

## THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF POLITENESS PHENOMENA IN A NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY

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### ABSTRACT

Politeness is pervasive in social interactions because everyone has some emotional and social sense of self that he or she expects others to recognize (Yule, 1996a, 1996b). This study examines the dynamics of politeness as a pragmatic concept and highlights how it operates in the Nigerian University of Ilorin community. It submits that six levels of politeness (super-formal, formal, semi-formal, informal, intimate, and ordinary) hold among the four major categories of the University community while ten politeness strategies, illustrated with a number of oral and written discourses, are identified. It is maintained that a harmonious and peaceful coexistence is predicated on observing others' face wants by upholding the Leechian Politeness Principles (PP) and avoiding Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) in everyday linguistic intercourse.

**Keywords:** politeness, politeness principles, politeness strategies, face wants, FSAs, FTAs, cooperative principle, role relations, University of Ilorin

### INTRODUCTION

Unless you are polite to your neighbour, the channel of communication between you will break down, and you will no longer be able to borrow his mower

*(Leech, 1983, p. 82).*

The modern society in which we live is a complex and complicated one. We, the occupants of the global society, have our varying classes, statuses, ages, grades, and so on, which we want others to recognize in our social and linguistic intercourse. In exercising the interactional function of language, especially politeness remains "a pervasive phenomenon" (Adegbija, 1989, p. 57) through which we establish our roles and maintain our integrity. One of our predominant face wants is the need to be respected. Thus, in a typical Nigerian university like the University of Ilorin, communication normally takes place, and interactions occur among its various stakeholders—the students, the non-teaching staff, the lecturers, the



administration—and within members of such categories, whereby face wants are upheld or suspended, engendering the instantiation or denunciation of politeness.

Politeness is the awareness of another person's "face" or the means employed to acknowledge the public self-image of a person. It is a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interactions and transactions (Lakoff, 1990, p. 34). Central to the explication of politeness is the concept of "face," the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). In other words, face is "the emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize" (Yule, 1996, p. 134). Thus, everybody has face wants—defined as the expectations a person has that his public self-image will be respected (Yule, 1996b, p. 130). In this regard, the politeness principle has a dual goal: acting efficiently together with other people and creating and maintaining social relationships.

In this article, through the analysis of naturally-occurring discourses, both oral and written, we describe various politeness strategies employed by members of the university community to maintain other people's faces. Our data are sourced from lecturers' offices, students' hostels, classrooms and the Students Union Building, memoranda, press releases, and letters in the University of Ilorin. Through the identification of politeness devices such as face-saving acts, indirectness and its forms, deference, register, ambivalence, and the politeness principle (PP) and its sub-principles or maxims, we look "at the way people use language to change (or maintain) social relationships" (Thomas, 1995, p. 133). Instances of impoliteness through the flouting of the PP and face-threatening acts are equally examined. It is ultimately advanced that upholding politeness in our interactional and transactional relations is highly pertinent to achieving better communication, improved coexistence, and harmonious relationships within the university community, a microcosm of the larger Nigerian and even global society.

### POLITENESS PHENOMENA: A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

Politeness, as a pragmatic concept, has gained some scholarly attention especially within the last thirty years. It is often interpreted as a strategy (or series of strategies) exploited or employed by a speaker to achieve such goals as promoting or maintaining harmonious relations as evidenced by Leech (1980, 1983) and Brown and Levinson (1978). Fraser (1978) and Walters (1979) focus on utterance-level realizations vis-à-vis investigating "how much politeness could be squeezed out of speech act strategies alone" and examining the perception of politeness through cross-cultural pragmatics by comparing, for instance, the politeness exhibited by native and nonnative speakers of English and Spanish.

Towards delimiting the politeness theoretical construct, Lakoff (1975) propounds the three rules of formality, deference, and camaraderie, which, according to her, guide relationships among members of the society. In an earlier work, she had formulated a series of maxims that people assume are being followed in the utterances of others (Lakoff, 1973). Lakoff's maxims, each of which tallies with her later rules, are:

- Don't impose
- Give options



- Make your receiver feel good

Leech (1983) sees politeness as a phenomenon concerning a relationship between two participants, which he labels 'self' (i.e., the speaker) and 'other' (i.e. the hearer). He proceeds to formulate the politeness principle (PP), which is basically as follows:

Minimize (all things being equal) the expression of impolite beliefs, and . . . maximize (other things being equal) the expression of polite beliefs (Leech, 1983, p. 81).

He further discusses his six maxims of PP (like the four Gricean maxims of the Cooperative Principle), which are those of Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy. These inform the general principles of politeness, which Yule (1996b) says, "might include being tactful, generous, modest and sympathetic towards others" (p. 60).

While Thomas (1995) delimits the concept of politeness by reviewing how politeness has been viewed in terms of five interrelated phenomena (i.e., Politeness as a real-world goal, Deference, Register, Politeness as a surface level phenomenon, and Politeness as an illocutionary phenomenon) and undertakes a well-exemplified explication of them, Brown and Levinson's (1978) influential work on politeness theorizing and application have served useful purposes. Based on the theories of Brown and Levinson, scholars have highlighted politeness phenomena in Nigerian English, Yoruba and Ogori (Adegbija, 1989), Japanese (Matsumoto, 1989), and Chinese (Spencer-Oatey, 1992), among others languages.

