

A PRAGMATIC STUDY OF POLITE INSULTS IN THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

Conversations are expressions of feelings, views, opinions or intentions that involve at least two individuals. The success or failure of any conversation solely depends on the interlocutors. For a conversation to be successful, it is expected that one of the interlocutors protects the self-image of the other interlocutor. This study, therefore, investigated polite insults so as to know the ingenuity in language use. Anchoring on Grice's (1981) conversational implicature as a theoretical framework, the study examined polite insults in the Nigerian context. Researcher's participatory observations and recorded conversations of the participants served as sources of data collection. Data were got from nuclear families, offices, Clubs, markets and interview settings in Ondo West Local Government Area, Ondo State, Nigeria. The participants were ESL speakers. The study discovered that polite insults are used for the avoidance of face-threat in a conversation. It also revealed strategies employed by the participants to express polite insults while still sustaining and maintaining face saving. Magnanimity in language use enabled the speakers and hearers flow in their conversations. These were reflected in the data analysed. This study, therefore, recommends that linguists should intensify efforts to beam their searchlight in other areas of polite insults in the socio-pragmatic context as this will expand and expound the body of existing knowledge.

Keywords: Polite Insult, Conversation, Implicature, Interlocutors, Nigerian Context.

Introduction

Since this present study is premised on polite insults, it is expedient to briefly shed light on the term pragmatics. This step is

designed to give a level playing ground for the task ahead. Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that focuses on how utterances convey meaning. It also focuses on utterances in context and situation, interlocutors' responses to meaning, and causes of wrong message encoding and decoding. The proponent of pragmatics is traced to Morris (1938). Further development of pragmatics is also traced to Austin (1962), Katz and Fodor (1963), Searle (1969) and Grice (1975). While Levinson (1983) sees pragmatics from a functional view, Brown and Yule (1983) view pragmatics from the analytical view point which involves contextual consideration in language study. In the same spirit, Farinde and Ogunsiji (2010) see pragmatics as the relationship between utterances and meaning in situation. To this end, pragmatics could simply be described as language in use. That is, how utterances are used in the contexts of situations by interlocutors in social interactions. In essence, the use of words in a conversation is within the preview of pragmatics.

Conversations are linguistic exchanges that are usually carried out by interlocutors for communication purposes. Interactions are successful if the interlocutors observe or maintain face-saving. This implies that a conversation could suffer setback if one of the interlocutor's self-image is threatened. So, to maintain and sustain social relationship in a discourse or conversation, language users should ensure that the self-image or face of every interlocutor is saved. By so doing, politeness has set in. Farinde, Omolaiye and Farinde (2023, p. 823) define politeness as "the means employed to show awareness of another person's face in a conversation. This means that the interlocutors are expected to show awareness of face of each other in a linguistic exchange. So, politeness is key to face-saving. Goffman (1955) sees "face" in conversation as the positive public image one intends to maintain in a social interaction. This implies that one of the interlocutor's face is expected to be protected in a conversation. Also, the faces of other participants in a conversation should be preserved. An interlocutor who ignores face-saving tends to pose threat to other interactants' faces. In its most restrictive sense, the term "face" is described

as the public self-image of a person while “face-threatening” is a situation where one of the interacts says something that threatens the other interlocutor’s public self-image. Self-image could be described as the emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone to recognize. Face-saving act, therefore, could be described as the language strategy employed by an interlocutor to make some utterances that lessen the possible face-threatening act. This is why Brown and Levinson (1987) pay more attention to “face”. The scholars identify two faces (positive and negative faces). Positive face is the desire for approval and acceptance by others, while negative face is the desire to proceed without being impeded upon (Redmond, 2015, Ajayi, 2020).

