
A PRAGMATIC INVESTIGATION OF FACE THREATENING ACT IN ONDO WEST LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF ONDO STATE, NIGERIA.

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Abstract

The use of language could either be for positive or negative purposes. As a result of this, the success or failure of any conversation solely depends on the interlocutors. This study investigated face-threatening acts in the Nigerian context to highlight the intentional use of utterances for attack in discourse situations. Culpeper's (1996) Model of Impoliteness was adopted as a theoretical framework. Participatory observations and recorded conversations of the interlocutors using linguistic exchanges served as sources of data. Data were got from nuclear families, offices, and market settings in Ondo West Local Government Area, Ondo State, Nigeria. The participants are ESL speakers. The study discovered that face-threatening act is intentionally

used to attack face in a conversation. It also revealed the strategies employed by the participants to express impoliteness in order to create a negative emotional atmosphere between the speaker and the hearer. Utterances of coerciveness and amusement were embedded in face-threatening acts. The study recommends that language scholars should intensify efforts to carry out empirical studies on face-threatening acts in other areas of human endeavour, as this will reveal how negative use of language is employed in discourse.

Key Words: Face-Threat, Impoliteness, Ondo West, Conversation, Interlocutors

Introduction

In pragmatics, the term “face” is described as the public self-image of a person. Every individual has a self-image to be protected, particularly in linguistic exchanges. Self-image is seen as emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone to recognize (Farinde, Omolaiye & Farinde, 2023, p. 823). It is expected that interlocutors show awareness of the face of each other in conversation, and if this is taken care of, face saving act has come to play. Face saving act is when an interlocutor makes polite utterances to lessen possible face-threat. Thus, face-threatening act could be described as a situation in which one of the interlocutors says something that threatens the other interlocutor's expectations (Osisanwo, 2008). Mohammed and Abass (2015) corroborate this as they categorize face-threatening act as a situation whereby a verbal or non-verbal act runs against the hearer's or the speaker's face. The scholars cited a situation where a “request” is seen as a face-threatening act to the hearer's negative face because the hearer might be impeded by the speaker to do what the speaker wants rather than what the hearer wants. On the other hand, face-threatening act could also be seen on the part of the hearer's positive face when the speaker's opinion is misunderstood by the hearer. From the perspective of speech-act, Brown and Levinson

(1987) view face-threatening act as any kind of linguistic act that has a relational dimension. They argue that face-threatening act should have some elements of politeness. Based on the views of the scholars above, there exists positive face and negative face.

Some strategies are usually employed by one of the interlocutors to threaten the face of the other interlocutor. Some of the strategies are ignoring or snubbing, use of absence utterances, use of inappropriate identity markers, denying common ground, use of taboo words, scorning, fright ridicule etc. Face-threatening act has an element of intention, that is an intentional expression or speech that is degrading, offensive or reprehensive. It usually expresses the opposite of one of the interlocutors' intention in a discourse or conversation. Jay (1999) corroborates this by stating that the purpose of face-threatening act is to harm, demean, or denigrate the listener. Thus, the main outcome of face-threatening act is infringement on the hearer's psychological status by the hearer since it is usually deployed to criticize or humiliate the personal competence of the hearer. In view of this, this study investigates why and how face-threatening act is employed by interlocutors in linguistic exchanges. This would no doubt provide additional empirical study on face-threatening act, with specific reference to Ondo West Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria.

Since, this study is premised on speeches or linguistic exchanges emanating from the interlocutors, it is important to briefly shed light on speech acts propounded by Austin (1962). Austin sees every utterance as an act of stating a fact or opinion, confirming or denying something, making a prediction or a request, asking a

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question, issuing an order, giving a permission or a promise, thanking somebody or condoling somebody (Omolaiye, 2019, p. 17). Austin distinguishes between two major classes of speech acts to include “constatives” and “performatives”. Constatives are seen as utterances that have the possibility of being true or false, while performative utterances focus on how language function manifests. Austin further identifies three types of speech acts to include locution, illocution and perlocution. Locutionary act is the act of making an utterance of a certain grammatical order, while illocutionary act is the force the utterance makes. The effect of the utterance on the hearer is the perlocutionary act. In view of this, it could be submitted that the effect of the utterance on the hearer can threaten his self-image, thereby putting his psychological state at risk. So, the act of making an utterance by the speaker has some semantic values on the hearer.