Like the concept of face, which exhibits two types—positive (a person's need to be accepted and liked by others and treated as a member of a group) and negative (a person's need to be independent, free from imposition, and act as it pleases him or her)—two types of politeness have also always been identified: positive and negative (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1995; Yule, 1996b). Less common typologies but no less important include absolute/relative politeness (Leech, 1983; in which he sees positive/negative politeness as forms of absolute politeness) and on-record/off-record politeness (Leech, 1983; Yule, 1996b). The difference between on-record and off-record politeness is essentially the difference between direct and indirect speech acts in making requests.

Citing Brown and Levinson (1978), Adegbija (1989) distinguishes between positive and negative politeness. According to him, while positive politeness satisfies a speaker's needs for approval and belonging, negative politeness serves to minimize the imposition of a face-threatening act. To Leech (1983: 83-84) (who offers us a rather circular definition), "negative politeness...consists in minimizing the impoliteness of impolite illocutions, and positive politeness consists in maximizing the politeness of polite illocutions". It is thus apparent from the foregoing that negative politeness is concerned with the avoidance of discord while positive politeness has to do with seeking concord.

It becomes necessary, having mentioned 'a face-threatening act' to differentiate between, and briefly discuss the concepts of, face-saving and face-threatening acts, at this juncture. A face-saving act is an utterance or action that avoids a potential threat to a person's self-image while a face-threatening act represents an utterance or an action that constitutes a threat to another individual's expectation regarding self-image. Incorporating the centrality of face into the explanation of the politeness types, Yule, (1996b) offers us an attractive summary:



So, a face-saving act which is oriented to the person's negative face will tend to show deference, emphasize the importance of the other's time and concerns, and even include an apology for the imposition or interruption. This is also negative politeness. A face-saving act will tend to show solidarity, emphasize that both speakers want the same thing, and they have a common goal. This is also called positive politeness. (p. 62)

Let us consider the following examples from a "No Strike Bulletin" dated February 2, 2001, addressed by lecturers to lecturers:

Positive Politeness:

Let us join hands and make Unilorin a great University.

Negative Politeness:

We therefore implore sincere and progressive Unilorin ASUU members to disregard the call for the strike . . .

Regrettably, while scholarly attention has been duly given to the 'sunny side' of politeness, regarding the maintenance of people's face wants, as far as we are aware, no such attention has been accorded the 'cloudy side' of politeness which is the use of 'rude' and 'inconsiderate' language (see Yule, 1996b, p. 60). This relates to instances where self (the speaker) blatantly fails to fulfill the face wants of the other. This study partly aims at filling this vacuum.

### CP AND PP: CONFLICT OR RESOLUTION?

Both the Cooperative Principle (CP) of Grice (1975) and the Politeness Principle (PP) of Leech (1983) are related. Leech himself acknowledges this fact that the CP prompted the development of the PP. His grouse with the CP is that it cannot explain *why* people are often indirect in conveying what they mean as well as the claim that the CP maxims are not universal to language, because there are linguistic communities where all of them do not apply (Leech, 1983). He therefore seeks to establish the weakness of the CP and entrench the PP as "a necessary complement, which rescues the CP from serious trouble" (p. 80). Quite justifiably, in the work of Brown and Levinson (1978), who studied politeness phenomena in widely diverse languages and cultures, it is advanced that the origin of politeness is the same in all human societies. They submit that all human beings, in order to enter into social relationships with one another, must acknowledge the *face* of other people. So, while the CP is narrow and limited in application, the PP is universal. The CP runs as follows:

Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. (Grice, 1975, p. 45)

Grice, the proponent, thus formulates the maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. All the maxims can be observed as in the following conversation between a secretary and a head of department:

HOD: Where is the letter?

S: It is in the file on your table.



The secretary has answered question clearly (Manner) and truthfully (Quality); she has presented the right amount of information (Quantity) and has directly addressed her superior's goal in asking the question (Relation).

The maxims, however, may not all be observed. Failing to do this is tantamount to flouting, violating, infringing, opting out of, and suspending the maxims. All these instances are illustrated by Thomas (1995).

But, casting our eyes at the PP, apart from the maxims of Lakoff, presented earlier, Leech presents the following in pairs:

Tact Maxim (in impositives and commissives)

(a) Minimize cost to *other* [(b) Maximize benefit to *other*]

Generosity Maxim (in impositives and commissives)

(a) Minimize benefit to *self* [(b) Maximize cost to *self*]

Approbation Maxim (in expressives and assertives)

(a) Minimize dispraise of *other* [(b) Maximize praise of *other*]

Modesty Maxim (in expressives and assertives)

(a) Minimize praise of *self* [(b) Maximize dispraise of *self*]

Agreement Maxim (in assertives)

(a) Minimize disagreement between *self* and *other*

[(b) Maximize agreement between *self* and *other*]

Sympathy Maxim (in assertives)

(a) Minimize antipathy between *self* and *other*

[(b) Maximize sympathy between *self* and *other*] (Leech, 1983, p. 132)

A cursory look at the CP and PP reveals that they are often in conflict. "Politeness and truth," notes Cook (1989), "are often in conflict with each other" (p. 23). In other words, more often than not in our day-to-day relationships, politeness and truth are mutually incompatible, and so are politeness and brevity. For instance, truth is sacrificed in the example below at the alter of politeness, as the hearer is conscious of the weirdness of the speaker's hairstyle but wants only to please her:

Student A wears a weird hairdo, which she has just made.

