LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2022, 19 (4): 125-136
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LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©December 2022
RESEARCH

TURN-TAKING AND HONORIFICS AS POLITENESS STRATEGY IN COMMUNICATION: THE CASE OF PARLIAMENTARY DISCOURSE

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Abstract

People take turns when they communicate in whatever setting except perhaps in heated arguments. Two participants of an exchange must however use language while they observe turns. If the use of turns fails, then, the role of language as maintaining social relationships fails as well. This study, using Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) Face theory, explores the extent to which face saving/threatening acts can make or mar a conversation; the degree to which turns can be maximized in parliamentary discourse, and the use of honorifics on the Floor of the House of Assembly as a politeness strategy. To access data for this discussion, the researcher had to attend some sessions held by the legislators at the Plateau State House of Assembly.

Introduction

There is no doubt that threats to face sometimes occur in everyday conversation. What constitutes politeness however differs from one culture to another, one group of people to another or from one profession to another. The paper is anchored on Brown and Levinson's (1978) face theory. This paper analyzes selected parliamentary proceedings of the members of the 7th Plateau State House of Assembly using scales of politeness. The study explores what exactly a 'turn' in conversation is and how people allocate turns to themselves. It also explores how legislators observe turns and the traffic rules of talks using linguistic and non-linguistic parameters. The use of honorifics in the Plateau State House of Assembly is taken into consideration as well. Honorifics are an inherent property of parliamentary discourse maximally employed to maintain good relationships and politeness.

In communication, interlocutors use verbal language but for effective or successful interaction, participants of an exchange must

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observe turns. If the use of turns fails, then, the role of language as maintaining social relationships fails as well. Trudgill observes that language "is not simply a means of communicating information … it is also a very important means of establishing and maintaining relationships with people" (126). He incorporates the functions of language in his definition, thus viewing language beyond a set of items used in communication but used for a purpose such as 'establishing relationships'. Whereas Politeness Principle (PP) suggests that conversationalists should behave politely towards one another since people must respect one another's face, the non observance of turns usually or more often constitutes a serious problem in conversation. This study, as earlier stated, explores the extent to which face saving/threatening acts can make or mar a conversation, the degree to which turns can be maximized in moving or supporting of motions, and the use of honorifics on the Floor of the House of Assembly as a politeness strategy. To access data for this discussion, the researcher had to attend some sessions held by the legislators at the Plateau State House of Assembly. The researcher was present in the House for a few hours, three days in a week to observe the legislator's mode of exchanges. A video recording device was used to record the proceedings. After the observations and video coverage of the Sittings, data in the form of legislators' verbal expressions were transcribed for analysis. The three tapes were played repeatedly to extract the data for subsequent analysis.

The Face Theory

Peccei posits that "face refers to our public self-image" (64). One's face explicates his state of mind to a certain degree. This is a literal explanation of face. It is more of a psychological phenomenon. Interlocutors are able to give away their countenance in conversation. A speaker could express his depressed state, distaste, gloom, delight and rudeness with the face. For example, a congratulatory message expressed with a long face shows some level of dishonesty. The face theory was propounded by Brown and Levinson. Holmes quotes Brown and Levinson's definition of linguistic politeness as "a means of showing concern for people's 'face'" (712). What constitutes politeness differs from one culture to another or from one group of people to another. Substantial research has been done on this by Brown and Levinson. Holmes captures this thus: "different cultures have different

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ways of expressing consideration for others, and the most influential work in the area of linguistic politeness is Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1978, 1987)" (712).

It is not in doubt that threats to face sometimes occur in everyday conversation. Culpeper *et al.* note that:

> Conflictive talk has been found to play a role – and often a central one – in, for example, army training discourse (Culpeper 1996), courtroom discourse (Lakoff 1989; Penman 1990), family discourse (Vuchinich 1990), adolescent discourse (Labov 1972; Goodwin and Goodwin 1990), doctor-patient discourse (Mehan 1990), therapeutic discourse (Labov and Fanshel 1977), 'Everyday conversation' (Beebe 1995) and fictional texts (Culpeper 1998; Liu 1986; Tannen 1990). (1545–6)

Parliamentary discourse can be added to the list as well. Disagreements are likely to ensue between conversationalists as a result of divergent views. As such, a threat to face is to be anticipated.

A talk that concerns 'face' cannot be discussed in isolation from politeness. While trying to communicate, interactants redefine interpersonal relationships (a view proposed by Trudgill). This is where politeness comes in and influences the way people talk. Johnstone defines politeness as, "all the ways in which speakers adapt (or decide not to adapt) to the fact that their interlocutors, actual or imagined, have human needs like their own" (124–5). To Brown and Levinson (1987), a participant in an exchange is regarded as a Model Person, who is "a wilful fluent speaker of a natural language, further endowed with two special properties–*rationality* and *face*" (58). A model person has a positive face and a negative face. As regards rationality, a speaker is capable of reasoning and knowing what options or strategies best suit the face needs (both faces) of interlocutors. Wang states that "Brown and Levinson treat politeness as a redressive action because some communicative acts (e.g. request, compliment, invitation, etc.) are considered to be intrinsically face-threatening acts (FTA); interaction is thus the expression of social relationships and is crucially built out of strategic language use" (1).