Area of Coverage

As earlier mentioned, this investigation is limited to face-threatening act; that is an utterance capable of destroying the self-image of the hearer in linguistic exchanges. Family settings, market settings, and office settings are the areas of coverage. This study focused on banter interactions. It is worthy of mention that much empirical efforts have not been directed towards the investigation of face-threatening act in Ondo West Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria. Hence, the recorded conversations were got on-the-field from the aforementioned setting. The study is significant in that it will broaden the knowledge of linguistic investigation in different contexts and settings within and outside Nigeria.

Method of Data Collection

Data were got with the aid of recording devices from different natural settings ranging from family, market, and club, to office settings in Ondo West Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria. The level of the interlocutors' unconsciousness with their utterances being recorded made the data standard. Some of the conversations were rendered in pidgin. In other words, the recorded conversations in pidgin were retained for originality. However, all data were translated to English while analyzing the data. Conversations of Seller and Buyer, Boss and Houseboy, President and Members, Manager and Worker were recorded for analysis. Collection of data spanned two years. Ten recordings were made. However, five were used for analysis because some features of some linguistic exchanges overlapped.

Theoretical Framework

This study is predicated on Culpeper's (1996) model of impoliteness theory. Impoliteness tends to cause disharmony among interlocutors in linguistic exchanges. In other words, impoliteness is a face destroyer (Walaszewaska & Piskorska, 2012, p. 246). This model originates from politeness theory. Culpeper disagrees with the view of Brown and Levinson who see politeness as “marginal” to every linguistic exchange. Culpeper sees impoliteness phenomenon as a foundation for the understanding of politeness theory. He argues that impoliteness theory should be given due consideration (Mullany & Stockwell, 2010, p. 71). Impoliteness model is built on real life data as it focuses on different types of conversations. This model came into limelight of research with conflictive and impolite illocutions in U.S training discourse. The verbal and non-verbal data adopted for analysis strengthen the impoliteness model and make it reliable (Bousfield, 2008, p. 90). Also, the model depends on media and television programmes for its functionality.

Culpeper identifies five super strategies in which impoliteness can be created and received. These strategies are “bald on record impoliteness”, “positive impoliteness”, “negative impoliteness”, “sarcasm/mock impoliteness” and “withhold politeness”. Culpeper also proposes three types of impoliteness to include “affective impoliteness”, “coercive impoliteness” and “entertaining impoliteness”. In affective impoliteness, the speaker tends to expose anger to the hearer which will eventually arouse a negative emotional situation between the speaker and the hearer (Huang, 2014, p. 150). In the case of coercive impoliteness, realignment occurs between the speaker and the hearer such that the speaker gains profits at the expense of the hearer because of societal strata. That is, the speaker belongs to a higher and more powerful position than the hearer. Coercive impoliteness means getting power through language. Entertaining impoliteness occurs when the speaker pokes fun at the hearer and utilizes the target's feelings to obtain amusement. The relevance of this theory to this present study lies in the fact that impoliteness is embedded in a conversation in which some utterances are made to threaten the face of one of the interlocutors. Adopting impoliteness as a theoretical framework has revealed how utterances are made to threaten faces in conversations.

Data Analysis

In this study, the data are categorized and analyzed. The categorization was based on the settings in which interactions took place. It is also germane to point out here that these categorizations are not exclusive to

pragmatic functions of utterances. The identified utterances that posed threat to the face of the interlocutors were got from different natural settings. As earlier mentioned, some of the settings are market place, work place, family settings etc. For easy analysis, data from each of the settings were analysed and discussed before going to another. Utterances related to face-threatening act were underlined in the conversations for identification purpose.