A: Do you like this my hair style?

B: Well, yes. (smiles)

In the following example, the CP maxim of manner (i.e., be brief) is deliberately flouted for the sake of politeness in a situation where 'no' would have been adequate and sufficient:

Dr. X, a lecturer, wants Prof. Y, the Dean, to sign a form for him.

Dr. X: Would you sign this form for me, sir?

Prof. Y: I am afraid I am obliged not to sign late forms again.

Thus, in English, orders, requests, and pleas (which are directives) are made in the form of elaborate questions (Would you mind...? Can you, for God's sake....? May I humbly ask you to...?) which give the other (the hearer) the option of refusal. Also, we tend to apologize if the situation warrants imposing on the other (I'm sorry to disturb you, kindly do...) and add



praise to make the hearer feel good (I know you are better informed than I am...) (see Cook, 1989, p. 33).

### POLITENESS AND ROLE RELATIONS

Role relations is another important variable engendering politeness in social interactions. As noted by Palmer (1981), role relations is a key factor in our linguistic acts because

it is not enough for the speaker to be able to identify the person to whom he is speaking; he must, in many languages, also indicate quite clearly the social relations between himself and this person. (p. 62)

For the purpose of this study, communication takes place among four major categories of interactants in the university community. These, hierarchically, are the Administration/Council, Lecturers (Academic Staff Union of Universities, ASUU), Non-teaching staff (Non-Academic Staff Union, NASU; Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities, SSANU; etc.) and the students. Following Brown and Gilman (1960), there are *power* and *solidarity* relationships among the four. Power involves the asymmetric relations of being superior to, higher than, older than, and/or more influential than 'the other,' whereas solidarity involves such symmetric relations as 'equal to,' 'practice the same profession as,' and 'coordinate with' the other. Power commands respect and formality and is addressed with the 'T' form (after the French *tu/vous* forms to indicate politeness), whereas solidarity takes the 'V' form. This grammatical markedness is in the structures of French, Greek, Russian, Yoruba, etc. (*tu/vous*, *esi/esis*, *ty/vy*, *e/o*, respectively).

It is the aggregate of such factors as age, status, class, etc. that determine language use in social interactions (Yule, 1996b). While members of the same class maintain social closeness via solidarity, there is a social distance (power) between two classes (e.g., students vs. lecturers). However, since the English language does not mark deference grammatically, address forms or honorifics are used to mark deference, a form of politeness (Thomas, 1995). As such, titles, epithets, and address forms such as Doctor, Professor, HOD, Dean, and Oga ('boss') are explicitly used to indicate politeness. Also, following Joos' (1962) classification of five degrees of formality (cited in Palmer, 1981, p. 62)—namely, 'frozen,' 'formal,' 'consultative,' 'casual,' and 'intimate'—the pragmatics of politeness in the Nigerian university is found to feature the following six degrees, hierarchically:


		Power	High
	Super-formal		
	Formal		
	Semi-formal		
	Informal		
	Intimate		
	Ordinary		
		Solidarity	Low

Figure 1. A Politeness Schema.



The politeness schema shown in Figure 1 represents the degrees of formality. While power descends in the use of formality, solidarity ascends in formal use of language. In other words, politeness is expected to move from the 'low' in 'age,' 'status,' and/or 'position' up to the 'high' in 'age,' 'status,' 'position,' etc.

In light of the above, we construct the degree of formal use of language among the members of the university, starting from the students. We are also aware of the fact that members of the same category equally have different grades. For instance, within students, there are 'junior' (100 to 300 levels) and 'senior' (graduating and postgraduate) students; among the non-teaching staff, there are junior staff (NASU) and senior staff (SSANU, for example); among lecturers, there are 'junior colleagues' (Assistant lecturers, Lecturers II and I) and 'senior colleagues' (Senior Lecturers, Readers and Professors); and in the administration, there are 'senior' members (such as Vice Chancellors, Deputy Vice Chancellors, Deans, etc) and 'junior' members (such as heads of departments (HODs) and directors of units, and other members). These broad categories are illustrated in Figure 2.

(a)	Students (S)	→	Administration	→	Super-formal
		→	Lecturers	→	Formal
		→	Non-teaching staff	→	Semi-formal
		→	S (graduating/pg)	→	Informal
		→	S (100-300L)	→	Intimate/ordinary
(b)	Non-teaching staff (NTS)	→	Administration	→	Super-formal
		→	Lecturers	→	Formal/Semi-formal
		→	NTS (Senior)	→	Semi-formal/informal
		→	NTS (Junior)	→	Informal/intimate
		→	Students	→	Ordinary
(c)	Lecturers (L)	→	Administration	→	Formal
		→	L (Senior)	→	Formal/semi-formal
		→	L (Junior)	→	Informal/intimate
		→	Non-teaching staff	→	Semi-formal/informal
		→	Students	→	Ordinary
(d)	Administration (A)	→	A (Senior)	→	Formal
		→	A (Junior)	→	Semi-formal/formal
		→	Lecturers	→	Formal
		→	Non-teaching staff	→	Semi-formal/informal
		→	Students	→	Ordinary

Figure 2. Levels of Politeness among Interactants in the University.

