



## Politeness Strategies and Address Terms in Igbo and Igala Kinship Cultures

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### Abstract

The work aims at investigating politeness strategies in Igbo and Igala cultures with a view to finding out how these two cultures handle the various strategies, honorifics and address terms in kinship relationships. The theoretical bases of the work are Brown and Levinson's face-saving view of politeness which draws heavily from Goffman's concept of face and interaction order. Our findings show that the two cultures under review are conscious of affronts to positive and negative face, favours indirectness and off-record strategies more than bald-on-record strategies. The two cultures also employ culture-specific honorifics and address terms especially in relating with parents, spouses, elder relations, siblings and peers. It is evident from the findings that contrary to what the present day so-called "civilization" may de-culturate people into especially in the use of first names, these two cultures still uphold the inbuilt cultural respect in observing politeness strategies, honorifics and address terms.

**Key words:** Politeness strategies; Face; Face-threatening acts; Honorifics; Face-saving view; Address terms; Igbo and Igala cultures.

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### INTRODUCTION

Human interaction is a complex phenomenon that requires conscious efforts of the interactants to work out intersubjective understandings, connect with one another, enact and maintain strong individual and group relationships. To achieve this requires tact, what Goffman (1974) calls "interaction order". Goffman claims that the maintenance of "self" and "face" is a condition for interaction in conjunction with the needs of "self" and "other" which can take these forms: interpersonal rituals; which includes avoidance and presentational rituals; and institutional rituals which are social establishments that determine the construction of private and public self-image. In interpersonal rituals, avoidance rituals are forms of deference which lead the actor to keep at a distance from the recipient. For example, "self" as a public figure requires maintaining distance; but as a private person, intimacy is preferred. Presentational rituals are acts through which the individual makes specific attestations to a recipient concerning how they regard them, for example, honorifics and address terms. Presentational and avoidance rituals are directly related to institutional rituals: social establishments/institutions people find themselves which can symbolize certain favoured aspects of self and face. As mentioned earlier, institutionally or culturally allocated roles as well can physically divide self into public and private, making interaction restricted and formal or casual and informal respectively. For instance, my father, a high court judge, assumes two different selves at home and in office.

Our concern in this work is to study observed politeness strategies, honorifics and address terms in selected areas of Igbo and Igala cultures in order to find out how these two cultures mitigate affronts to face needs in kinship relationships; how people who are related by blood observe politeness when talking to one another, what address terms are reserved for each kinship status

and how observance of this interaction order helps to achieve harmonious coexistence. It is claimed that people consciously work at these interpersonal relationships, giving rise to what Brown and Levinson (1987) refer to as “face-work”.

Goffman’s concept of face is the basis for politeness theory propounded by Brown and Levinson (1987) to account for how rational participants achieve interactional success. Among the ways to do this is to observe politeness strategies and use appropriate address terms that preserve the face of participants in interaction. A number of works have been devoted to the study of politeness such as Leech (1983) politeness principles or maxims, Lakoff (1973) conversational maxims view of politeness, Brown and Levinson’s face-saving view, and “first-order politeness” suggested by Watts *et al* (1992:3) which explained how politeness is perceived in a given culture. Sifiano (1999) work also shows that intercultural differences may have tremendous impact on politeness strategies. The present work focuses on the politeness strategies and address terms adopted in two distinct cultures in Nigeria: Igbo and Igala, in order to find out how the two cultures observe politeness conventions and address terms in kinship relationships and how face work is enacted in the two cultures.

