
Politeness in Language Use: A Case of Spoken Nigerian English

By

EDENOWO T. ENANG

*Department of English/Literary Studies,
Akwa Ibom State University,
Ikot Akpaden*

CLETUS S. ESHIET

*Department of English/Literary Studies,
Akwa Ibom State University,
Ikot Akpaden.*

SUSANNA T. UDOKA, (Ph.D.)

*Department of English/Literary Studies
Akwa Ibom State University
Ikot Akpaden*

Abstract

This paper examines Politeness in Language Use: A Case of Spoken Nigerian English, considering the multilingual posture of Nigeria a conglomeration of many ethnic nationalities. Data were gathered for this study, tape recording of speeches and responses from sixty (60) randomly selected Nigerians of Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo and Efik/Ibibio/Anaang origins was made. After the interviews, data were transformed and interpreted. The analysis of the data empirically reveals that polite expressions in spoken Nigerian English are inextricable from the socio-cultural conventions of the various ethnic nationalities that constitute the country. Inherent in this discourse are such features as social distance, sex, age, social background etc, which serve as determiners of polite utterances, whether positively or negatively. It has observed some implications and then made suggestions based on the findings. Our conclusion based on the findings is that Nigerians interactants in a discourse have not only internalized the grammar of their regional or background language/s but also the socio-cultural rules in speech situations and the principles governing them have also been retained (i.e. pragmatic competence).

Language is a necessary pre-requisite of every human group or society. It relates to culture and functions also in the transmission of information as well as the norms, rules and mores of the society in which it operates, thereby concretizing human relationship in their daily life traffic. The ways we do things with words, according to Austin (1962), are “functionally related to the culture of the society”. So, one can safely say that language and culture are closely interwoven.

According to Saussure (1966): ‘Social stratification, power dynamics and other sociological factors do affect how different age groups, races, sexes etc, use language in any speech community’. The source further establishes that one of those aspects of language which occurs in all societies and cultures and dates back to creation, is the observance of politeness in both verbal and non-verbal situations. The issue of politeness has assumed a position of greater significance when we consider the African societies where various cultural variables determine how language functions. This paper has as an aim to describe and analyse the various socio-linguistic manifestations of politeness in language use especially, as it is used in spoken Nigerian English and compares these manifestations with some examples in selected Nigerian languages. It will also incorporate some relevant verbal strategies of politeness or otherwise from literary texts especially those with cultural inflections such as novels written by Nigerian writers to be read not necessarily aloud, but rather silently.

The writers’ selection of verbal forms of address according to politeness and the response to speech act in this discourse is enhanced by the presence or absence of some cultural variables, which are often shown in the attitude of the interlocutors. Every language, therefore, has conventions for expressing speech acts; one of which is the preoccupation of this paper.

What is Politeness?

Akpan (2003:210) puts it that: “Politeness is an aspect of social behaviour which makes individuals, within and outside any given society live in harmony with other people”. From the foregoing, politeness is to be seen as a strategy adopted by language users in interaction and it serves the purpose of providing deference of the speaker to the hearer or vice versa. It has to do with mutual respect that maintains cordial social relationship.

Politeness in language use is guided by **three maxims** which together constitute the politeness principles. These maxims, according to Lakoff (1973) are; (i) Don’t impose, (ii) Give opinion and (iii) make the addressee or respondent feel good. Afolayan (1974) viewed politeness as; “a sort of grace, a type of behaviour that classifies people along the dimension of refinement and courtesy”.

When grace is in place, the addressee would not be found wanting in any aspect of his life because ‘**grace**’ mentioned above is meant to **colour** the efforts and also **cover** the mistakes of the addressee. Still in support of Afolayan in his definition of politeness, Adetugbo (1979), added that; “such behaviour must be exhibited through a speech that is unlikely to give offence to the maker”. It is the opinion of the present writer that the offence is not only the maker but also the recipient because as Goody (1978) puts it, “we are rewarded by success in our encounter when we use forms... which the culture has provided, and we are punished...when we use forms which are omitted from the cultural repertoire...”

Language users’ attempt to maintain the maxims earlier mentioned were bequeathed to human speech (act), a legacy of apology, circumlocution, euphemisms and a preference for model expressions. Scholars have at various levels and times argued on this concept of **model expressions** and agreed that even the model expressions differ from one society to another. According to Cook (1989);

in English language, orders, request and plea take the form of elaborate questions such as “would you...”, “could you...”, “may I...”, The speaker apologizes for imposing with “I’m sorry...” and makes room for other’s opinion or option with “may I ask you...”

