



Politeness Principle as a Pragma-Stylistic Device in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates into how politeness principle is employed in the regulation of discourse in literary texts. It also evaluates the applicability of the politeness principle, which is a pragmatic principle designed to regulate spoken discourse, to literary discourse. Excerpts from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* were collated, presented and analyzed based on the politeness maxims postulated by Leech (1983) and, Brown and Levinson (1987). This study reveals that politeness strategies could be used as a stylistic device for the regulation of discourse among characters in a discourse and, between a narrator and his reader. They enable a participant in a discourse to exploit language to achieve communicative goals, and when used appropriately they ease tension and promote comity and understanding. This study also reveals that politeness is culturally bound, as it varies from one culture to another. It also shows that politeness could be deduced from the linguistic and paralinguistic attributes of the text. It is obvious from the analysis of the excerpts that politeness principle is applicable to literary discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Politeness theories were developed to account for face-to-face interaction, not literary discourse. However, the relevance of such theories to dialogue between characters in fiction is obvious; its relevance to the communicative flow between narrator and reader is less clear, but this study shall show that politeness does have a role in literary discourse. The politeness principle (PP) grew out of the weaknesses of the cooperative principles (CP). The politeness principle is generally considered a good complement to the CP. It is thus said to rescue the CP. For Leech (1983), PP has a higher regulative value than CP;

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being polite allows communication to be smooth and to continue in such a way that better cordiality is assured. However, he contends that both PP and CP have relative-overriding tendencies i.e sometimes CP overrides PP, and vice-versa. Leech observes that politeness is manifested not only in the content of conversation, but also in the way conversation is managed and structured by its participants. For example, conversational behaviour such as speaking at the wrong time (interrupting) or being silent at the wrong time has impolite implications (139).

Leech identified six different maxims of politeness which tend to go in pairs as follows:

- i. Tact Maxim (in impositives and commissives)
 - (a) Minimize cost to other [(b) Maximize benefit to other]
- ii. Generosity Maxim (in impositives and Commissives)
 - (a) Minimize benefit to self [(b) Maximize cost to self]
- iii. Approbation Maxim (in expressives and assertives)
 - (a) Minimize dispraise of other [(b) maximize praise of other]
- iv. Modesty Maxim (in expressive and assertives)
 - (a) Minimize praise of self [(b) Maximize dispraise of self]
- v. Agreement Maxim (in assertives)
 - (a) Minimize disagreement between self and other [(b) Maximize agreement between self and other]
- vi. Sympathy Maxim (in assertives)
 - (a) Minimize antipathy between self and other [(b) Maximize sympathy between self and other] (132).

Leech observes in relation to these maxims thus:

Politeness concerns a relationship between two participants whom we may call self and other. In conversation, self will normally be identified with s, and other will typically be identified with h;... The label other may therefore apply not only to addressees, but to people designated by third-person pronouns. (131).

These maxims are also important to our pragmatic stylistic analysis of Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. However, for the purpose of our study, 'self' is used to refer to the writer or a character taking turn in a dialogue while 'other' is used to refer to a reader or a character who is the hearer. Other scholars who have explored the politeness principles are Brown and Levinson (1987). At the heart of Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness lies Goffman's (1967) sociological notion of face. They are of the opinion that in order to enter into social relationships, we have to acknowledge and show an awareness of the face, the public self-image, the sense of self, of the people we address. Brown and Levinson's politeness theory holds that people are motivated by their need to maintain their face. Simply put, face is "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (Brown and Levinson, 1987:61). Stated in another way, face means roughly an

individual's self-esteem. Fairclough sees politeness as "...part of concern from Participants for each other's 'face' (wish to be liked, wish not to be imposed upon) and respect for status" (118). Brown and Levinson identify two aspects to this self-image: Positive face and Negative face. Positive face refers to our need to be accepted and liked by others and our need to feel that our social group shares common goals. Positive face also refers to the need to be appreciated by others, and to maintain a positive self-image. Positive politeness orients to preserving the positive face of others. When one uses positive politeness, one tends to choose the speech strategies that emphasize one's solidarity with the addressee. These strategies include claiming 'common ground' with the addressee, conveying that the speaker and the addressee are co-operators, and satisfying the addressee's wants (Brown and Levinson, 1987:101-29). On the other hand, negative face refers to our right to independence of action and our need not to be imposed on by others. Negative politeness orients to preserving the negative face of other people. When one employs negative politeness, one tends to opt for the speech strategies that emphasize one's deference to the addressee. Face is considered to be a universal notion in any human society. As rational agents, conversational participants will ideally try to preserve both their own face and their interlocutors' face in a verbal interaction. It is worth the effort to reiterate that everyone wants his face wants to be met. When such happens, the individual is said to get his face saved; when the converse occurs, his is said to be threatened. These events have been described as Face Saving Acts (FSA) and Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) respectively.

