

## **Politeness as Performance: The Functions of Politeness Forms in English and Ibibio**

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### **Abstract**

Linguistic politeness as enunciated within the framework of Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) work proposes that utterances are either polite or impolite, and that linguistic resources serve to "encode" politeness. This paper adopts the Rational Actor model of politeness which focuses on participants' goals and motivation during interactions. It examines the functions of politeness forms in English and Ibibio in naturally occurring interactive sessions. This is with a view to demonstrating that in some social and cultural contexts politeness may encompass dimensions which extend beyond positive or negative face threats. The findings indicate that both English and Ibibio express politeness by verbal means. Furthermore, English and Ibibio have formal and informal politeness forms. Regarding Ibibio society analysis of the interactions shows that the politeness form **mbòk** tends to be employed in informal contexts, while the form **áák** appears to be used strategically, deployed for the preferred outcome which it can secure. The paper includes that the choice of certain politeness forms in some socio-cultural contexts may be strategically determined by the outcome which such a choice is anticipated to secure for the individual interactant.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The term 'politeness' may be used to describe both the utterances and actions of members of a society. According to Grundy (2000 cited in Bello, 2002), the term is used "to describe the extent to which actions, including the way things are said match the addressee's perception of how they should be performed" (p.315). Expanding further the source states that "politeness is...the exercise of language choice to create a context intended to match the addressee's notion of how or he should be addressed." (p.316). It would be seen from the quotations above that politeness encompasses both speech and action dimensions, even though in its earliest formulation the concept of politeness may have had verbal behaviour as its main point of focus.

Construed as a form of social behaviour, politeness plays a crucial role in social interaction and conversation, and is well studied in sociology and conversational studies. The initial foray into studying politeness phenomenon was made by a sociologist, Erving Goffman in his (1967) work on the construction of the self, and his notion of face otherwise referred to as the public image that an individual interactant seeks to protect in the course of every interaction. Goffman's (1967) work has triggered a large interest in politeness studies with contributions in the 80s from Brown and Levinson (1987), Leech (1983) and Tannen (1984, 1986).

Much of the work in politeness research has focused on Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) politeness theory. While some of this research has tended to follow Brown and Levinson's classification of politeness into two neat dichotomies of polite and impolite some of the work in politeness research has sought to extend the theoretical frontiers and understanding of politeness as a linguistic performance. Thus, more recent and broader theoretical frames have evolved (like the Rational Actor Model, the Social Constructionist Theory, the Speech Act Theory... and so on), which have examined politeness as a sociolinguistic construct and a culturally specific phenomenon which varies across cultures and varies from one social context to another.

The Rational Actor Model (the model adopted in this paper) proposes that interactants are sentient language users (henceforth LU); therefore, rather than passively observe existing social norms, they strategically select from a set of linguistic options (a form or combination of forms of linguistic resources in order to secure a desired outcome, (Schegloff, 1991, Ochs, 1993, Cook, 2006). In this view speech-shifts are permissible and are determined in large part by the desired goals of the speaker. Although every society has pre-prescribed norms governing social interactions and relationships, and speakers possess tacit knowledge of these social norms, however, they also possess both *ability* and *agency* to choose which form is appropriate for which context. In the process of executing a desired outcome, language is viewed and employed as a tool available to members of a particular society for eliciting preferred outcomes and controlling the actions of others (see Searle, 1969).

A cover linguistic label which encodes politeness in all social contexts is rare, and different socio-cultural contexts have different politeness forms and strategies which are determined by the operative culture in the society in question. In some societies/cultures, politeness forms and strategies are linguistic, in some others, they are both linguistic and non-linguistic. Take the linguistic form “please” that indexes politeness in English, for example; this form may be used in various contexts generally without strategic politeness implications. The pragmatic functions of the word “please” as a politeness marker may constitute plain polite behaviour together with other dimensions of social and cultural context (House, 1989), but it may also indicate superior authority without any politeness implications. This point shows up for instance when “please” occurs sentence finally in issuing directives to subordinate officers by superior officers in work places.