The source further points out that sometimes truth has often been sacrificed in the alter of linguistic etiquette in order to accommodate polite expressions.

Types of Politeness

Politeness, as an attitude in language use, has been a source of concern to scholars of socio-linguistic in recent times. Because of the role which language plays in communication that aims at establishing interaction and cooperation among interactants, politeness has become an inseparable variable for such attainment. Two major types of politeness are identifiable with language use. These are positive and negative politeness.

Positive Polite Expressions

Every form of expression, act, feeling, thought or idea that is a plus to a person, place or thing is said to be positive. Positive expressions signal in or introduce an atmosphere of encouragement, praise and or reward to the addressee or recipient. It is always a mark of admiration displayed openly. According to Brown and Levinson (1995:75);

Politeness is directed toward positive face in which one’s self image is evaluated by others through appreciation and approval to assure the person addressed that he is liked and his ways of life approved of and that his wants are also wanted by the speaker.

Politeness is positive when the addressee is made to realize the fact that he is regarded as a friend, an in-group member, a well known and liked personality and that he is the same as the speaker and perhaps, other members of that group or social environment. For instance, if an adult speaker refers to a young boy or girl as: *Kan anwaan (old woman)*, *Kan aden (old man)*, *Da ami (my mate)*, *Ufan ami (my friend)*, *Uyai iden (fine boy)*, *Uyai iban (fine girl)*. As can be seen, the boy or girl's self image is being evaluated by the speaker because the speaker appreciates the addressee and approves of his/her ways. This type of polite expressions, it should be noted, may constitute an abuse or offence or a serious embarrassment to an Efik young girl or boy because it is mostly used in Anaang or Ibibio language variety of polite expressions.

Negative Polite Expressions

Unlike the positive polite speech act, this type is avoidance-based and is oriented towards partially satisfying the addressee's negative face. In fact, Negative Politeness is in line with one of the conversational postulates of Grice (1976:64) known as "Don't impose". This is a strategy in language use in which the speaker recognizes and respects the addressee would not like to interfere with his freedom of action if not the circumstances that compel him to do so. This form of politeness carries with it some measure of social distance which must be strictly maintained between the speaker and the addressee in that, the speaker does not know much about the addressee's inner thought and or vice versa. It is a strategy in language use commonly employed in making. In Anaang society for instance, a request for a favour often begins with apologies for interfering, disturbing one's peace, interrupting or transgressing and all these are put in an indirect form because the speaker does not wish to put across his request so directly. For instance:

"Mme neke nseme eti eti ke ami ndufana fien. Ade mkpo ami mkpelimaha inam. Mbuk, kpede ke anyene mkpo nte ekepad naira duop kufok afo om, mbok nwam nne nlad ndep ndidia no ntok adjen ami. Sisoño ete". (Anaang language).

"I really feel sad within me my bothering you. It is against my wish to do so. Please, if you have up to One Thousand naira on you, please help me so that I may use it to buy food for my children. Thank you Sir." (Spoken Nigerian English).

Furthermore, there is the realization that Negative politeness strategies consist in assurance that the speaker recognizes and respects the addressee's freedom of action.

Socio-cultural Manifestations of Polite Expressions in Spoken Nigerian English

Nigeria is a multilingual nation- a country which speaks over 513 languages and practices as many cultures as possible, (Eka 2000). This culturally diverse posture of Nigeria makes it easy for similar manifestations of politeness at the various levels and

forms of human interactions by the people of the various socio-cultural groups. The manifestations of politeness referred here, could either be verbal or non-verbal.

From the viewpoint of verbal manifestations, we have greetings, terms of address, use of honorific and choice of even how to make requests. With regard to non-verbal manifestations, we have gestures, eye contacts and movement, use of right or left or both hands, etc.

Verbal Manifestations of Polite Expressions in Nigeria

Across the various cultural groups in Nigeria, there is no provision for accommodation from a young person to an older a face threatening act a (FTAs), as this would be frowned at and considered an aberration or a taboo. But on the other hand, the older or socially superior person may threaten the face of a subordinate without much room for redress by the recipient usually, in this case, the subordinate. For the Nigerian, the concept politeness cannot be detached from social and cultural convention. This explication is buttressed by Nanda (1984:115) who reaffirms that: Language does more than just reflect culture. It is the way in which the individual is introduced to the order of physical and social environment.

The Nigerian child learns to appreciate the speech tradition of its people as an essential substance for survival and acceptance. For instance, a child in Nigeria across all the ethnic formations is meant to be seen and not heard, a woman's role is spelt out, the norms of addressing are clearly defined. These are some of the aspects of socialization that control the Nigerian world-view and a Nigerian child on his part grows up to accept them as his global aggregate of understanding of what politeness entails.