The phenomena in Figure 2 can be represented in a multiple bar chart as shown in Figure 3. In the chart, category members—who are either senior or junior—are shaded. Administration is 1, Lecturers is 2, Non-teaching staff is 3, and Students is 4, just according



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		→	L (Senior)	→	Formal/semi-formal
		→	L (Junior)	→	Informal/intimate
		→	Non-teaching staff	→	Semi-formal/informal
		→	Students	→	Ordinary
(d)	Administration (A)	→	A (Senior)	→	Formal
		→	A (Junior)	→	Semi-formal/formal
		→	Lecturers	→	Formal
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to our earlier hierarchy. In instances where two levels of formality operate (e.g., formal/semi-formal, which is the relationship between non-teaching staff and lecturers), the midway between the two is upheld (implying 'below formal, above semi-formal').

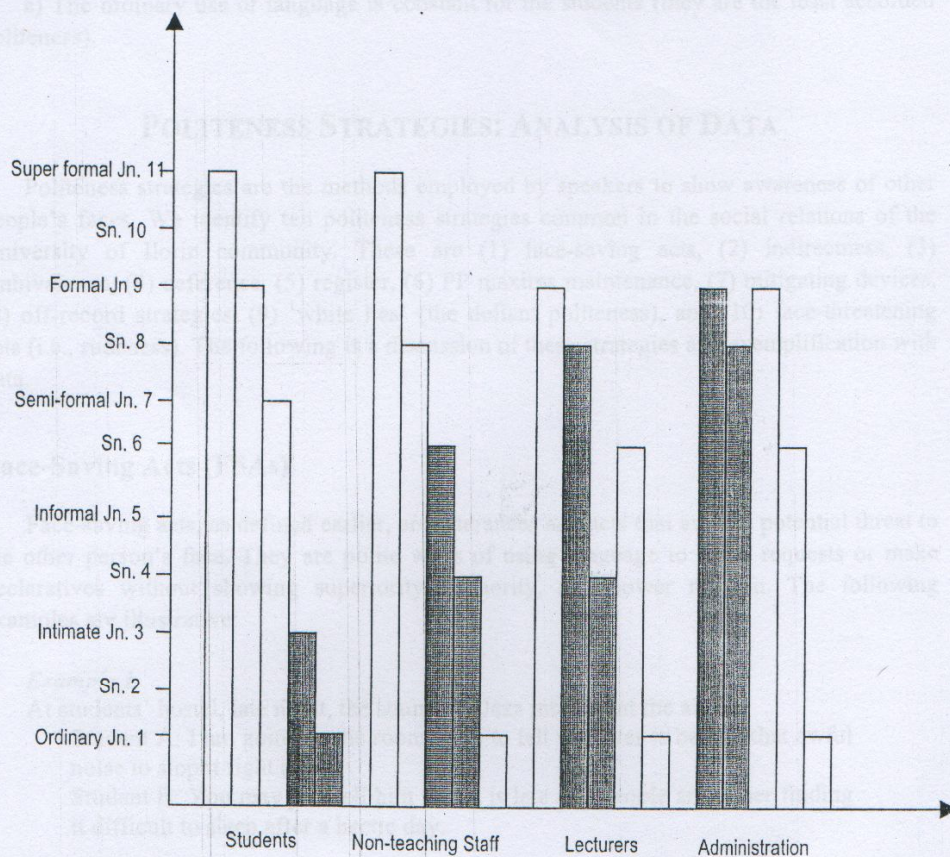


Figure 3. Our Politeness Multiple Bar Chart.

With respect to our study, certain hypotheses can be drawn from Figure 3, which are as follows:

- The lowest degree of formality operates among the students; meaning that students fulfill the least level of politeness among for themselves;
- The highest degree of formality operates within the administration; meaning that formality operates highest in the highest hierarchy;
- Formality within the category of lecturers (i.e., between junior and senior ones) is most pronounced (perhaps because many junior lecturers are also students to their senior colleagues);



d) Though administration is superior to lecturers, both interact at the same level of formality (perhaps because of the education of the lecturers and the fact that many lecturers are members of administration);

e) The ordinary use of language is constant for the students (they are the least accorded politeness).

### POLITENESS STRATEGIES: ANALYSIS OF DATA

Politeness strategies are the methods employed by speakers to show awareness of other people's faces. We identify ten politeness strategies common in the social relations of the University of Ilorin community. These are (1) face-saving acts, (2) indirectness, (3) ambivalence, (4) deference, (5) register, (6) PP maxims maintenance, (7) mitigating devices, (8) off-record strategies, (9) 'white lies' (the defiant politeness), and (10) face-threatening acts (i.e., rudeness). The following is a discussion of these strategies and exemplification with data.