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What is considered as a threat to face may vary across cultures, as well as functions and professions. The face–threatening act in parliamentary discourse is what this paper investigates. It is expected that members of the parliament use strategic language in communication such that social relationships are built and maintained.

Face–threatening acts such as denigrating someone's face become minimal when participants enjoy a good social relationship. Wang quotes Brown and Levinson thus: "a 'typical' FTA such as a criticism could "lose much of its sting" with the assertion of mutual friendship" (2). Even criticism could lose its venom when conversationalists share a close rapport. Participants with such good rapport avoid disagreements. Wang observes that "avoidance of a disagreement, in order to minimize a possible FTA, is termed the number 6 positive politeness strategy in Brown and Levinson's FTA strategies" (3). Politeness allows participants to curtail FTAs. Furthermore, Wang observes that FTAs are "context-dependent" (4). Language is not merely a rational or logical use of strategies, nor do FTAs remain face-threatening or as intrinsic as Brown and Levinson claim. The importance of how contexts (e.g., interlocutors' relationship and background knowledge) affect the interpretation of FTAs cannot be underestimated. As speakers, we use strategies that connect us together to enjoy a kind of belongingness. Peccei observes that "when we use positive politeness we use speech strategies that emphasize our solidarity with the hearer as *we*, and requests which are less indirect". By this, Peccei means that instead of saying "you should have done it the other way", one would say "we should have done it the other way". This paper is however particularly interested in the observance or non observance of turns.

Turns and Turn-taking

The word 'turn' as a noun refers to a time when somebody gets an opportunity to do something. 'Turn' also refers to a time when somebody is asked to do something, especially when this is rotated among other people. It is normal for conversationalists to take turns during talks except perhaps in an argument or brawl. In the sense of the word 'turn', conversationalists in a civilized society wait for their turn before speaking. They cannot talk all at the same time. Finegan posits that "participants must tacitly agree on who should speak and when". He

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adds that "normally we take turns at holding the floor and do so without overt negation" (293). Levinson raises an obvious observation that "conversation is characterized by turn-taking: one participant, A, talks, stops; another, B, starts, talks, stops; and so we obtain an A-B-A-B-A-B distribution of talk across two participants" (296). Sacks refers to 'turn' as the basic unit of conversation. He suggests that "A central… feature (of conversation) is that exactly one person - at least one and no more than one - talks at a time" (223). This, according to him, is the first general rule of conversation.

What is exactly a 'turn' in conversation and how do people allocate turns to themselves? How do legislators observe turns and how do the traffic rules of talks using linguistic and non-linguistic parameters operate? Mey observes that

> turns occur normally at certain well-defined junctures in conversation; such points are called 'transition relevant places' (TRPs). A TRP can be exploited by the speaker holding the floor. This may be done directly, for the purpose of allotting the right to speak to another conversationalist of his or her choice ("Now, we'd like to hear Jim's view on this")… the current speaker selects the next speaker… (139)

Sacks suggests alternatively that "the current speaker may proceed more indirectly, by throwing the floor wide open to whoever feels like getting into the fray ('Any other opinions or further comments on this matter')" (223). The second general rule, according to Sacks, is when "a speaker selects himself" (224). But how does a speaker select himself especially in a formal gathering like on the Floor of the House during Sitting? This is where the idea of Transition Relevant Places (TRP) in Mey's view becomes relevant.

TRPs refer to natural breaks occurring in conversations. Mey explains it further as follows: "A speaker has to pause for breath, or runs out of things to say, or simply declares his or her contribution to be finished: all those points in the conversation are places where a natural 'transition', a relay of the right to speak to the next speaker, may occur" (139). Finegan, expressing a similar proposition, asserts that "speakers signal their turn is about to end with verbal and non-verbal cues. As

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turns commonly end in a complete sentence, the completion of a sentence may signal the end of a turn" (294). Usually, this happens chiefly by sharply raising or lowering the pitch of voice. The non-verbal clue Finegan identifies is "eye gaze" (295). According to him, "…eye gaze can help control floor holding and turn taking" (295). Speakers do not ordinarily stare at their interlocutors while they speak but rather, their gaze goes back and forth between the listener(s) and another point in space usually swiftly. Listeners on the other hand often gaze at the speaker. A speaker reaching the end of his turn simply returns his gaze on the listeners. However, this propensity is not fixed because there may be variations across cultures.