Face threatening acts are illocutionary acts that are liable to damage or threaten the hearer's or reader's negative face. This happens, sometimes, when the hearer is insulted or when what the hearer holds dear is given disapproval or when an imposition is placed on the hearer's freedom. Sometimes, the illocutionary act may be potential to cause damage to the speaker's own positive face, negative face or both. Acts that threaten positive face include expressions of disapproval, accusations, criticism, disagreements, and insults; those that threaten negative face include advice, orders, requests, suggestions, warnings; those that threaten both positive and negative face include complaints, interruptions, and threats. Furthermore, a second distinction can be made between acts that primarily threaten the speaker's face and those that primarily threaten the addressee's face. The speaker can threaten his or her own face by performing, for example, the acts of accepting compliments, expressing thanks, and making confessions. On the other hand, acts such as advice, reminding, and strong expression of emotions threaten primarily the addressee's face wants (Brown and Levinson, 1987:67-8).

Brown and Levinson (74) posited three independent and culturally sensitive social variables according to which the strength or weightiness of FTA can be measured. First, there is the social distance (D) between the speaker and the addressee. Second is the relative power (P) of the addressee over the speaker. Finally, the third variable is the absolute ranking (R) of

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imposition in a particular culture. The strength of an FTA is measured by adding together the three variables D, P and R, on the basis of which the amount of face work needed or the degree of politeness required can be worked out.

However, it is possible to reduce the damage that the speaker's act may cause to the hearer's face through the adoption of certain strategies. The strategies are:

- i. Performing the FTA on record without redressive action
- ii. Performing the FTA on the record using positive politeness
- iii. Performing the FTA on record using negative politeness
- iv. Performing the FTA using off record politeness and not performing the FTA (Thomas 1995) .

Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies correspond to some extent to Leech's politeness maxims. The tact maxim focuses on the hearer, and says 'minimise cost to other' and 'maximise benefit to other'. The first part of this maxim fits in with Brown and Levinson's negative politeness strategy of minimizing the imposition, and the second part reflects the positive politeness strategy of attending to the hearer's interests, wants and needs. The maxim of generosity is the flip-side of the tact maxim since it focuses on the speaker, and it says 'minimise benefit to self' and 'maximise cost to self'. The maxim of approbation says 'minimise dispraise of other' and 'maximise praise of other'. The first part of the maxim is somewhat similar to the politeness strategy of avoiding disagreement. The second part fits in with the positive politeness strategy of making other people feel good by showing solidarity. The modesty maxim is possibly a more complex maxim than the others, since the maxim of quality can sometimes be violated in observing it. The maxim of agreement, 'minimise disagreement between self and other' and 'maximise agreement between self and other', is in line with Brown and Levinson's positive politeness strategies of 'seek agreement' and 'avoid disagreement', the sympathy maxim – 'minimise antipathy between self and other' and 'maximise sympathy between self and other' includes polite speech acts as congratulate, commiserate and express condolences. This group of speech acts is taken care of in Brown and Levinson's positive politeness strategy of attending to the hearer's interests, wants and needs. Having considered the general theories of politeness, which were developed to account for conversational interactions, this research turns to the issue of the extent to which they may be applicable to literary discourse.

Black observes that politeness needs to be considered on different levels of narrative organisation. On the level of character-to-character interaction, the normal conventions of politeness apply. The situation is slightly different and more complex, on the higher level of author/narrator and reader. Here the interaction is essentially one way: our recourse if we do not like something is to stop reading (74).

There is an impoliteness in being invited to read a book. It is an imposition, which threatens our negative face. It makes demands upon time and... It may seek to overturn our schemata, to change our minds about things we may hold dear. It may expose us to uncomfortable views of the world, show us the perspectives of people with whom we profoundly disagree (Black 74).