Greetings

From the view point verbal manifestation of politeness, there are evidence of greetings and the choice of terms of address. Greeting makes clear the position of a language user (LU) with regard to his age or social relationship to people around, under which rank differences and achievement could be easily established. For instance, in a gathering, that older participant in the interaction is greeted first. Greeting can be seen as a useful index of symmetrical or asymmetrical relationship and by extension, also index of power dynamics in a society. Above all, greeting reflects politeness and good breeding. When we bid someone "Godspeed" we could say in:

Hausa - (*Se anju ma*), Igbo- (*Ije-oma or Ka chifo*), Yoruba- (*Elo K' abo*),
Ibibio- (*Ka dio or Saña suñ -o*), Anaang – (*Wara*) for (**welcome or go well**).

Polite greetings also reflect some cultural variations in Nigeria and involve the choice of an appropriate pronoun. For instance, the pronoun for plurality is used to indicate difference according to ethno/linguistic norms: In Yoruba for instance: **Greeting** - "*Ka' ro*" (singular) and "*eka' ro*" which either passes for singular or plural

marker for deference. Meaning “**Good morning**”. **Question** - “*Ibo lo/le fi akpo naa si?*” meaning “**where did you keep the bag?**”

But for the Hausa speaker, such marked pronoun will only signal gender difference as in: **Greeting** – “*Sanu Ka*” (for male) and “*Sanu Ki*” (for female) Meaning “**I greet you**”. **Praise Singing** - “*Ranka dede*” (for male) and “*Ranka didi*” (for female) Meaning “**may you live long**”. But such pronoun used as politeness makers seem to be absent from the speech parlance of the Ibibio and Efik . They however, use appellations like “*Akparawa*”, “*Nkaiferi*”, “*Nne*”, *Usobom* (for singular) “*Nsobom*” (for plural) and *Akparawa* (for male singular) and “*Mkparawa*” (for male plural,) while Anaang uses “*Abaikpa*” (female singular) and “*Ubaikpa*” (for plural), *Dada* or *Dede* (for singular female and male respectively), but makes use of the marker; *mme* for plurality as in “*mme dada* and *mme dede*”. With regard to greeting still, Eka (2000:35) established that:

“the Sapir- Whorf hypothesis is quite valid in the Nigeria (English) situation...The linguistic variability is immense For instance if someone is engaged in a piece of work, Nigerians from many linguistic groups will say things which may be interpreted thus – you have done well’, ‘You doing well’. I recognize your effort’, I greet you ‘or’ ‘well done’

This therefore shows the extent to which the politeness strategies manifest across the cultures of the various groups in Nigeria.

Expressing Thanks

The expression of thanks reflects some cultural variation in spoken Nigerian English. Among the Hausa, Ibibio, Efik, Anaang and Igbo, expression of thanks are immediate. for instance, in Hausa: *Na gude* (singular) *Mungo de* (plural), Igbo - *Ime la*, Ibibio – *So soño eti eti* (singular) *Eso soño eti eti* (Plural) Efik – *Amenam (eti eti)* (singular) *Emenam (eti eti)* (plural) Anaang – *Ade anam or anam aboho* (singular) *Ede enam or e nam eboho* (plural). But they would thank you for long forgotten favour, arguing ‘*bi omode be dupe ore ano, ri mi gba*, meaning that more politeness and gratitude is expressed. The same is true of the Hausa, In using spoken Nigeria English, there seems to exist some inadequacies in the standard British English – “**Thank You**”, such that Nigerian English users now add qualifiers such as: “ **Very much**”, “**tremendously**”, or “**very seriously**”, “**from the bottom of my heart**” etc. as marks of politeness.

Expressing Requests

Spoken Nigerian English seems to suffer from the stuffs of formal English language expressions of politeness. This is noticed when requests are made with a total disregard to the use of or omission of the politeness marker ‘**please**’ as in the following

examples: **Give me your book, Can I see my result?, I want to sign my forms, Why not give me your pen?, I want you to sign my forms, Where is the VC's office?** As against the more polite forms shown below:- (**Let me use your book, please. Please, could I see my result? I wish you to sign my form, please. I hope you don't mind my using your pen, please. Could you please, sign my form? Please, where is the VC's office?**) The present writer, however, wishes to add that such omissions are not noticed among the (highly) educated Nigerian English users.

