communicative intentions of speakers. Fowler (1981) notes that “linguistic structure is not arbitrary. It is determined and motivated by the functions it performs.” In a similar vein, Adegbija (1998) opines that “language use is not incidental. It is of credit.” In U.9, illocutionary acts are speaker-hearer based.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study reveals that like other human conversations, teacher-student conversations deploy discrete and functional politeness strategies. The politeness strategies across U.1-U.9 and their communicative functions are shown in table 1 below:

Politeness Strategy	Communicative Function
Agreement	- to relax the communication atmosphere - to make the conversation progress
Hedging	- to relax the communication atmosphere
commendation	- to relax the communication atmosphere - to justify the addressee
self-justification	- to protect self-image
indirect speech act	- to avoid imposition - to make a request - as a face-saving act
avoiding blame	- to relax the communication atmosphere - to make the conversation progress
avoiding imposition	- to relax the communication atmosphere
Clarification	- to protect self-image
turn-taking	- to make the conversation progress
appreciation	- as a face-saving act - to make the conversation progress
Pleading	- to relax the communication atmosphere
Apology	- to relax the communication atmosphere

Table 1: Politeness Strategies in the Conversation

As we see in the textual analyses, discourse participants are conscious of the objective underpinnings of their cooperative and polite behaviour. The analyses of U.1-U.9 reveal that besides functioning as cohesive devices, preparatory speech acts and repair mechanisms, politeness strategies develop a conversation. However, a major weakness of the Politeness Principle is that it lacks universality; it can be culture-bound. Searle (1969) notes that “across languages and cultures there are general norms for realizing speech acts and conducting politeness behaviour ...” Although the Politeness Principle is not a law, obeying it is beneficial to participants of discourse. The literature establishes the pragmatic link between politeness and the Cooperative Principle of conversation, considering the fact that flouting a maxim of the CP can imply that a speaker is not being polite. In this regard, Grice (1975) is instructive:

The Cooperative Principle (CP) operates in the plans of speakers and understanding of hearers, by obeying maxims:

- Quantity:
- Make your contribution as informative as required (for the current purposes of the exchange);
- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
- Quality:
- (Supermaxim): Try to make your contribution one that is true.
- (Submaxims):
- Do not say what you believe to be false;
- Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
- Relation:
- Be relevant
- Manner:
- (Supermaxim): Be perspicuous.
- (Submaxims):
- Avoid obscurity of expression;
- Avoid ambiguity;
- Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity);
- Be orderly.”

Grice (1975) also posits that “features distinguishing the Cooperative Principles are as follows:

1. The participants have some common immediate aim;
2. The contributions of the participants should be dovetailed, mutually dependent;
3. There is some sort of undertaking (which may be explicit but which is often tacit) that, other thing being equal, the transaction should continue in appropriate style unless both parties are agreeable that it should terminate.

Due to the pragmatic functions of politeness strategies, agitations in human interactions can be conveyed subtly (face saving acts). In teacher-student interactions, difference in status informs the preference of one politeness strategy to another. Mey (ibid.) notes that “one of functions of politeness is to create (or manifest) a distance between the interlocutors, as in the case of social-hierarchical placements that have to be maintained through language use.” The violation of the Politeness Principle is partly informed by the natural tendency of man to protect him and negotiate the best out of whatever counts as the goal of any on-going communication; the goal of a communicative event is the relevance of the communication to the participants. For personal benefits therefore, discourse participants naturally do not violate the Principle of Relevance. Unlike the Politeness Principle and the Cooperative Principle (of conversation), the Principle of Relevance cannot be violated. It is non-negotiable and must naturally be followed³.

This study examines the Politeness Principle as evident in teacher-student conversation, and concludes that there are different strategies deployed by participants of discourse for being polite or impolite depending on whose face is threatened, the possibility of alternative ways of saying something, the psychological state of participants, and the social relationship between them.

Notes

The strategies also determine whether or not politeness principles are flouted or not.

However, it was in fact Robin Lakoff who provided pioneering work by linking politeness with its three rules:

1. ‘Don’t impose’
2. ‘Give options’
3. ‘Make the other person feel good’, ‘be friendly’ by sometimes being indirect.

According to Sperber and Wilson (1986), “communicators do not ‘follow’ the principle of relevance; and they could not violate it even if they wanted to. The principle of relevance applies without exceptions.”

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