In Yoruba society, politeness forms and strategies are both linguistic and non-linguistic (gestural). Ibibio marks politeness mainly linguistically, sometimes embedded in greetings (Udosen, 2005, p.339), sub-classified into vocal but non-verbal greetings and non-verbal and non-verbal greetings (ibid). Jibir-Daura (2008) identifies various dimensions of politeness in Hausa as deference, apologizing, indirectness and formality. These dimensions according to the source, are encoded in honorifics and address terms.

Pronominal forms may index politeness, for example, the symmetrical and the asymmetrical uses of Tu/Vous forms which originated in Medieval Latin (Wardhaugh 1986, p.255-6). In this society/culture, the choice of a particular pronominal form is determined by any combination of the following: age, distance-social-status and family relationship. Wardhaugh (1986) expatiates further and states that Asian countries such as China, Japan and Indonesia are quite polite in their disposition. In these societies, politeness is marked by honorifics, speech levels (low, middle and high) as well as voice modulations.

### **Linguistic Politeness as Performance**

In linguistic circles, it is a generally acceptable fact that language is constituted in two dimensions, namely: *Competence and Performance: knowledge and use*. In this view, a language does not comprise only in its sound system; vocabulary; its rhythms in speech and writing but pragmatically in “the attitudes it inspires” in the users and socio-linguistically, in the communicative goals it is deployed to achieve. Ikiddeh (2005, p.393). Chomsky (1965, p.4) considers linguistic performance to be “the actual use of language in concrete situations”. Linguistic performance may, therefore be thought of as the selection and utilization of relevant structural aspects of a language in executing communication and discourse events. Ikiddeh (2005) asserts that “language may be basically biological, but its major modes of operation are functionally social”(p.393).

Performance as construed in this paper describes the types of “action” which a speaker/LU does in appropriate contexts using language. Language users may use utterances to perform the following linguistic “action”: requesting, commanding, questioning or informing. In the relevant literature, the term “speech act” is regularly used to describe those actions which are capable of being performed within the proximity of language. Of the four broad speech-act types mentioned above, politeness may be located within “requesting”. Linguistic politeness is a type of “action” which requires the use of language for a successful execution of a discourse event given that certain linguistic devices encode politeness even though indexing polite behaviour is determined by socially definable variables like age, status, power and gender.

Ideas about what constitutes the appropriate markers of politeness differ substantially from one culture to another, as there is no one-to-one correspondence between a linguistic form and social meaning. In this regard Yule (2007) draws attention to cultural determinants of how linguistic forms could be interpreted. According to this source, some cultures value indirectness and avoidance of imposition. In such cultures, linguistic forms such as “Are you using this”, “will you stay for dinner?” are considered polite utterances, while in other cultures that are more oriented to directness as an acceptable way of showing solidarity utterances such as “Give me that chair” or “stay for dinner!” constitute polite behaviour. Also politeness in East Asian languages show differences in culturally determined social meaning. For example, Matsumoto (1988, 1989), Ide (1989), Mao (1994), Ide and Yoshida (1999), differentiate between two broad types of politeness – discernment and volition. In this view, discernment and volition characterize polite behaviour in East Asian (Japanese) and Western societies, respectively. According to Ide and Yoshida (1999) in Japanese society, politeness through discernment is essential whereas in Western society the volitional use of politeness (strategic politeness based on face needs) is predominant. Indeed, there is no direct correspondence between a linguistic form and social meaning.