There are formal rules of selecting the next speaker as seen from the first point observed by Sacks above. Apart from the formal rules (i.e. TRPs) there are natural breaks like pausing for breath, occurring in every conversation. This is analogous to what athletes do on the field during relay competitions. The next runner takes off only after receiving the baton. Speakers ought to wait for natural changeovers or switches since they do not have to interrupt.

Noticeable in speech also is that some speakers have language habits of taking long pauses even within group of words in the same constituent. Mey observes that this trend is common among

> many old-time conversational practitioners (such as politicians) [who] have the habit of ignoring a natural break that would have occurred at the end of, say, a sentence (with the corresponding intonational pattern before a full stop); instead, they create an 'unnatural break' (in the form of a mid-sentence pause). (139)

Obviously, such breaks cannot be considered as TRPs by other participants. Others emit sounds or meaningless words ('Aahhm', 'Eehm') that constitute a noise to speech. Mey calls that "the technique of 'masking' a TRP by emitting 'turn-threatening' noises at potential transition points, thus warning other speakers of their intention to continue past the TRP as soon as they have regained their breath" (139–40).

In a typical African setting, children are taught to speak one at a time. They are often told to wait for their turns. Speaking randomly is a

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strong cultural taboo. Sometimes speakers deliberately ignore turns especially in a scuffle. Interrupting others while they speak occurs as well in formal settings like the Parliament. This constitutes a face–threatening act to the speaker because it can be assumed that the next speaker's utterance who fails to observe a TRP is trampling upon the rights of the former since he/she holds the floor. Politeness is manifested not only from the choice of words employed in a conversation but also by the way it is handled and controlled by the conversationalists. Leech says that:

> conversational behavior such as speaking at the wrong time (interrupting) or being silent at the wrong time has impolite implications. Consequently we sometimes find it necessary to refer to the speech acts in which we or our interlocutors are engaged, in order to request a reply, to seek permission for speaking, to apologize for speaking, etc. (139)

While we respect other people's turn in speech, we respect their faces as well. This means that respecting one another's turn is proportional to respecting one another's face. Apart from interrupting turns, an addressee becomes impolite when he/she is expected to speak and is silent.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The Observance/Non Observance of Turns on the Floor of the House

Conversationalists in a civilized and formal setting wait for their turns before speaking. This is because they cannot talk simultaneously. Finegan's view that "participants must tacitly agree on who should speak and when" is apt. He says that "normally we take turns at holding the floor and do so without overt negation" (293). This is precisely the norm in the House. Order 7 Rule 4 (v) states that "Members shall not make unseemly interruptions while any Member is speaking". Similarly, Order 8 Rule 1 requires that "Whenever Mr. Speaker or the Chairman rise during debate, any Member then speaking or offering to speak must sit down; the House or the Committee shall be silent so that Mr. Speaker or the Chairman may be heard without interruption". This means that no Member has the prerogative to interrupt the Speaker or another Member except he is given the permission to speak by Mr. Speaker. One of the

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duties of the Speaker of the House according to Order 5 Rule (v) is to "control the House as stipulated in Order 7(Rules of Debate)".

Mey explains Transition Relevant Places (TRPs) thus:

> A speaker has to pause for breath, or runs out of things to say, or simply declares his or her contribution to be finished: all those points in the conversation are places where a natural 'transition', a relay of the right to speak to the next speaker, may occur. (139)

But these TRPs may not operate functionally in legislative proceedings. This is because the Speaker is responsible for appointing who speaks after another. Order 7 Rule 1(i) states that "A Member desiring to speak shall indicate by show of hand and if called upon, shall address his observation to Mr. Speaker or the Chairman, while sitting". That one legislator runs out of what to say or declares his contribution finished does not mean another legislator can simply pick up from where he stopped or start making his observation. The TRPs may only serve as non-verbal cues to other legislators who may want to make their contributions on the Floor of the House. They utilize that opportunity by raising their hands to be given the authority to speak. The legislators therefore carry out their deliberations on the Floor of the House in this manner. Sometimes however, the legislator's get offended while waiting to be given the permission to speak. This is evident when a legislator permitted to speak makes this observation about giving turns first before going ahead to make his contribution. He is aggrieved that he was not immediately given the mandate to speak even though he raised his hands before others who spoke earlier. He says, "We raised our hands at the same time with right Honourable … from Pankshin South before others followed suit. And I believe leading debate should not always be from the South. It depends on who raises his hand first. It is very very important". Order 7 Rule 1(ii) states that "if two or more Members (raise their hands) so indicate at the same time Mr. Speaker or Chairman shall call on the Member who first catches his eyes".