So far as the linguistic organization of a text is concerned, certain figures of speech can constitute an FTA. Leech (1983) argues that irony is used to convey an offensive remark without (on the surface level at least) violating his politeness principles. In other words, it appears to attend to the hearer's positive face, while conveying a negative face comment. Black encapsulates this view thus:

In the context of politeness, it is worth noting that irony is potentially face threatening in a number of ways: it requires extra processing effort, and if readers miss it and it is subsequently drawn to their attention, embarrassment and a sense of exclusion are the likely consequence" (76).

Analysis of Some Excerpts From *Purple Hibiscus*

This section analyzes the text *Purple Hibiscus* using the Politeness Principles. Excerpts from the texts are identified, presented and analyzed below as follows:

Excerpt [1] *'Papa himself would have a blank face when I looked at him, the kind of expression he had in the photo when they did the big story on him after Amnesty World gave him a human rights award (5).*

In the excerpt above, Kambili tries to describe Papa's reaction to the praises showered on him by Father Benedict. It could be deduced from the excerpt above that politeness could be inferred from the paralinguistic features of the hearer. The way an individual reacts to praise will help us to draw a conclusion as to whether an individual is polite or impolite. The modesty maxim stipulates that an individual should minimize praise of self and maximize dispraise of self. Notwithstanding the praises showered on Brother Eugene by Father Benedict, the former still maintained a poker face. This is in a bid to minimize praise of self.

Excerpt [2] *"Jaja, you did not go to Communion" Papa said quietly, almost a question.*

"The wafer gives me bad breath."

"And the priest keeps touching my mouth and it nauseates me," Jaja said.

"It is the body of our Lord... You cannot stop receiving the body of our Lord. It is death, you know that" (Papa)

"Then I will die... Then I will die, Papa" (Jaja) (6-7)

The excerpt above took place between Eugene Achike, a devoted and fanatical Catholic, and his son, Jaja. Achike who was not pleased with his son, asked him why he did not partake in the communion. The response by

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Jaja sounded impolite as it threatened the face of Achike who would not tolerate any act that is repugnant to the Catholic faith. To start with, describing the 'host' as wafers is unacceptable to Achike, as he has always insisted they '*call it the host because "host" came close to capturing the essence, the sacredness, of Christ's body. "Wafer" was too secular...*' (6). Worse still, Jaja states that the Wafer gives him 'bad breath'. In addition, Jaja describes the action of the priest who Achike revered highly as 'nauseating'. He made his father to understand that he would rather die than partake in the communion. It could be deduced from the responses of Jaja that he had resolved to be uncooperative. A close look also reveals that the responses of Jaja uphold the maxim of quality which stipulates that a speaker should make his contribution one that is true. However, in trying to uphold the maxim of quality by saying the truth, Jaja contravenes the politeness principle. The agreement maxim stipulates that one should minimize disagreement between self and other, and maximize agreement between self and other. A close look at the responses of Jaja would reveal a deliberate attempt to maximize disagreement between himself and his father, who had been dictatorial. This act of revolt took place after the transformation in Jaja's orientation made possible by his visit to Auntie Ifeoma's house in Nsukka. Prior to this visit, Achike determined everything they do. One could conclude therefore, that the decision to respond to Achike in such a manner was a deliberate attempt to liberate himself from his father's religious and draconian shackles.

Excerpt [3] "*Jaja, have you not shared a drink with us, gbo? Have you no words in your mouth?*"

"Have you nothing to say, gbo, Jaja?" Papa asked...

"Mba, there are no words in my mouth", Jaja replied.

"What?"....

Jaja pushed his chair back. "Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Papa. Thank you, Mama."

"Jaja!" Papa said. (13-14).

The above excerpt also took place between Jaja and his father, Eugene. Papa had served cashew juice produced in his factory. As usual, he expected compliments from the members of his family. Unfortunately, Kambili and her mother passed some compliments with the exception of Jaja who was silent and that infuriated Eugene. Jaja may have remained silent in a bid to uphold the maxim of quality which requires a speaker to make a contribution that is true. Rather than taking the hypocritical posture adopted by Kambili and her mother which is fallacious, he decided to keep silent to save his father's face. Unfortunately, his father took his act of silence as rudeness and impolite. It is important to note that silence has both polite and impolite implications. In the first part of this excerpt, even though Jaja considered his act of silence as a deliberate attempt to be polite, Eugene considered Jaja's act of silence as rude and impolite. Unfortunately, the responses of Jaja after being pressured became unpalatable to his father. On the literal level, the

response “*Mba, there are no words in my mouth*” may be categorized as a polite response, but when situated in the context of the utterance, it is sarcastic and impolite. Another seemingly polite but sarcastic and impolite utterance is the statement “*Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Papa. Thank you, Mama*”. On the surface, it may be perceived as an appreciation. But when analyzed in the context of the utterance, it amounts to an impolite utterance. It contravenes the agreement maxim which provides that a speaker maximizes agreement between self and other, and, to a great extent, minimize disagreement between self and other. It is clear from our discussion thus far that context is an essential element in evaluating the politeness potential of an utterance. Interpreting the politeness potential of an utterance without recourse to the linguistic and non linguistic context of utterance will to this extent be impoverished.