Cook (2006, p.270) argues that “most linguistic forms have a broad indexical scope”. This point may be illustrated with linguistic forms generally considered to be markers of the female gender. Tag questions, for example, are widely believed to index the female gender but they are known to be used also by men. In Yoruba society (Nigeria) polite behaviour is marked both linguistically and non-linguistically by use of addressee honorifics as well as gestures. Yoruba addressee honorifics is indicated by affixing /e-/ to the relevant base, for example, é-jọ̀ọ̀/jọ̀ọ̀ “please” (where the first form “é-jọ̀ọ̀” is directed at an older/higher status interactant). But by contrast, interactants in Ibibio society express politeness only linguistically, however, without the use of

morphologically marked honorifics. Ibibio politeness forms are **mbòk**: “please” and **áák**, “I entreat you” and they constitute gradations within the politeness system of Ibibio society with which interactants perform specific acts on the basis of the personal assessment of context variables relative to the act in question.

**Data**

The English language has its politeness phenomenon widely researched hence it has a large body of literature on the subject, for example, House (1989), Brown and Levinson (1987), Crystal (1995), Yule (1996), Fauziati (2013) and others. English politeness markers are indicated in Table 1. The Ibibio data came from naturally occurring interactions (NOIs) obtained during speech events in rural Ibibio society in the South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria. Ibibio society covers fourteen Local Government Areas in AkwaIbom State where Ibibio language is spoken. Ten sessions of different speech events were recorded and classified into two broad categories of language use – formal and informal speech events.

In the context of this study, formal speech events are those in which the social boundaries definable by status, age, power and gender are somewhat rigid and non-permeable. The traditional court sessions, sessions where land disputes are resolved and sessions concerned with the resolution of family crises (between spouses or siblings, etc), constitute formal social speech events. Also classed among formal speech events are marriage ceremonies, village meetings, family meetings and social gatherings. Informal speech events, on the other hand, comprise filial talk, that is, conversation among siblings, members of a family or requests made by younger members of a family to older or older to older siblings and to neighbours. The duration of each session varied from session to session, and the entire sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed. To preserve the naturalness of the interactions, the recordings were done without the interactants being aware.

**Presentation of Data and Discussion of Results/Findings**

Politeness in English and Ibibio is expressed mainly by verbal means. Data obtained on politeness for both languages reveal that there are formal and informal indicators of politeness. English politeness is replete with markers of directness and indirectness which index taciturnity, socially differentiated attitude (Blum-Kulka, cited in Watts, et al 2005) formulaic utterances, passive construction...and so on. Table 1 summarizes English politeness forms.

**Table1: PolitenessformsinEnglish.**

<b>PoliteFormType</b>	<b>Illustrativesample</b>
Formal markers	please, excuse me, sorry, thank you sir, Madam
Grammatical Forms	can you...? Could you...? Will you...?
Directness	would you like to eat?
Past form	did you want to stay for dinner?
Passive construction	Dinner is served

Figure 1 shows two politeness forms in Ibibio – **mbòk** (please) is shown in the data collected to be used in informal contexts whereas **áák**: “I entreat you” occurs more in formal speech events.

**Figure 1: Naturally Occurring Interactions A: Filial Talk**

1. (a) Bénáfóńmíńsók  
Bring me my cloth
- (b) Bro,mbókséányé mi  
Brother, please here it is
2. (a) Bro, **mbòk**kú-fré á'-di -ńńóakAkúfókñwéd-ò  
Bro, please don't forget to give me money for school fees
- (b) **mbòk**kú-m-fínámíen  
Please, stop bothering me

**Naturally Occurring Interactions B:** Interaction between two neighbours, A and B.

3. (a) NA: Mmá**mbòk** kòà yín mfoítèm  
Mother, please counsel your child  
(b) NB: **áák**, Bró; **mbòk** kú-ü yádésíd  
I entreat you, Bro, please do not be angry.

**Naturally Occurring Interactions C:** Interaction between husband and wife.

4. (a) ímá, **mbòk** yém m k p ó n ó ñ-díá  
My love, please find me something to eat  
(b) Ébé**áák** kú dí á í b í ó t d t ó f ò n  
My husband, I entreat you, the food is not yet ready

**Naturally Occurring Interactions D:** Formal Speech Events -[Interaction between alleged offenders and members of a traditional jury.