Excerpt 1: Conversation between a Seller and a Buyer

These are linguistic exchanges that took place at the market setting that involved a seller and a buyer, that is, in the context of business transaction. The conversation is presented below:

1. **Seller:** Good afternoon mummy, do you want to buy fish?
2. **Buyer:** Yes, don't you have the big one.
3. **Seller:** I have, how many will you buy?
4. **Buyer:** Just one
5. **Seller:** That is the big one.
6. **Buyer:** How much?
7. **Seller:** N1,700.00
8. **Buyer:** What of N500.00
9. **Seller:** Is it the one you are holding.
10. **Buyer:** Yes
11. **Seller:** Put it down.
12. **Buyer:** For what?
13. **Seller:** I say put it down.
14. **Buyer:** Na wa o

In a business transaction there is always a price negotiation between the seller and the buyer. Usually the seller fixes a price for his/her goods. In some cases the price of goods is open for negotiation. Usually, buyer opts for price negotiation. In a situation, whereby the seller and the buyer are unable to agree on a particular selling price of goods or commodity, it is likely that face-threatening act may occur between the buyer and the seller. In the case of the conversation above, there occurred a face-threatening act.

At the beginning of the conversation, the use of language was polite until when the issue of price negotiation ensued. In (11) and (13) the seller threatens the face of the buyer because the seller was not happy for the price of the buyer. So the seller simply put an end to the conversation using the expressions “put it down” and “I say put it down”. The seller employed positive impoliteness strategy to express her impolite utterances by ignoring the buyer's price because of the low price of the lower. The expressing “put it down” implies that the buyer's price negotiation is no longer welcome. It is also

another way of saying “go away”. The seller also employed “withhold politeness strategy” because she did not say no or yes to the buyer's price negotiation. The conversation ended on a bad note as both of them were not happy at the end of the conversation because none of them was able to achieve her aim.

Excerpt 2: Conversation between Master the Houseboy

This conversation took place in the house of the boss. Conversation came up because the boss was not happy for the houseboy's inability to carryout assignment given to him effectively. Here is the conversation:

15. **Master:** Kabiru
16. **Houseboy:** Sir
17. **Master:** Come here.
18. **Houseboy:** Here I am sir.
19. **Master:** Why didn't you do the work I asked you to do?
20. **Houseboy:** What work sir?
21. **Master:** Why didn't you wash the black jeep?
22. **Houseboy:** I washed sir.
23. **Master:** You didn't wash it.
24. **Houseboy:** I did sir.
25. **Master:** Shut up!
26. **Houseboy:** I...
27. **Master:** I say shut up your mouth or I fire you!

As earlier mentioned, the conversation above was between the boss and his houseboy. The conversation has revealed face-threat in (25) and (27). The face-threatening act is a coercive impoliteness. The boss was able to gain profits at the expense of his servant because of the use of power through language. The utterances “shut up”, and “I say shut up your mouth or I fire you”, are examples. The use of the face-threatening act enabled the boss to put an end to the behaviour of the houseboy by warning him not to speak further. The utterances show that the boss has a command over his houseboy.

From the conversation above, it could be said that the speaker (master) employed “bald on record impoliteness strategy” to attack the face of the hearer (houseboy). In other words, the face attack was intentional (i.e the boss intended to damage the face of his houseboy in clear terms). In a nutshell, the use of impolite utterances is to destroy or damage the self-image of the hearer. It is a deliberate intention on the part of the master or the boss to attack the face of his houseboy. For the fact that the boss has the power of economy over his houseboy, he had to shut up the houseboy's mouth for further argument. It could be submitted, therefore, that coercive impoliteness strategy tends to intimidate the hearer with the aid of language use.

Excerpt 3: A Conversation between Two Friends

This is a conversation between two friends in which one of the friends seemed to have disappointed in an agreement. The conversation is presented below:

28. **Tunde:** What happened to your phone?
29. **Segun:** Nothing happened to my phone?
30. **Tunde:** I wanted to reach out to you yesterday, but it wasn't possible.
31. **Segun:** It could be network problem. Hope no problem.
32. **Tunde:** Who told my brother about the plan?
33. **Segun:** I of course.
34. **Tunde:** Oh my God!
35. **Segun:** Anything the matter?
36. **Tunde:** You made me crazy!
37. **Segun:** How?
38. **Tunde:** It's over!
39. **Segun:** So be it! What have I done wrong here for Christ sake?