#### Face-Saving Acts (FSAs)

Face-saving acts, as defined earlier, are utterances and acts that avoid a potential threat to the other person's face. They are polite ways of using language to make requests or make declaratives without showing superiority, authority, and power relation. The following examples are illustrative:

##### *Example 1*

At students' hostel, late night, the sounds of Jazz music rent the air.

Student A: I am going to the room there to tell whoever is behind that awful noise to stop it right now!

Student B: You may just tell him that it is late and people are rather finding it difficult to sleep after a hectic day.

Student B's utterance is a face-saving act of the positive politeness type. His solidarity with 'people' underscores his quest for what will satisfy the students' common goal. He makes the other (i.e., the person playing the music to feel good) as his request is off-record. A's utterance on the other hand is likely to produce a negative result because the tone is a breach of the agreement maxim. B is also tactful by not imposing his suggestion on A. Face-saving acts can be contra-distinguished from face-threatening acts as the following example illustrates:

##### *Example 2*

The following is an example from a newspaper (*The Punch*, March 29, 2001, p. 52), which involves a face-threatening act with redress:

It is sad to note that while the society looks up to the academics, ASUU (Unilorin Chapter) has continued to demonstrate unacceptable style of communication and language.



There is a positive politeness strategy in the example above. It is also in this quest for politeness that "unacceptable style of communication" is used, flouting the Gricean maxim of manner 'be brief,' as it substitutes 'rudeness.'

### Indirectness

Indirectness is a universal phenomenon in all natural languages (Thomas, 1995), and it functions as "as a form of politeness" (Lakoff, 1990, p. 34). Indirectness occurs when there is a difference between what is said and what is meant or there is "a mismatch between the expressed meaning and the implied meaning" (Thomas, 1995, p. 119). It is often concerned with politeness as a result of the difference between the structure and the communicative function of utterances. For instance, we use an interrogative (Can you...?) not to ask a question, but to make a request (Can you bring that envelope to me?) Factors that affect "how indirect to be," according to Thomas (1995, pp. 124-133) include 'power,' 'social distance,' 'size of imposition,' 'rights and obligations,' and 'the negotiation of pragmatic parameters.' Here, we are concerned with indirectness as a general term.

#### Example 3

This is a conversation between a non-teaching staff member (A) and a lecturer (B):

A: I suppose you are going to the Main Campus, sir (?)

B: Yes.

A: May I join you in your car, then?

B: Okay.

In the above conversation, A knows that B is on his way to the Main Campus, but he uses indirectness as a politeness strategy by first using intonation (with no obvious question marker) to present a declarative as an interrogative. He further uses an interrogative or a question to make his request. If he says, 'I want to join you in your car,' he would definitely flout the politeness maxims of Lakoff: 'Don't impose' and 'Give options.'

#### Example 4

This is a conversation between a lecturer (A) and his colleague (B) in the former's office. Lecturer B enters, does not close the door, and the conversation begins:

A: My A.C.

B: (looks around the office, nonplused) eem eehm

A: The breeze is going out.

B: (quickly closes the door) Oh sorry.

The politeness strategies of A are discernible. Out of politeness, he expects B to infer what he means from his utterance 'My A.C.' Having seen that B hesitates because he does not understand A's intention, he uses another declarative. B understands that A wants him to shut the door, feels good, and closes the door with apology. This is an instance of indirectness being 'costly' because of the long process of speech production and meaning processing and identification as indicated by Dascal (1983, cited in Thomas, 1995, p. 120). Another possibility, according to Dascal, is its being risky, as it is susceptible to misinterpretation. The next example illustrates this:



*Example 5*

Dr. X is not very happy that his student doesn't bring his (Dr. X's) book, which he lent the student and said "I shouldn't expect my book in the next class as well, right?" At the next class, the following ensues:

Dr. X: Where is my book? I reminded you of it in the last class.

Student: Sir, but you said you wouldn't expect it in this class.

Dr. X: For goodness sake! Imbecile, what on earth did you think I mean?

Instances of misinterpretation abound in indirectness to show how risky it is. The student, probably because of his limited pragmatic knowledge of the world, could not understand that his lecturer actually meant that he must bring the book to the next class. For that indirectness, the lecturer had to wait until another class before he could have his book.

**Ambivalence**

This is a politeness strategy that employs an utterance that has more than one pragmatic force. In other words, being ambivalent refers to the possibility of conveying ideas that the other will find disagreeable without causing undue offence. Though it is always difficult to put words that are naturally offensive to the hearer, especially at the surface (grammatical) level, being impersonal or ambivalent reduces threat and makes the other to decide the precise force of the message and whether it applies to him or not.

*Example 6*

In a lecture room at a corner of the chalk-board, there is a piece of religious information above which is written in bold letters:

This information is not for you alone.

In a multi-religious setting like the university, it is not unusual for rival religious members to rub off information that is meant for the students. 'Do not rub off' notice does not solve the problem, as there is a predilection among such rivals for frustrating the *other*, the progress of whom is rightly or wrongly construed to be a cost to *self*. Thus, the above notice is meant for the reader to determine whether he is morally justified to rub off the information and thereby deny others of the privilege of reading the information.

*Example 7*

This example is taken from a toilet door in the post-graduate student hostel.

Being a P.G. student connotes being mature.