Excerpt [4] “*Sister Beatrice, what is it? Why have you done this? Are we not content with the anara...we are offered in other sisters’ homes? You shouldn’t have, really*” (22).

This statement was uttered by members of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal prayer group when they visited Mama and were offered food. Even though the utterance violates the maxim of quality, it upholds the politeness principle. In Igbo socio-cultural arrangement, it will amount to an aberration for one to accept such an offer without such polite remarks. As a matter of fact, the parties to the interaction are conscious of the fact that it is just a formality. This act of politeness is in consonance with the tact maxim, which stipulates that an individual should minimize cost to other and maximize benefit to other. Thus, the women uphold the tact maxim by minimizing cost and maximizing benefit to Mama.

Excerpt [5] “*The Standard would never write this nonsense... The Standard editorial is well done...Ade is easily the best out there*” Papa said (25).

In the excerpt above, Papa compares *The Standard* and Ade Coker which are his newspaper and editor respectively with other newspapers and eulogizes them. This act is impolite as it contravenes the politeness principle. It is contrary to the modesty maxim and approbation maxim. The modesty maxim stipulates that an individual should minimize praise of self and maximize dispraise of self. On the other hand, the approbation maxim stipulates that an individual should minimize dispraise of other and maximize praise of other. In the first instance, Papa’s act is contrary to the modesty maxim in the sense that instead of minimizing the praise of self and maximizing the dispraise of self to enhance the modesty maxim, Papa praises his newspaper and editor. Papa’s remark also contravenes the approbation maxim in the sense that instead of minimizing dispraise of other and maximizing praise of other, Papa did not only maximize praise of his company and editor, he condemns other newspapers thus “*Change of Guard. What a headline. They are all afraid. Writing about how corrupt the civilian government was, as if they think the military will not be corrupt. This country is going down, way down*” (26). Thus, making his comment immodest and, by extension, impolite.

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Papa's behaviour is not different from what is obtainable in human life. Man by his very nature is very selfish and would prefer to minimize dispraise to self and maximize praise to self.

Excerpt [6] "*Ogbunambala!*" Papa said. "wait for me, I am praying with my family. I want to give you a little something for the children. You will also share my tea and bread with me"

"*Hei! Omelora! Thank sir. I have not drank milk this year*". (Ogbunambala said) (60).

The excerpt above can best be analyzed in two parts. The first part consists of Papa's offer to Ogbunambala, while the second part of the speech event consists of Ogbunambala's acceptance. Papa's offer is in consonance with the politeness principle. It agrees with the generosity maxim which provides thus: minimize benefit to self; maximize cost to self. By offering to give a 'little something for the children' and share his tea and bread with Ogbunambala, Papa has minimized benefit to himself and maximized cost to himself, thus upholding the politeness principle. The acceptance by Ogbunambala presents a different situation. His act violates the politeness principle. It violates the tact maxim which stipulates that an individual should minimize cost to other and maximize benefit to other. Thus, instead of minimizing cost and maximizing benefit to Papa by rejecting the offer, he accepts the offer, thereby maximizing cost and minimizing benefit to Papa. At another level, Ogbunambala's response upholds the modesty maxim. His response that "*I have not drank milk this year*" upholds the modesty maxim in the sense that it minimizes the praise of self and maximizes the dispraise of self. It is important to note that in violating the tact maxim and upholding the modesty maxim, Ogbunambala upholds the maxim of quality which stipulates that one should make his contribution one that is true. This is unlike the response in Excerpt [4]. This statement was uttered by members of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal prayer group when they visited Mama and were offered food. Even though the utterance violates the maxim of quality, it upholds the politeness principle. In Igbo socio-cultural arrangement, it will amount to an aberration for one to accept such an offer without such polite remarks. As a matter of fact, the parties to the interaction are conscious of the fact that it is just a formality. This act of politeness is in consonance with the tact maxim, which stipulates that an individual should minimize cost to other and maximize benefit to other. Thus, the women uphold the tact maxim by minimizing cost and maximizing benefit to Mama.