One of the strategies employed to save face in a conversation is politeness. However, the focus of this study is on “polite insults” in the Nigerian context. Before diving into the phrase “polite insults”, it is important to briefly shed light on the term. “Insult” is a derogatory use of language. It could be verbally and non-verbally expressed. Verbal insult is expressed through language while non-verbal insult is usually expressed through action. Since this study is on language, verbal insults are emphasized. *Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* defines the term “insult” as an offensive remarks or action”. Babou-sekkal (2012) sees an insult as an intentional expression or speech that is degrading, offensive and reprehensive. This implies that insult usually expresses the opposite of someone’s value. In the same spirit, Jay (1999) states the purposes of an insult. According to the scholar, insults are used to harm, demean or denigrate the target’s state of mind. It is worthy of mention here that an insult infringes on one’s emotion or self-esteem as it criticizes or humiliates the personal competence of the abused. Name-calling, prejudices, figurative use of words, proverbs, idiomatic expressions etc. are examples of verbal insults. Given this premise, therefore, it is important to briefly shed light on polite insults.

Polite Insults

Omolaiye (2020, p. 24) simply defines polite insult as “that type of insult that is mild, i.e. not blatant. Gentleman’s journal refers to polite insult as “gentleman insult”. That is, insulting while remaining a gentleman. The scholar points out some insult types thus:

- “I do not consider you a vulture, I consider you something a vulture can eat”.
- People clap when they see you, they clap their hands over their eyes”.
- You are a proof that God has a sense of humour.
- If I throw a stick, will you leave?.
- (<https://www.thegentlemansjournal.com>)

Polite insults are employed in conversations, in various facets of life. For instance, polite insults are expressed in our homes, offices or social gatherings in order to sustain and maintain social relationships in the social interaction.

Scope of Study

It must be mentioned here that an utterance is capable of making or marring an individual’s self-esteem. So, an acceptable speech or utterance usually guarantees peace and tranquillity among individuals. However, an impolite utterance could cause hatred, malice, embarrassment or disunity among individuals. To avoid blatant insults or utterances, some language users tend to make insults mild. However, much efforts have not been intensified to investigate how these polite insults are employed in families, offices, business transactions, social gathering etc. Given this premise, therefore, this present study investigated on polite insults. The study limited its research to verbal polite insults emanating from Nigerian bilinguals. Focus of investigation were utterances or conversations emanated from “husband and wife”, “boss and worker”, “buyer and seller”, “president and members” etc. It is worthy to mention here that the areas of focus mentioned are significant as they enhance interpersonal relationships for social and economic developments in our society. So, investigating

polite insults has revealed why and how polite insults are employed in conversations.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on conversational implicature propounded by Grice (1981). The tenet of this theory explains the principle of implied meaning in a conversation. Grice claims that when utterances are made, the language user may not wish to say everything in his utterances. However, it is expected that the hearer interprets the meaning of such an implied utterance, particularly the unspoken word(s) meanings of such words are not usually overt. That is, they are covertly implied. Ogunsiji and Farinde (2010) describe such an implied meaning as “implicature”. The term implicature is seen as an additional conveyed meaning(s) needed to be understood by the hearer. Lyons (1977) corroborates this when he also describes implicature as the extra information rested upon a distinction between what is actually said and what is implied in saying what is said. Kempson (1975, p. 43) defines conversational implicature as:

...assumption over and above the meaning used which the speaker knows and intends that the hearer will make in this face of an apparently open violation of the cooperative principles in order to interpret the speaker’s sentence in accordance with the cooperative principles.

The definition above has explained the implication of conversational implicature in the pragmatic context. It is something which is implied in a conversation that is something left implicit in actual language use. The relevance of this theory is on the conviction that polite insults are embedded in a conversation in which some utterances are covertly implied to avoid face threat. Hinging this theory on polite insults this study will reveal the pragmatic impact of language in use, thus revealing the communicative competence of a language user in a conversation.

Method of Data Collection

This study is empirical in that the data were got on-the-field. The recorded conversations were gathered in natural settings ranging from families, market places, offices and interview panels in Ondo West Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria. The level of the interlocutors' incautiousness in their conversations being recorded made the data original and standard. As at the time of the recording, the participants were at their natural best. Only the ESL users' conversations were recorded for analysis.