It is animalistic and immature not to flush the toilet after use.

The notice obviously avoids imposition. Rather, it is left to the user to determine whether being immature or animalistic, at such a level of education, applies to him or not. He also has to decide whether he is being requested or ordered to flush the toilet after use.



## Deference

Deference, legitimately connected with politeness, is the opposite of familiarity. It refers to the respect shown to other people by virtue of their higher status, greater age, upper influence, etc. It is in-built, as shown earlier, in the grammars of languages such as Korean, Japanese, French, German, Russian, and Yoruba, etc. through the presence of the 'T/V' system. For the fact that the T/V form of English (thou/you) is outdated, in modern English, deference manifests itself in two ways: the address forms (Doctor, Professor, etc.) and the honorifics (Sir, Madam) in the university. To say that this is the most frequent politeness strategy in use is to say the obvious. Often, the two forms are combined in a single utterance.

### Example 8

In a post-graduate class being held in a lecturer's office, a groundnut seller knocks and comes in.

Student A: Does *Oga* want to have some groundnuts, sir?  
(She offers the lecturer a wrap.)

In the above utterance, student A respects her lecturer by combining the address form, *Oga* meaning 'boss' or 'master' with the honorific *sir*. Usually, at the University of Ilorin, student-lecturer conversations are always punctuated by *sir/ma* after each sentence. In instances such as that of Example 9 below mere greetings necessitate the use of the address form:

### Example 9

A final year student knocks at his supervisor's door and says:  
"Prof., good morning, sir."

## Register

Register is defined as how "the language we speak or write varies according to the type of situation" (Halliday, 1978, p. 32; see also Halliday, 1973). Primarily a sociolinguistic, rather than a pragmatic, phenomenon, register is of pragmatic import as speakers deliberately use unexpected forms in order to change situation or to challenge the status quo. As discussed earlier, levels of super-formal, formal, semi-formal, informal, intimate, and ordinary exist and are marked. If students, for instance, address the university authority as follows, it appears clearly that it is a deliberate challenge.

### Example 10

The example here is an extract from a statement for potential graduates, Unilorin 2001 entitled "Unilorin Resumption and May 2nd Exam Date: Our Fears."

Just in that mood somebody somewhere call (sic) on us to resume and slate examination (sic) for May 2nd and May 10th for graduating students and others respectively without resolving the contentious issue. . . . For how long shall this 'Abachanism' tendencies on the part of the authority subsist.

Register in essence relates to the use of the appropriate code in the appropriate context. One example to illustrate the use of unexpected forms to change the situation of discourse is



when a student is discussing casually with his phonetics lecturer and the latter changes the social interaction to a practical phonetics test and grades the student based on his oral performance in their short interaction. Another example is shown in Example 11 below between a student (who coincidentally happens to be the lecturer's wife) and a lecturer in a class:

*Example 11*

Student: Sweetheart, I have a question.

Lecturer: (Embarrassed as the whole class bursts into laughter) I beg your pardon.

The students' laughter is informed by the choice of a code that should have been meant for the class context. It appears that the wife deliberately wants to embarrass her husband/teacher or just wants to prove a point to her classmates.

**PP Maxims Maintenance**

The maintenance of the PP maxims is another important politeness strategy. Speakers seem to uphold the 6 Leechian maxims as a means of being polite.

*The Tact Maxim*

The Tact maxim is maintained through the use of 'minimizers' (to reduce the implied cost to the hearer) and 'mitigating devices' (i.e., expressions used to soften an imposition; Yule, 1996b, p. 131).

*Example 12*

The secretary courtesies before the Dean.

Secretary: I have a little problem.

Dean: You have no problem whatsoever, what's it?

The secretary tactfully reduces the amount of burden he will be putting before his boss by minimizing it. The Dean reacts positively by assuming that the secretary has no problem at all, for he (the Dean) will surely solve the problem if he is able.

*Example 13*

A porter is bothered that his boss has not found a vital document of his.

Boss: I haven't still found your document.

Porter: Kindly check your files again, please.

(Offering to do the checking for the boss)

The amount of imposition in the example above is reduced through the mitigating devices, *kindly* and *please*. Employing these forms of tact is also a common politeness strategy at the University of Ilorin.



### *The Agreement Maxim*

In situations where one necessarily must disagree, it is not unusual to hear 'Yes, but....' This maxim is predicated on the fact that being in agreement with people lubricates the channels of interaction.

#### *Example 14*

A faculty officer addresses the admission officer.

A: Mr. X, just do me this favor: I want my son to study Medicine.

X: Okay, but I told you the other time that he doesn't have the basic requirements.

Mr. X observes the agreement maxim not only by expressing agreement through 'okay' but also by not blatantly refusing to be of any assistance. His utterance is a truth of which Mr. A cannot claim ignorance.

### *Generosity Maxim*

The Generosity maxim implies making a sacrifice as a means of pleasing the other. For instance,

#### *Example 15*

A test is in progress. Student Y is having problems with his pen.

X: (Offering) You wouldn't mind having my spare biro, would you?

Y: Oh thanks. That's kind of you.

By offering to lend Y his pen, X has really maximized benefit to the other at a cost to himself. For, if his (X's) pen develops a problem after he has lent his extra pen out, he will 'suffer' for not having an alternative immediately.