Excerpt [7] "*Does Eugene think we are starving? Even a bag of rice?...Gas cylinders? Oh, nwunye m should not have bothered herself so much*". Then Aunty Ifeoma did a little dance... (113).

The utterance above transpired between Aunty Ifeoma and Eugene's driver, when he brought some items including a bag of rice and gas cylinders to her. Her utterance violates the maxim of quality to uphold the politeness principle. Aunty Ifeoma's utterance violates the maxim of quality because she is aware that she is making a contribution which is not true. In Igbo socio-cultural

arrangement, it will amount to an aberration for one to accept such an offer without such polite remarks. As a matter of fact, the parties to the interaction are conscious of the fact that it is just a formality. This act of politeness is in consonance with the tact maxim, which stipulates that an individual should minimize cost to other and maximize benefit to other. Thus, Aunty Ifeoma upholds the tact maxim by minimizing cost and maximizing benefit to Papa.

Excerpt [8] *"I love you"* (Kambili)

"You are almost sixteen, Kambili. You are beautiful. You will find more love than you will need in a lifetime," (Father Amadi)

The excerpt above transpired between Kambili and Father Amadi. To start with, Kambili's utterance amounts to an abominable act when situated within the Igbo sociocultural context. It is an aberration for a woman to make such passes at a man. Thus, the act is impolite and repugnant to Igbo conventional practice. In addition, making such an offer to a Catholic priest amounts to a face threatening act, which is impolite. This is because it threatens the sanctity of priesthood, which provides that a priest is not allowed under the Catholic institutional framework to enter into any sexual relationship with a woman. From Kambili's thoughts and reflections, it is clear it is not the agape love that she is interested in. This utterance is impolite because it violates the tact maxim which stipulates that an individual should minimize cost to other and maximize benefit to other. Considering the shared knowledge among the interlocutors that a priest cannot indulge in such an act, one considers Kambili's offer one that maximizes cost to the priest. The priest response may appear to have violated the maxim of relevance. But a close look at Father Amadi's response points to the contrary. A denotative interpretation of that response indicates that the response is relevant. Father Amadi's act of deviousness is deliberate to uphold the maxim of politeness. It would have been impolite if Father Amadi had given a blunt response. Also, a blunt response of turning down the request of Kambili would have resulted to a face threatening act. The priest's response saved the face of Kambili. Father Amadi's response upholds the tact maxim. In his response, he has minimized cost to Kambili and maximized benefit to her. This explains why the relationship did not turn sour after the response. At another level, Father Amadi's response constitutes an off-record communicative act. This off-record communicative act also constitutes a flouting of the maxim of quantity. Father Amadi's act of not saying openly what he meant implies that he is not appearing to make his contribution as informative as possible. Indirectness enables speakers to address particular people but be polite by giving them options and retreating behind the literal meaning of words.

Excerpt [9] *"Are you sure they're not abnormal, mom? Kambili just behaved like an atulu when my friends came."*

"She behaves funny. Even Jaja is strange. Something is not right with them." (Amaka) (141)

In the excerpt above, Amaka describes Kambili, her cousin, as abnormal and also compares her to a sheep. This utterance violates the politeness

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principles. It violates the approbation maxim which encourages the speaker to minimize dispraise of other and maximize praise of other. The impoliteness implicit in the utterance could be deduced from the word "atulu". Atulu which means sheep in Igbo language is a word used to refer to an individual who exhibits foolish traits. By comparing Kambili to a sheep, Amaka undermines Kambili's intellectual prowess. Thus, Amaka's utterance is impolite to Kambili since instead of minimizing dispraise and maximizing praise to her, Amaka chose to maximize dispraise by condemning her activity. Amaka's act amounts to a face threatening act as it threatens Kambili's face.

CONCLUSION

This study investigates into how the politeness principle could be employed as a stylistic device in a literary text. This is premised on the fact that the politeness principle is a pragmatic principle originally formulated to cater for face-to-face spoken discourse. This study reveals that the politeness principle could be use as a stylistic device for the regulation of discourse among characters in a discourse and, between a narrator and his reader. This study also reveals that politeness is culturally bound, as it varies from one culture to another. This study also shows that politeness could be deduced from the linguistic and paralinguistic attributes of the text. It is obvious from the analysis of the excerpts that politeness principle is applicable to literary discourse.

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