5. (a) JS: Átáá k p á n n d ü d u é á d ó m i , á - y á á á - k p é í s ó p  
This is a very serious offence, you will be penalized  
(b) **Áák**, m m d u é , **mbòk** k í k í - m b o o í s ó p  
I entreat you, I am guilty, please do not exact a penalty  
6. (a) **Áák**, O b o o ñ m í - m í , ñ - t ú a m i è n m b o m  
I entreat you, my lord, please have mercy on me  
7. (a) Dàôwô, ñtâkâfo à-sikkéâdâñâikôd à-dô-ô?  
Young man, why did you adjust the boundary of that land?  
(b) Ñki-sikkéâdâñâikôd, ââkmmèétém mí  
I did not adjust the boundary, I entreat you, my fathers.  
8. (a) Afô à kèbôdíém m á â - m i ?  
What did you say to this woman?  
(b) Ñkèbô y à k à n y è â k p è m è i k p à d i s à n a m o  
I told her to be mindful of her footsteps.  
(c) Afô à kékôdànyéâkparà, à mmédionoké à-yàà yédànyé idem?  
You called her a prostitute. Are you aware that you will be asked to cleanse her?  
(d) **Áák**, mmèrnboñid Ìñhnyin **mbòk** i-féén i-nnokémédûè, Nyáák p è n y é ú b o k .  
I entreat you, our village leaders, please forgive me, I've wronged her. I shall apologize to her.

**Naturally Occurring Interactions E:** Interaction between spokespersons at a traditional marriage ceremony.

9. (a). Mbôñ Ikot Akàn, èdisôôkéât Ìnámí?  
People from Ikot Akàn what do you want in this compound?  
SS: Mmèú k ô d n y i n , i y è m i d i í d o u y à i y à à y i n ô w ò n w à à n k è è d k è ù f o k m f ô .  
Our in-laws, we have come to marry one of your beautiful daughters.  
BS: Ûsôn-ènyèn! Aniéâdôú k ô d y è m b ù f ô ?  
Insult! Who are your in-laws?  
(b). Ákè à y i n n y i n k è m b ù f ô è d o ?  
Which of our daughters have you married?  
SS: (Sensing that he has stepped out of turn in his utterance) responds  
(e) **Áák**, mbôñ Ikot Ibanga, ùbokkèisohô, **mbòk**, ikí y á d é s i t ; m m é d ù è i k o

People from Ikot Ibanga, I entreat you, (my) hands are on the ground, (gesturing appropriately) do not be angry, I have erred in my speech.

**Naturally Occurring Interactions F:** Interaction between attendees at a village meeting.

- 10 (a).1st Speaker: IkoIkotEffiongâdôâkpenànyinikinèhèádânâ  
About Effiong's piece of land is that we should set the boundaries.
- (b) 2nd Speaker: **Áák** yak e-keneeneen**mbòk**  
**Áák**; "I entreat you" let the boundaries be set, please.  
Figure 1 shows two politeness forms in Ibibio – **mbòk**: "please" and **áák**: "I entreat you".  
**mbòk**: "please" is shown in the data collected to be used in informal contexts whereas **áák**: "I entreat you" occurs more in formal speech events.

**Discussion: Functions of Politeness Forms in English**

The politeness forms together with their illustrative samples in table 1 demonstrate that linguistic strategies available in a language may be employed to serve various social functions. However, the interactants are not passive observers of a prescribed a priori communication strategy. They actually select specific strategies and linguistic/verbal items which they consider to be strategic enough to secure for them, an expected outcome which shows the interactant's preference for other linguistic strategies available in the language in use. Thus even in English in which directness is the generally polite mode the linguistic strategies, "would you like to eat?", "did you want to stay for dinner?" or the passive construction, "Dinner is served". An interactant, say A, may choose the second strategy and B may choose the first depending on the outcome he/she desires to secure. They may all encode directness since the interactants operate in same culture and language context. So there is gradation construed here as the value imputed to a linguistic strategy by an interactant in situated language contexts.