The conversation has generated a negative emotional atmosphere between Tunde and Segun. Faces of both interlocutors were threatened as revealed in (36) and (38). Tunde expressed his anger towards Segun with the utterance "you made me crazy". He employed this strategy to express the massive effect of Segun on Tunde, thereby letting him know that he was no longer wanted anymore. Positive impoliteness strategy was also employed in the conversation. For instance, Tunde made use of inappropriate identity marker "it's over" to tell Segun that his face was unwanted. The use of the expression "you made me crazy!" could be regarded as a unpleasant expression. The use of the expression by Segun "so be it" is an indication that threatened the face of each other in the conversation. Element of negative impoliteness strategy was revealed in the data above. For instance, the use of face-attack in (36) could be seen as an utterance that frightened Segun. This necessitated the question in (38). It could be mentioned here that the interlocutors departed in anger because their faces were attacked as noticed in the utterances of each other.

Excerpt 4: Conversation between Co-workers

This conversation took place at the place of work in which one of the co-workers tried to poke fun at the other co-worker. However, the utterances did not generate much negative emotional atmosphere between the speaker and the hearer. Here is the conversation:

40. **Worker A:** Today is great oo!
41. **Worker B:** It's great indeed.
42. **Worker A:** Who gave you this fez-cap?
43. **Worker B:** The one I wear?

44. **Worker A:** Yes, it is like papa Ajasco's cap.
45. **Worker B:** You don't mean it!
46. **Worker A:** How were you able to come here with these oversized shoes?
47. **Worker B:** Please, leave me alone.
48. **Worker A:** Don't fall oo.
49. **Worker B:** I can't. do you need one?
50. **Worker A:** I don't want to be like a cockroach in the shoes.
51. **Worker B:** Na you sabi.

The conversation could be likened to entertaining type of impoliteness. Worker A poked a fun at worker B because of worker B's amusing dressing. Worker A generated his utterances to utilize the target's feelings to obtain amusement. This explains why worker B did not get offended. A close study of the conversation above has revealed mutual relationship or understanding between the interlocutors. Worker A succeeded in employing sarcasm or mock impoliteness as a strategy in the conversation. The use of the expressions like "Yes, it is like papa Ajasco's cap" and "How were you able to come here with these oversized shoes" in (44) and (46) are examples of sarcasm. The expressions seem to be superficially suitable and accepted, but deeply they have the opposite meanings. Negative impoliteness also featured in the above conversation because of the ridiculous nature of the worker A's utterances. Expressions like "don't fall oo" and "I don't want to be like cockroach in the shoes" are expressions emanated from worker A with the intention to poke a fun at worker B. In essence worker A's utterances intended to describe worker B's appearance as unacceptable form of dressing.

Excerpt 5: Conversation between Husband and Wife

This conversation was got from a couple who wanted to know the person that has the right to control the family. That is the person whose authority should be highly respected. The conversation is presented thus:

52. **Husband:** Why do you always go against my order in this house?
53. **Wife:** As how?
54. **Husband:** Why don't you respect me in this house?
55. **Wife:** Why don't you have little respect for the woman you call you wife?
56. **Husband:** When did you become the head of this family?
57. **Wife:** As how?
58. **Husband:** Do you know what? I don't want to see your two legs in that compound anymore. My decision is final.
59. **Wife:** I am not your slave. You should respect my right for once.

The interaction above show power tussle between the husband and the wife. None of them had any form of respect for each other because both claimed to be right. The expressions of the husband and the wife created face-threatening act. For instance, the expression “why don't you respect me in this house” which emanated from the husband and the expression “why don't you have little respect for the woman you call your wife, which also emanated from the wife are features of face-threat. Also, the expressions in (58) and (59) portrayed masculinity and feminism respectively. The husband intended to control and rule his wife entirely. However, this became difficult because the wife also had proved her value or relevance in the family. The conversation above is a coercive impoliteness. The conversation has revealed the status and level of the husband and his wife in the family. Expression like “why do you always go against my order in this house” shows the supremacy of the husband in the family.