The researcher intensified efforts to find out why and how impolite insults are employed. In this regard, twenty participants who were between the age bracket of 45 and 85 years and who were also ESL users were engaged in interactions. Hence, husband-wife, buyer-seller, boss-worker, and president-member conversations were recorded. Ten recordings were made. However, only seven of the recorded conversations were used for analysis. It must be mentioned here that the collection of data for this study spanned two years.

Data Analysis

In this study, the data were categorised and analysed and this was based on data got from different settings. It is germane to mention here that the categorizations are not mutually exclusive, as the pragmatic features of some linguistic exchanges could overlap. The identified polite insults in the conversations underlined. For each of the analysis and data discussion, a heading was created.

Excerpt 1: Conversation between a husband and his wife

In this context, the husband returned from office and found that clothes were put in a chair in the sitting room. This infuriated the husband and wanted to find out why the clothes were put on a chair in the sitting room. Here is the conversation.

1. Wife: You are welcome dear.
2. Husband: Thank you. Who put these clothes here?
3. Wife: I

4. Husband: But you know this is sitting room
5. Wife: I'll remove them. I am sorry.
6. Husband: Have the children not returned from lesson?
7. Wife: No
8. Husband: I shall go and pick them.
9. Wife: Alright. Thank you.

The data above have revealed the conversation between the husband and his wife. In the conversation, the mood of the husband was not pleasant because of what he saw in the sitting room. He expected his wife to have known the proper place of keeping clothes. This necessitated the expression “but you know this is sitting room”. The expression could be regarded as a “polite insult” which implies that the wife was untidy. The woman admitted her guilt with a response “I will remove them; I am sorry”. It could be stated here that a polite insult manages conflict in a family. For instance, if the husband had insulted his wife blatantly, the wife would not have admitted her guilt. And this might have caused a conflict in the home. It is also discovered that the husband successfully employed a low tone to express the polite insult. Also, a reminder strategy (but you know) employed by the husband brought about admittance of guilt (I am sorry). In a nutshell, the understanding of the implied meaning in the polite insult had prevented conflict that might have likely ensued. This is why the husband decided to pick his children who were yet to return from their lesson. So, the polite insult above tactically avoided face-threat.

Excerpt 2: Conversation between the boss and his worker

This conversation occurred at a place of work where the manager was not happy for the store-keeper's lateness at his place of work. In age, the store-keeper was much older than the manager. The manager was at the gate of the office before the arrival of the store-keeper. Here is the conversation.

10. Store keeper: Good morning Sir.
11. Manager: Good morning baba, are you just coming to work by this time of the day?

12. Store - keeper: I woke up late Sir.
13. Manager: Do you have clock in your house?
14. Store-keeper: Yes sir.
15. Manager: And you still woke up late baba?
16. Store-keeper: This won't happen again sir.
17. Manager: I see! Go to your duty post.
18. Store - keeper: Thank you Sir.

The conversation was between the employer and the employee. Polite insults have been revealed in almost all the utterances of the manager. The question “Baba are you just coming to work by this time of the day?” is intended to attack or condemn baba for coming late to office. However, the expression was politely presented. The ignorance of Baba to the embarrassing question posed to him necessitated another embarrassing question- “Do you have clock in your house?” Baba eventually understood the implied meaning of the questions initially posed to him. Hence, he promised that such lateness would not repeat itself. The use of “I see” could be interpreted to mean that Baba’s body system could not function as expected because of age. The manager had successfully employed questioning as a strategy to express polite insults. The use of polite insults necessitated the store - keeper to tender his apology with a promise. Age recognition is revealed in the conversation above. The use of “Baba” in the manager’s utterances indicates respect for age. For instance, in the Yoruba context, age is held to high esteem. This is why the unruly behaviour of a younger person to the elderly person is usually frowned at. So, the use of the word “baba” is a respect for age. So, polite insults identified in the conversation above have saved the self - image of the store - keeper.