Politeness is culture-and context-specific. It is "an intentional, goal-oriented, situation-specific" activity (Watts et al, 2003, p.133). while institutionally there may be hierarchical relationships between higher social status interactants and lower level ones even lower level interactants possess agency to select specific linguistic strategies on the basis of which they structure their communicative contributions" to achieve their preferred/desired goals (Watts et al, 2003, Fauziatic, 2013). Take the politeness form "please" for instance. This form may be employed by a higher ranking officer in a place of work while giving instructions to a lower-ranking officer. When used sentence finally in this way it does not encode deference to the addressee but authority of the speaker, thus has no strategic politeness implications.

**II. DISCUSSION:**

**Functions of *Mbòk* and *áák* in Informal Speech Events in Ibibio**

An analysis of the Naturally Occurring Interactions (NOIs) data in Ibibio indicates that **mbòk**"please" has a more frequency of occurrence than **áák**: "I entreat you"; however, it would be observed that the **áák** form is multifunctional, indexing different social identities and expectations or norms of appropriateness.

**The Functions of *mbòk* and *áák* in Informal Speech Events**

The data in. (1b), (2a) (4a) and (5a) conform .to the notion of social norm or what Cook (2006, p. 276) described as 'discernment'. The exchanges in these data sets are carried out in reciprocal **mbòk** form between higher status/older interactants (UTT(O)) and the lower status/younger interactants (UTT(Y)). The exchanges here may be classified as informal speech event performed in informal talk sessions where the use of **mbòk** does not only index the speaker's hierarchical relationship to the addressee, but also indicates the acknowledgement of his/her sense of place toward the addressee/referent, who in each case cited above is older or of a higher status than the speaker.

In (1a) an older sibling asks a younger sibling to get him his cloth. In line (2), the younger sibling complies with the order by performing two kinds of action: the physical act of bringing the cloth and the linguistic act of signaling his compliance by using the plain/informal politeness form, **mbòk**. It would be observed from the exchanges that while the older sibling can use a direct speech act to talk to the younger sibling the addressee does not reciprocate by saying "se anye mi: "here it is". Rather, as a rational actor who has tacit understanding of the meaning of social acts in the culture in which he performs and who acknowledges his socially lower status in relation to the older sibling, the younger sibling injects **mbòk** into his utterance to show politeness to the older sibling. This contrasts with what obtains in western society where the direct speech act indexes solidarity between interactants (Yule 2007). In Ibibio socio-cultural context, the use of the direct speech in line (1), by the older sibling (a higher status addressee) is not intended to show solidarity, it is to be interpreted as an order issued to a lower status addressee/referent. Moreover, in line (2) the younger sibling's utterance contains a form of addressee honorific in sentence initial position. Thus, the form "Bro." (short for brother) is the honorific which linguistically marks both a filial and a hierarchical relationship.

In 4(a) the **Íbòk** form neither marks politeness since in Ibibio society (as in most African societies) the husband is generally older considered more powerful and of a higher status than the wife, nor does it show the husband's solidarity with the wife. The husband's use of **mbòk** may be interpreted as a strategy for urging the addressee/referent to carry out a request. In Ibibio society one gradation of polite behaviour is urging, expressible using the plain polite form, **mbòk**, but sometimes also **áák**. In (4b) using the **áák** form the wife states a negative proposition indicating that her husband's request was not likely to be granted (at least, not immediately). It would be observed that as a rational actor, the speaker positions the politeness form **áák** sentence initially. Essien (1990) describes Ibibio as an SVO language which sentences have (pro) nominal elements occurring regularly in sentence - initial position in the canonical word order. But as is apparent, **áák** is not a (pro) nominal element, therefore it cannot function as the subject of the verb in the utterance under analysis. The speaker's decision to place it sentence initially is not only grammatically regular but also expected in terms of discourse organization (i.e. in terms of foregrounding and backgrounding information (see Cook, 2006). Thus, in (4b) the wife foregrounds her pleas by prefacing her explanation with **áák** as a display of strategic politeness to her husband.