Both the wife and the husband employed “bald on record impoliteness strategy” to attack face of each other. These were revealed in the participants' utterances. The utterances of the participants show deliberate intention to attack face. Negative impoliteness with the following sub-strategies “bright”, “ridicule”, and “scorning” were also employed to damage face. One important feature noticeable in the conversation is “rudeness”. Rondina and Workman (2005, p.3) describe rudeness as anything that one says or do that offends someone else, making him feel uncomfortable or inconvenience. In the same spirit, Dubrin (2011) sees rudeness as insensitive or disrespectful behaviour engaged in by a person that displays a lack of regard for others. A critical observation in the utterances of the husband and his wife have revealed lack of respect. In other words, the husband and the wife do not have respect for each other in the family.

Findings and Discussion

This pragmatic study of impoliteness in Ondo West Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria has revealed the emotional use of language. Conversations sometimes could damage the face of either of the interlocutors. The impolite use of language does not have regard for social or interpersonal relationships between the interlocutors because impoliteness is a form of insult or embarrassment displayed in a conversation. It is also a form of rudeness in language use. It could be said that impolite utterances are capable of infringing on an interlocutor's psychological status or self-esteem.

It is observed that impoliteness could occur in business transaction especially in price negotiation between the seller and the buyer. Face-threat occurs when

there is disagreement in price negotiation between the interlocutors. In the context of business, the seller employed positive impoliteness strategy to attack the self-image of the buyer. The popular saying that “customers are always right” is not always applicable in all context of business transactions. The seller employed negative impoliteness by ignoring the buyer. These were revealed in (11) and (13). Withhold politeness strategy was also revealed as the seller did not say “No” or “Yes” to the price negotiation of the buyer.

In the case of the conversation between the boss and the houseboy, coercive impoliteness was revealed. Power was exercised via language. This shows that the boss and the houseboy are different in economic status. Utterance of intimidation was employed by the boss to have command over his houseboy. The command enabled the boss to put an end to utterances of the houseboy by warning him not to speak further. Excerpt 2 revealed power of social or economic status in the use of language.

In excerpt 3, the use of language was affective as the utterance of Tunde in (36) exposed his anger towards Segun's utterances in (39), and this consequently generated a negative emotional atmosphere between the interlocutors. So, Tunder's utterance in (36) expressed passive effect of Segun on him, thus informing him that he was no longer wanted. It could be said that negative impoliteness strategy is a linguistic tool to attack face in a conversation. The interlocutors eventually ended their conversation with anger. However, face- attack in excerpt 4 was mild in that worker A poked fun indirectly to threaten the face of worker B. This explains why worker B did not get offended. Despite the fact that worker A's utterances had some elements of sarcasm, the conversation still ended on a good note.

The study also revealed the utterances of power tussle in the conversation between husband and his wife in excerpt 5. Masculine and feminine expressions were revealed. The husband intended to control and rule his wife in entirety. However, this was not possible because of the feminist tendencies in the utterances of the wife. The wife sees herself as being equal to her husband. This is what brought about rudeness in the conversation. In a nutshell, the utterances of the participants show a deliberate intention to attack face.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Face-threatening act is seen as a situation in which the self-image of one of the interlocutors is attacked in a conversation. Given this premise, therefore, this present study adopted Culpeper's impoliteness theory for the analysis of face- threatening act in the Nigerian context. The selected conversations subjected for analysis are

affective, coercive and entertaining impoliteness in language use. They are intentionally used to attack or threaten face.

So far, this study has made a pragmatic analysis of why and how impoliteness is employed in a discourse. It has been observed that impoliteness is used to create a negative emotional atmosphere between the speaker and the hearer. For example, the expression “shut up”! portrays face-attack on the hearer. The utterance made by the speaker tried to put an end to the hearer's behaviour by warning him not to speak further. This utterance indicates power via language. The study has also revealed situational use of language. In view of this, this study concludes by recommending that language scholars should carry out an empirical research of face-threatening act in other areas of discourse as this will reveal how negative use of language is employed. By so doing, the recommendation stated will broaden the scope of linguistic study in the Nigerian context.

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