### *Approbation Maxim*

The following example of maximizing praise of the other is part of a letter entitled "Can Falsehood save this sinking ship?" from a lecturer (HOD) to the two principal officers of ASUU, regarding another lecturer.

#### *Example 16*

The Graduate Assistant in my Department holds a Second Upper B.A. degree and a Master of Arts degree in Theatre Arts. He is a University of Ilorin's best convocating student prize winner (see 18th Convocation Booklet of the University). He also had the best result in his M.A. class at the University of Ibadan with eligibility to proceed to Ph.D (sic). These are certainly not scholarly achievements that "are barely" attained.

It is obvious that the approbation maxim is in force in the above fulsome praise of the concerned lecturer.



*Modesty Maxim*

The thrust of the Modesty maxim lies in praising others and dispraising self. Anyone who blows his own trumpet is considered impolite. Rather, the maxim is maintained by expressing the flaws and weakness of self.

*Example 17*

A student guest lecturer at a Student Union Week lecture after observing the due protocols begins his presentation.

I need to say from the outset, respected audience, that I am unequal to the task of which I am requested. This is because my knowledge of the subject as well as the medium is very limited. I am however sustained by the hope that my shortcomings will be treated with indulgence. You all know better than I do.

This maxim which characterizes true scholars is regrettably the most abused/flouted by many a Nigerian politician. Certain so-called intellectuals also lavishly praise their own works in a most blatant show of egotism.

*Sympathy Maxim*

The Sympathy maxim is aimed at showing concern for the plight of others. It is a debatable point whether the maxim is maintained by words or by actions. The next example is the last paragraph of a letter by ASUU Chairman, Unilorin dated April 24, 2001 and addressed to 'Dear Students,' who have been subjected to a long suspense occasioned by a prolonged industrial action.

*Example 18*

We are concerned about the plight of students and we all hope for a speedy and just resolution to the current conflict. All hands must be on deck to ensure this.

By sympathizing and identifying with the plight of the students, politeness is maintained through this sympathy maxim. The addressed students naturally feel comfortable that their lecturers are concerned about their plight.

*Mitigating Devices*

Mitigating devices are expressions used to soften the tenor of impositions. These include expressions like *pleas*, *I'm sorry...*, *would you...?*, *kindly...*, etc. As mentioned under the discussion on the tact maxim in the preceding section, mitigating devices are tactful means of achieving desired ends without letting the hearer feel the burden of imposition he or she is encumbered with. Instances of using this strategy abound in everyday linguistic exchange across all levels interactants.

*Example 19*

Dean: Please quickly type this memo. I need it urgently.  
Secretary: Consider it done, sir!



*Example 20*

At the SUB, students are chatting, some of them are reading.

Student A: I am sorry to bother you. Can I have a look at your newspaper for a second?

Student B: Well, sure. (hands the newspaper over to Student A)

In Example 19, the use of *please* by the speaker mitigates the imposition of typing on the hearer. In Example 20, the acknowledgement of being a bother, and of being sorry about it, mitigates the feeling of being disturbed in the hearer. These are also reinforced by the use of the phrase for a second, indicating that the speaker does not intend to deprive the hearer of his material for long. In the two examples, the politeness strategies are successful in making the interactions harmonious.

### Off-Record Strategies

Off-record utterances are those that are not directly addressed to the other (Yule, 1996b). Brown and Levinson (1978) present some fifteen strategies for performing off-record politeness such as 'give hints,' 'use metaphors,' 'be ambiguous or vague,' etc. The following examples are illustrative.

*Example 21*

A lecturer, after having gone through a student's assignment, says:

"My dear student hasn't copied Chomsky's ideas, has he?"

This is a mild way of accusing the student of plagiarism. The student does not necessarily have to make a confession or even raise an objection. He is warned to acknowledge sources of information correctly.

*Example 22*

The following is an extract from *The Clarion* (Vol. 1, No. 3) the ASUU's newsletter of February 26, 2001, page 2:

**The elasticity of the membrane will soon be exceeded and the bubble will burst. Those on top of it will find themselves thrown to the floor like lifeless corpses.**

The use of metaphor in the above example is clear. Given the pragmatics of the prevalent industrial action that provoked a 'face-off' between ASUU and the administration, the off-record strategy of rightily or wrongly predicting the fall of 'those on top' is important.

*Example 23*

Asked what is being done about the crisis in his university, a principal officer says:

"We are doing something about it."

The response here is vague and evasive. It looks like a subtle way of telling the interrogator to mind his business without causing offence.



## White Lies

A 'white lie' is an English term used "for the surrender of truth for politeness" (Cook, 1989, p. 23). Instances of white lies abound at the University of Ilorin, as in other contexts of dynamic human interactions. It seems as if the maxim is: truth is what pleases the other. The main reason for white lies is politeness. It could also be for the fear of being victimized for expressing a 'bitter truth.'

### Example 24

A is an administrative officer, whereas B is a lecturer. The former had given the latter a manuscript, which B found distasteful, to read. B however did not feel it was appropriate to tell A the truth in the context.

A: What do you think of my novel?