Saying 'No' Politely

In all the sampled groups, saying 'no' directly to a person of higher status or a guest, is offensive and unpleasant. There are other indirect but polite ways that are normally understood by interactants in spoken Nigerian English e.g **I am okay for now..., I don't feel like ..., I am already...** The other ways of refusing a request or answering a question Spoken Nigerian English include: (i) **changing the subject**, (ii) **not responding immediately**, (iii) **asking for time to think**, (iv) **making a non committal reply**, (v) **using a polite phrase that means 'no' but does not explicitly say it**. Unfortunately, it may be difficult to translate these phrases into English from some local languages such that when people try, they may often times be misunderstood.

Expressing 'Sorry'

Spencer (1971:44) recognized that appropriateness in Spoken Nigerian English is not the same thing as with native English usage. He also states that there is difference in appropriateness of certain expressions for particular occasions. For instance, if somebody slips off the ground or falls by sliding, a Spoken Nigerian English user would choose to say **'sorry'** or **'I'm sorry'** instead of the most appropriate native English usage of **'watch out'** or **'what a shame'**, **'be careful'** or **'mind your steps'**. The case explicated above is the same with a person sneezing. If a Nigerian English speaker wants to show concern for his plight, he says **'sorry'** or **'life for you'** especially when a child or an adult sneezes (in Anaang), instead of the SBE variety of **'Don't be a fool'** or **'what a shame'** and or **'take it easy'**. This could be traced to the peculiar way in which English is learnt in Nigeria and so, the NigE user manages to extend the semantic range of the English expression by creating new ones to accommodate the little provisions made by his culture in that regard.

Expressing Congratulations

In Spoken Nigerian English, it may be discovered that most users say **"congratulation"** without the 's' morpheme even a wrong collocation of **'for'** while others rather say **'thank you...'** in place of **"Congratulations"**. There is a marked difference with that of the Standard British English of **"Congratulations on your..."**. This could be explained from the view point of total absence of direct equivalence of such strategy in the indigenous Nigerian languages. But it must also be mentioned that

the Nigerian English users who do not have difficulty in using this strategy are mostly educated Nigerians, even though a sizeable portion who are not well informed in the area of language use still make use of “**Congratulation for your...**”.

Expressing Condolences

There is a general mix up observable in Spoken Nigerian English when one considers the various expressions ranging from ‘**sorry**’, ‘**take heart**’, ‘**take courage**’, ‘**be strong**’, ‘**the lord is your strength**’ etc, as against the Standard British English variety of: ‘**accept my condolences**’, or the American English variety of ‘**accept my sympathies**’. But most educated Nigerians make use of either of the British or American English varieties.

It must however, be pointed out that some semi literate Nigerians English users still find it difficult to differentiate between situations that require the use of congratulatory or condoling expressions. For instance, a 2nd Republic Governor paid a condolent visit to his counterpart whose daughter died in plane crash and made the following utterances:

*“...my dear people of...state, we have come to **congratulation** you for the death of your daughter... while in your state, we have **eaten** and we have **drunken**, we have e...eh, any way, when you come to..., we shall revenge...”*

This speech, to the educated Nigerian crowd, was a serious embarrassment while on the other hand, the said state governor had felt satisfied that he had done justice the occasion.

Data Analyses/Results

At the end of the interviews, sixty (60) responses were received. Ten (10) from the Hausa, Ten (10) from the Yoruba, Ten (10) from the Igbo speakers. The other thirty (30) came from Efik, Ibibio and Anaang language speakers who supplied ten (10) respondents each. Each of the sixty (60) who were interviewed responded satisfactorily to all the ten (10) question items used for the interview.

From the interview, it was discovered that politeness in language use reflected the socio-cultural background of each respondent and that virtually, all the ten respondents from each ethnic nationality gave similar responses to all the ten (10) questions except for little or variations, which took place among the Kano born Hausa speaker and Kanem-Bornu born Hausa speakers in the treatment of an older participant in a gathering, where the Kanem-Bornu prostrate by lying flat while the Kano sect would rather squat before an older participant as a mark of deference. Details of the findings are summarized in the table below:

Table 1: Findings on the Speech Acts Interview

S/N	Aspect of Polite Strategy	Socio-Cultural Background	Response
1	Making the addressee to realize that he is regarded as a friend, In-Group member or liked.	Anaang Ibibio Efik Igbo Hausa Yoruba	Fine boy/girl My son/daughter Goodboy/girl Beloved child True boy/girl Dependable child
2	Checking the Addressee's Negative Face	Anaang Ibibio Efik Igbo Yoruba Hausa	Don't be annoyed Be not offended Don't take offence Tolerate me, please Don't vex Just cool down.
3	Appreciating One's Ways Of Life	Anaang Ibibio Efik Igbo Yoruba Hausa	My brother's/sister's child, I don't hate you Father's incarnate, you are nice. Father mother's incarnate, nice of you, friend Son of the soil, we love you Our child, we love you Beloved, feel free
4	Treating Face Threatening Act	Anaang Ibibio Efik Igbo Yoruba Hausa	It is an insult from a young person. Only the adult may do it to the young. The young person can't do it. It is a taboo from a young person. It attracts a redress. It is an offence to the entire people if a young person exhibits it.
5	Ceremonial Etiquette for a Visitor	Anaang Ibibio	Real man, brave lion incarnate, the man every one hits and trembles. Handsome man, mother's husband.

6	Expressing Love, Affection or Infatuation	Efik	Youngman, courageous young man
		Igbo	The man of the people.
		Yoruba	The like of none, our great pillar.
		Hausa	Most loved, this is your home.
		Anaang	The one I love.
		Ibibio	I love you, darling.
		Efik	My sweet heart
		Igbo	None but you.
7	Appreciating Appearance/Dressing	Yoruba	My breathe of life
		Hausa	The one Allah has given me.
		Anaang	My brother's/sister's child, I don't hate you
		Ibibio	Distributor of beauty.
		Efik	Father's incarnate, you are nice.
		Igbo	Father's mother incarnate, nice of friend.
8	Boosting the Image of aYoung boy/girl	Yoruba	Our source of beauty, distributor of love and hatred. The mirror of our beauty, spirit of the day.
		Hausa	The carrier of beauty.
		Anaang	The only son/daughter of the mother.
		Ibibio	My young beauty.
		Efik	We cherish you.

9	Identifying Sex And Age	Igbo	Beauty of the old block.
		Yoruba	A show of beauty, beauty king/queen.
		Hausa	Ancient beauty's attire.
		Anaang	Baba/Mma ma.
		Ibibio	Papa/Mma ma
		Efik	Same
		Igbo	Same
		Yoruba	Same
10	Expressing Apology	Hausa	Same
		Anaang	Forgive me.
		Ibibio	Forgive me.
		Efik	I beg for pardon.
		Igbo	Forgive my wrong doing.
		Yoruba	Please, pardon me.
Hausa	May you forgive me.		

Implications

All that have been said boils to the fact politeness is a polished and civilized speech and its usage shows a tactful language device which recognises other factors of social interaction which are due to interactants and avoid causing offence to the person being addressed. This informs every rational speaker to adjust his verbal acts during interaction to suit his addressee, bearing in mind the sociological variable of polite forms of expression. Human beings need to interact with each other in order to create a better communicative world. Therefore, we should note the implication that one phenomenon which can help cement or mar relationship is the application of politeness.

Suggestions

From the foregoing it is suggested that socio-linguists should describe politeness in different Nigerian societies in order to check conflicts that arise from embarrassment between interactants from different cultural backgrounds or groups. It is also suggested

that every educated Nigerian and or socio-linguist should embark on a viable research venture into the possibilities of identifying possible areas of convergence in the use or application of civility (politeness). Strategies across cultures for purpose of ensuring world peace through the appreciation of other cultures. There is the need to transfer traditional Nigerian verbal manifestation of politeness into the English language and establish how these manifestations exert impact on effective communication.

As an official language in Nigeria, English has gone deeper into the domestic life of a sizeable proportion of the population, and so there arises the urgent need to discover how politeness (civility) has influenced the languages of the various regions of Nigeria and how these could be interpreted in the various domains of language use. Finally, in view of the present political/democratic dispensation in Nigeria, there is a serious need for effective inter-ethnic rapport and such rapport is rooted in politeness in every area of Nigerians' socio-political, academic, commercial and cultural activities and this should be seen as a major consideration in the task of forging unity in diversity.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper was concerned with politeness in language use, focusing on its relevance to spoken Nigerian English. It has shown that every language use is a reflection of the norms, rule and mores of the socio-cultural environment in which it functions. It has practically highlighted politeness from the point of view of various scholars; linguists and non-linguists and identified positive and negative types of politeness and brought to light their effects in verbal and non verbal speech acts.

It has also shown that there are socio-cultural manifestations of politeness in spoken Nigerian English and illustrated how politeness are expressed in greetings, thanks, apologies and requests etc, considering the multilingual posture of Nigeria. It has made useful suggestions toward the enhancement of effective communication, interaction and cooperation among language users in a speech community. These suggestions, it is hoped, will go a long way to stepping up the relevance of politeness to verbal and non- verbal speech acts in Nigeria and beyond.

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