### **The Functions of mbòk and áák in Formal Speech Events in Ibibio**

Natural Occurring Interactions in this segment are classified as Formal speech events discussed in (1)-(4) where more speech - style shifts occurred in interactants' use of the plain **mbòk** and the formal **áák** forms. By contrast in (5) - (10) we find that interactants' choices in the selection and use of politeness forms are not as fluid as they were in informal speech contexts. In (5), (6), (8), (9) and (10), the utterances of the lower status interactants have a similar syntactic structure whereby **áák** prefaces the sentences. This feature in the data sets under discussion is analyzable in terms of syntactic structure and in terms of discourse organization.

In (5a), the utterance is the verdict of the traditional village jury pronounced by the spokesperson in which he states, "ataakpanndudue a dom mi a-yáá-kpeisòp: "This is a very serious offence, you will pay a penalty". The speaker uses a direct speech act to define the relationship between the traditional jury which he represents and the addressee unlike what obtains in Western society where this resource would indicate solidarity between the interactants. In Ibibio society - where this study is based - members of a traditional jury are mostly elderly men and are considered higher status interactional partners. The relationship between them and those brought before them is a hierarchical one.

The addressee's turn in (5b) reflects both the formal context of language use as well as institutional hierarchy. His status is singly indexed by his use of the **áák** form which he employs as a rational actor not only to accomplish a communicative goal, but to secure a preferred outcome in the discourse event. This is achieved by his adoption of the **áák** form and by positioning it where necessary. These are demonstrable pieces of evidence that interactants in Ibibio are actors with agency; consequently, they do not passively implement a prior given sociolinguistic norms but strategically employ both linguistic resources like sentence structure, the principles of organization and so on in performing linguistic politeness in constructing desired outcomes.

The data in (9e) is particularly illustrative of the agency with which interactional 'partners in Ibibio society are endowed. The constellation of politeness forms in SS's response, **Áák**mbònkotIbanga, ùbòkkèisòn-o mbòk i-kí-yadèsít; míme-dùèikò. I entreat you, people from IkotIbanga, (my) hands are on the ground...please, don't be angry, I have erred in my speech" shows that the speaker knows what strategies of politeness to employ and knows how to organize them to achieve the desired outcome, (Wardough 2006). The politeness strategies in SS's utterance are linguistic and non- linguistic - **áák** and **mbòk** are linguistic while placing one's hands on the ground or floor is non- linguistic. A constellation of politeness forms in a single utterance singly indexes institutional hierarchy between a prospective son-in-law and his prospective father-in-law, a relationship that is regarded very highly in Ibibio society.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

Overall, this paper examines how interactants in English and Ibibio societies secure preferred outcomes in different social contexts and the resources they employed in achieving these communicative goals. In this discussion we showed that interactants are rational actors in the social situations in which they are participants, and they adopt politeness forms which are best suited not only for the social situation at hand but which are best suited to securing communicative goals.

By carefully examining naturally occurring data in different contexts in English and Ibibio, this paper re-analyses the use of politeness forms as the speaker's active rational choice and shows a variety of social situation which politeness forms may be used. The paper has demonstrated that Brown and Levinson's (1978) neat dichotomy of polite and impolite behaviour does not always obtain. For example, the paper has shown that interactants do not always passively observe pre-prescribed rules of social interactions; rather, they make their choices in order to achieve intended communicative goals.

### Abbreviations

NOI	-	Naturally Occurring Interaction
UTT(O)	-	Older Speakers Utterance
UTT(Y)	-	Younger Speaker's Utterance
JS	-	Jury Spokesperson
NA	-	Neighbour A
NB	-	Neighbour B
SS	-	Suitor's spokesperson
BS	-	Bride's spokesperson
LU(s)	-	Language User(s)

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