B: It is simply excellent, profoundly rich in functionality and aesthetics.

A: (smiles) Thank you.

The lecturer's comment in this context actually is a white lie because the opposite is the truth regarding the manuscript.

### Example 25

Mrs. X is a self-conscious faculty officer. She has two secretaries, Y and Z.

Mrs. X: How do I look, Mrs. Y?

Mrs. Y: Gorgeous, like a queen ma.

Mrs. X: (smiles and regards herself, walks into her office)

Miss Z: Do you really mean it? I think...

Mrs. Y: Shh... what do you think she wanted to hear?

As pointed out previously, for the sake of pleasing the other and maintaining other people's faces, the Gricean maxims are flouted.

## Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs)

According to Brown and Levinson (1978), face-threatening acts (FTAs) are illocutionary acts liable to damage or threaten another person's face. Performing an FTA is a matter of choice, and people often opt for it in a crisis situation. The concomitant effect of this is deepening the crisis. There are four possibilities of performing FTAs, the explication of which is constrained within the scope of the present work, but which Odebunmi (2002), using another Nigerian University as a case study, illustrates. These are made up of three sets of 'on-record' super-strategies—perform the FTA on-record without redressive action (bald-on-record), perform the FTA on-record using positive politeness, and perform the FTA on-record using negative politeness—and one set of 'off record' strategy—say nothing. All these super-strategies are geared towards extenuating the effect of the FTAs (Thomas, 1995).

As revealed in our data, the super-strategies of politeness and redressing FTAs may be suspended or flouted, especially in a crisis situation where propaganda and mudslinging hold sway. When the politeness maxims and PP are not upheld, the cloudy side of politeness is triggered and FTAs are fired among the members of the society, provoking rudeness, insult, abuse, contempt, and condemnation. We only cite a few examples here.



*Example 26*

FTA from Lecturers to Administration:

Administration is spreading fear that it has the authority of Government to sack striking academic staff by Monday, March 26, 2001. This is not true. (*ASUU Strike Bulletin* No 14, February 26, 2001.)

*Example 27*

FTA from Administration to Lecturers:

Council wishes to observe that some of Unilorin Unions, especially ASUU, have proved to be unruly, uncompromising, disrespectful, insolent and showing absolutely no regard for constituted authority while pursuing their sectional interests. (Governing Council's Statement, *The Punch*, March 29, 2001, p. 52)

*Example 28*

FTA from Lecturer to Lecturers (a letter addressed to ASUU chairman and secretary by a lecturer/acting HOD, dated May 1, 2001):

If you remove the blinkers from your eyes, you will recall that here in this University there are many brilliant lecturers. . . .

If the truth cannot save your badly battered sinking ship, falsehood cannot.

*Example 29*

FTA from Lecturers to Lecturers:

Really, members of the illegitimate . . . EXCO are poor students of strategy. It is not out of place to recommend some tutorials for them on the principle of surprise attack and the conditions governing it. One is tempted to stop at this elementary level because of their shallow understanding of tactics and its advanced variant, which is strategy. (*No Strike Bulletin* No 10, April 2, 2001)

In all the examples above, FTAs are performed with reckless abandon and the others' faces (negative and positive) are damaged. They almost constitute the worst form of FTA (FTA without redress or 'bald-on-record'). In the examples above, as well as the one cited in Example 2 under the analysis of face-saving acts, there is the high propensity to offend, to condemn, and to malign the other. Ultimately, people's images are tarnished and destroyed. Everything in the long run, just because of not upholding the Politeness Principle, constitutes an open sore that assails the image of the interactants.

## SUMMARY

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics studying behaviour that is motivated in terms of conversational goals (Leech, 1983). In functioning with language in our daily social intercourse, politeness is pervasive because of the intricacies of our diversities in terms of age, status, rank, etc. When politeness is maintained, peace reigns. But when it is flagrantly flouted, such a phenomenon warrants muscle-flexing, arm-twisting, or even warfare. Our social relations accord us social roles: those to whom we are responsible and those who are responsible to us. If we do not give people their due, our relationship will collapse. But if we



are aware of people's faces and accord them some politeness in words and deeds, definitely solutions will be found to most of the crises that engulf our global community.

In this study, we have attempted to x-ray the politeness phenomena at the University of Ilorin. We identified four broad groups, namely, the administration, the lecturers, the non-teaching staff, and the students, as members of the university community. We discussed, building on the works of various scholars, how politeness takes place, by describing the super-formal, formal, semi-formal, informal, intimate, and ordinary levels of politeness or formality in the university. We contend, through the presentation and general analysis of data, that positive and negative politeness takes place through the activation of such strategies as face-savings acts, indirectness, ambivalence, register, deference, maintenance of the PP maxims of Lakoff (1973) and Leech (1983), mitigating devices, off-record strategies, and 'white lies.' We also illustrate the impoliteness of face-threatening acts and the debilitating effects they have in frustrating mutual understanding and social cohesion. It is our suggestion that, if we all maintain our PP, crises will crumble, and the world, the macrocosm of the university system, will be a peaceful abode for all and sundry.

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APPLIED THOUGHT  
(A Multidisciplinary Approach)

Volume 3

MAY 2014

PAY 2014

NUMBER 2