Excerpt 3: Conversation between a buyer and a seller

This conversation took place at the market setting. In other words, the conversation took place in the context of business transaction. The data are presented below:

19. Seller: My customer, watin you wan buy?

20. Buyer: Ground nut Oil
21. Seller: Edey. Which one?
22. Buyer: Watin be the price of this one?
23. Seller: ₦10,000.00
24. Buyer: What of ₦4,000.00
25. Seller: Which day you buy it last?
26. Buyer: Na two market ago.
27. Seller: Let me give you the one you go fit buy
28. Buyer: Watin that come mean?
29. Seller: Me and you know say this country no balance again
30. Buyer: Ok how much last?
31. Seller: Take am ₦7,000.00. A no see am buy ₦4,000.00, follow me buy customer

Business transaction is one of the contexts in which polite insults are employed, especially when the buyer and the seller disagree on prices of goods or services. This is revealed in the conversation above. In the beginning the conversation was cordial until when the buyer's price was not in conformity with the expectation of the seller. The expression of the buyer "What of ₦4,000.00" infuriated the seller. However, the seller succeeded in saving the face of the buyer with an implied statement which connotes "Ignorance". Another polite insult is the expression- "let me give you the one you go fit buy". The implicature in the expression could be interpreted to mean that the buyer was ignorant of her financial status. The response of the buyer to the seller's utterance has revealed the implied meaning of the seller's statement. Further statement of the seller in (29) is also a polite insult which could also be interpreted to mean ignorance in the current prices of commodities in Nigeria. Eventually, the buyer and the seller were able to agree on a reasonable price. One thing spectacular in the conversation above is the ability to insult while remain being polite. Ordinarily, the seller could have simply said "get out of my shop", but he succeeded in convincing the buyer through polite insult. Also, the use of irony as a strategy in the conversation above came to play. For

instance, the expression “Let me give you the one you go fit buy” was indirectly used to mean “I can see you do not have the capacity to buy this one”. Conversations were expressed in pidgin English. In the context of business, it is said customers are always right. This could be the reason behind the use of polite insults instead of blatant insults.

Excerpt 4: Conversation between the employer and an applicant

The conversation took place at the interview panel. An applicant was invited to an interview for employment. The manager of the company who was also the chairman of the interview panel had conversation with the applicant. The conversation goes thus:

32. Chairman: Good morning young man.
33. Applicant: Good morning Sir.
34. Chairman: can we meet you?
35. Applicant: How do you mean Sir.
36. Chairman: But you are a graduate?
37. Applicant: Yes Sir.
38. Chairman: Aright, just tell us your name.
39. Applicant: Thank you Sir. My names are OlabojoAyoola Mathew
40. Chairman: And you passed English at credit level?
41. Applicant: Yes Sir.
42. Chairman: Alright we shall get back to you.
43. Applicant: Thank you Sir.

Polite insults are usually embedded in the utterances of an interviewer especially if the applicant performs woefully in the interview. This was revealed in the conversation above. The expression- “But you are a graduate” and “And you passed English at credit level” are polite insults which imply that the certificates the applicant claimed to have obtained were not the through reflection of his academic performance. The chairman of the interview panel was surprised that the so - called graduate could not introduce himself to the panel. This necessitated the polite insults. The most surprising part of the

conversation is that the applicant could not understand the implied meaning of the utterances of the chairman. It is observed the strategies employed by the chairman to express his polite insults are declarative questions. The use of low tone and smiles employed by the chairman calmed the nerves of the applicant to respond to questions posed to him. In essence, the chairman was able to save the face of the applicant

Excerpt 5: Conversation between the president and his members

The conversation took place at the club setting. While the meeting was ongoing, some members sitting at the back were discussing. The president became unhappy for such distractions. Here is the conversation:

44. President: What is going on over there?
45. A member: The people sitting at the back are making noise
46. President: I beg, let us apply maturity. I believe we are not primary school pupils.
47. Another member: Let there be decorum
48. President: It shall be well with us oo.
49. All members: Amen oo.