However, cases of violation of this rule occasionally flourish in the House, especially when a sensitive issue to which legislators are emotionally attached is being discussed. Below are some examples from the data:

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1. The next question is what is the equivalent of first degree? [Voices are heard on the Floor- 'HND!'. Some say- 'No!' 'Disagree!' 'Let us just vote']
2. PDP is the largest political party in Nigeria, in fact in Africa. It is the giant of Africa [a Member of the Parliament says 'I dispute!'].
3. Shendam town is one of the most cosmopolitan towns on the Plateau. It is one of the largest cities today on the Plateau and in fact in Nigeria [Voices from the background are heard simultaneously- 'It's a lie!', 'Disagree!'].
4. As one person, I don't want to believe that there is anything traditional about budget. There is nothing Orthodox about budgets neither is there anything Catholic or Pentecostal about any budget. [A voice from the Floor is heard- 'There is no COCIN budget, nothing!'].
5. And it says eehh Executive Secretary must have a degree/ (stroke or slash) HND or its equivalent [Voices from the background are heard concurrently – 'ah ah!', 'We are saying the same thing!', 'Tautology!', 'So what has he said different?']
6. It will interest you to know that the safe drinking water that was provided to the people of Shendam in the 19th century is no longer provided in the 20th century- [several voices from the background are heard at the same time- '21st century'] in the 21st century.

Not all interruptions may be considered as impolite. Some of these polite interruptions are observed in data 4 and 6. Speaker 4 makes his contribution hilariously. The interrupter simply halts the flow of the speaker's utterance by adding another humorous example: 'There is no COCIN budget, nothing'. Speaker 6's utterance is interrupted because other Members wanted to draw his attention to the error of calling the present century 20th instead of 21st century. Most of the interruptions are inherently impolite. The impolite interruptions are observed in data 1, 2, 3 and 5 respectively.

Politeness in the Moving of Motions

A motion as understood in the parliament is a proposal put forward for discussion during Sittings. For a motion to be accepted for discussion, the mover must have a seconder. A few are presented as follows:

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7. My name is … representing … Mr. Speaker, I wish to move that this Sitting be adjourned to a later date **having cleared your table and the other paper. I so move Sir**.
8. **I beg** to second.
9. I want to go ahead with my motion. Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members, they say water is life…Having said that Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members **that is my plea** and **my cry** and **my motion for your consideration. Thank you very much.**
10. '…So **I am pleading** with eeh government too that they should eeh look at that issue and then come to their rescue.
11. Mr. Speaker, **having done justice to this honourable House today**, **I beg** to move that this house adjourns to tomorrow, I so move.
12. **I want to plead** with this House to consider my dear father, that the gentleman should take a bow- I so move.

The PP is maximally utilized in moving and seconding motions as seen above. The expressions considered as scales for politeness marking are highlighted. It is obvious that any threat to face is avoided when motions are moved and seconded. It is expected that motions are presented politely so as to get seconders and also avoid contrary opinions that may render the motion void or debatable.

Honorifics as Politeness Strategy

Honorifics are used in conferring honour especially in the House. They are given as a mark of distinction, esteem, or respect. Some of the honorifics used to show politeness in parliamentary proceedings are:

13. Honourable Members of the House…
14. Honourable Members of this honourable House…
15. Mr. Speaker, my Honourable Colleagues…
16. I am Honourable… representing the good people of…
17. Mr. Chairman, Honourable Members…
18. Mr. Speaker Sir…
19. Mr. Chair…
20. Principal Officers, distinguished Honourable Members…
21. Mr. Speaker, Principal Officers of the House, My very able Colleagues…

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The use of honorifics in the assembly during Sittings is a common harmonious norm. It is observable however that Mr. Speaker is often mentioned and detached from other members of the House for special recognition. At other times, principal officers are given special recognition by calling them separately. The principal officers are the Speaker of the House, Majority Leader, Minority Leader, Party Whips, *et cetera*. Given the foregoing, the use of honorifics in the House is plethoric in that speakers make idiosyncratic choices often coined to suit their communicative needs. For instance, an abbreviation in data 17 and 19 is observed. While speaker 17 says 'Mr. Chairman', speaker 19 chooses to simply clip it thus: 'Mr. Chair.'

Conclusion

It is deducible that the interactional function of maintaining good social relationships as suggested by Trudgill is observed and maintained in legislative discourse. This is however not sustainable in all cases. There are rules that guide the affairs of the House. It is against the rule of the parliament for example to make comments or contributions on the Floor without the prior permission of the Speaker. The TRPs only serve as non-verbal cues to other legislators who may want to make their contributions on the Floor of the House. They use the non linguistic cues to raise their hands so that they may be appointed to make their contributions. There are cases of occasional violation of turns in the House especially when a sensitive issue that legislators are emotionally attached to is being discussed. Substantive data shows rude interruption of turns.

Politeness strategies were however maximally utilized in moving and seconding motions. The use of honorifics in the Assembly during Sittings as seen is also a common norm and this, essentially promotes politeness.

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