The data above have revealed a high level of communicative competence in the utterances employed. Almost all the utterances are polite insults. For instance the use of “making noise” (in 45) is an instance of insult though politely expressed. The lexeme “noise” is an unwanted utterance. It could also be interpreted to mean useless utterance. By extension, some members discussing at the back were saying rubbish while the meeting was ongoing. The president’s utterance corroborates this when he politely advised that every member should imbibe the spirit of maturity in the meeting. The president further condemned noise making where he likened the attitudes of the noise makers to primary school pupils. The metaphorical use of primary school pupils implies that the noise makers are immature. This insult is politely expressed with the use of the pronoun “we”. In other words, the president also categorized himself to be one of the primary school pupils. The expression “Let there be decorum” is also a polite insult. It

implies that the noise makers are distractors (that is black sheep in the meeting). The president was, however, able to maintain social relationship with a prayer that the 'amen' was echoed by all the members.

Findings and Discussion

A pragmatic investigation of polite insults in the Nigerian context has revealed the ingenuity in language use. Verbal insults were politely expressed in order to avoid face threatening, thereby creating social or interpersonal relationships between the interlocutors. The study has identified low tone as a key to express polite insults. It is one of the strategies for insulting while still being polite. This could be found in (2) where the husband employed polite insult to correct the action of his wife. Eventually, the wife admitted her improper action and then apologized for such an action. The understanding of the implied meaning in the polite insults restored peace and harmony in the family.

The study has also observed that polite insults are employed to respect age. Conversation in excerpt (2), the manager kept on repeating the word 'baba' as a sign of respect for age. Questioning was employed as a strategy to express polite insults on baba for his lateness to office. It is noted that the effective use of polite insults still maintain cordial relationship between the interlocutors because each of the interlocutors tried to avoid face-threat.

In the context of business transaction, polite insult is a tool to checkmate some buyers who price goods or commodities below the cost price. The use of irony was employed as a strategy to express polite insults. For instance, the expression in (27) is a polite insult which implies that the buyer is ignorant of her financial status. By extension, the buyer is poor financially. It is discovered that polite insult is better than blatant insult in the context of business transaction.

Declarative question is also employed as a strategy to express polite insults. The questions asked by the chairman of the interview panel in (36) were not really questions but insults. The

applicant was not upset because the insults were politely expressed in low tones. It is also discovered that not all the implied utterances that were understood by the hearers. Throughout the conversation, the applicant thought the questions posed to him were intended questions. The questions were polite insults to condemn his poor performance and his educational certificates he claimed he had.

No doubt, noise making could be a distraction in social gathering. However, polite insult is seen as a tool to maintain decorum while meeting is ongoing. The president and some members successfully employed polite insult as a corrective measure without threatening other members' faces. So, polite insults were metaphorically expressed to maintain social relationship. Conversational implicature in the conversations analyzed are indications that it is not necessary to say everything as they are if there is need to sustain and maintain face-saving act in linguistic exchanges.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Effective use of language is key in every conversation. It is a yardstick for measuring communicative competence of a language user. It is not out of place to state that polite insult is a linguistic tool to sustain and maintain face saving act in every linguistic exchange. The effective use of language goes a long way in bringing about interpersonal relationships between the interlocutors. To this end, this study has made a pragmatic analysis of why and how polite insults are expressed in conversations in the Nigerian context. It has been observed that polite insults are used to recognize or respect person's self - image. For instance, the use of the word "baba" in excerpt (2) simply indicates respect for age. Respect for age is entrenched in socio-cultural realities in Nigeria. For instance, in the Yoruba context, age is held to high esteem. This is why the unruly behaviour of a younger person to an elderly person is usually frowned at.

It is worthy of mention here that some of the polite insults were expressed figuratively. Questioning (declarative questions), and rhetorical declarative sentences were also employed to avoid face-

threat in linguistic exchanges. In a nutshell, polite insult could simply be described as a linguistic manipulation in an utterance to save faces of the participants. This study, therefore, recommends that linguists should intensify efforts to investigate other areas of polite insults in the socio – pragmatic context because, polite insults enhances face-saving act in a conversation.

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