## 1. THEORETICAL BASES

The work is hinged on one of the major approaches to politeness which is the face-saving view, put forward by Penelope Brown, an anthropologist, and Stephen C. Levinson, a linguist, in 1987. It represents a framework for linking the major dimensions of social interaction with the ways people talk with one another. This model postulates three basic notions that are of utmost importance in politeness:

- i. Face
- ii. Face-threatening acts
- iii. Politeness strategies

Their model of politeness is symbolized in what they called a Model Person (MP), which

...consists in a willful fluent speaker of a natural language, further endowed with two special properties – rationality and face. By “rationality” we mean something specific – the availability to our MP of a precisely definable mode of reasoning from ends to the means that will achieve those ends. By “face” we mean something quite specific again: our MP is endowed with two particular wants – roughly, the want to be unimpeded and the want to be approved of in certain respects. (1987:58, qtd in Malmkjaer, 2002, Mey, 2001)

Brown and Levinson thus argue for the universality as well as culture specific dimensions of face. Because this notion of face appears to pervade much of the concerns of this model, it is pertinent to elaborate in more detail on its profound implications to the theory of politeness; the potential of some illocutionary acts to damage the hearers

and the speakers’ positive and negative face, also called “face-threatening acts”, and the various strategies that are deployed to mitigate affronts to face.

## 2. FACE AND FACE-THREATENING ACTS

Face involves taking into account the feeling of others when we speak to them. Brown and Levinson (1987: 61), in furtherance of Goffman’s work, recognized two central themes of politeness, as hinted earlier: “rationality” and “face”. They defined “face” as the public self-image that every model person (MP) wants to claim for themselves, and that politeness presupposes that every model person, as a rational being, must show awareness of another person’s face in conversation.

Two types of face have been identified:

- Positive face (solidarity face): the need to belong, to be liked or admired by another.
- Negative face (power face): the need to be left alone, to be independent, to be free from imposition and to keep distance.

Participants thus work at saving face both for self and others and at avoiding threats to face. Our utterances can therefore contain illocutionary acts that are regarded as face-threatening.

When an illocutionary act runs contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or the speaker, it is face threatening to that participant. Face threatening acts (FTAs) are said to inherently damage the self-image of the participants in interaction (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 70) and in order not to be tagged impolite, we strive to mitigate them through what has been termed “politeness strategies”.

### Politeness strategies

Utterances that are face-threatening require softening or mitigating statements or some sort of verbal repair. Since such illocutionary acts (order, warning, requests, etc) are inevitable in conversations, polite people strive to soften them or use indirectness. In order to save the hearer’s face when face-threatening acts are inevitable or desired, Brown and Levinson outlined four main types of politeness strategies and a fifth which they later disclaimed. These are as follows:

#### i. Bald on-record strategy

This strategy involves using direct speech acts without any attempt at mitigating or minimizing the threat to face. Using such a strategy will often shock or embarrass the addressee especially one who has a negative face to the speaker. For instance, if one needs to use a pen and he/she tells the boss, *Ooh, I want to use your pen*. Such an approach is more appropriately used in situations where the speaker is in close relationship with the hearer, such as family or close friends.

## ii. Positive politeness

Positive politeness is the recognition of the hearer's desire to be respected and also that the relationship is friendly, cordial and expresses group reciprocity. It is used to make the hearer feel good about themselves, their interests or possessions. They express friendship, solidarity with the hearer and are mostly used in situations where the participants know one another very well and wish to maximally utilize their positive face. Using our pen-lending example above, the speaker may say to the hearer *so it's ok if I use your pen?* Putting the request this way not only recognizes the hearer's need to be respected but also expresses solidarity and friendship. Similarly, when a boss suggests that a subordinate should use her first name in addressing her, this is positive politeness, expressing solidarity and minimizing status difference.

## iii. Negative politeness

This strategy is oriented towards the hearer's negative face and emphasizes avoidance of imposition on the hearer, the desire to remain autonomous and maintain social distance. In demanding for the pen in our previous example, the speaker recognizes that he/she is imposing on the boss's freedom, but, in the circumstances, could not help but make the request. So he/she has to apply certain features like hedging strategies or indirectness to make the request, as in *I'm sorry to bother you but I just wanted to ask if I can use one of your pens?*

## iv. Off – record / indirect strategy

This strategy removes the potential of being directly imposed on by the speaker through the use of indirect strategy. In our example, the subordinate can use this indirect strategy to request the boss for a pen by saying *I sure could use a pen right now*. This will make the boss realize that the subordinate needed a pen and may offer him/her one. The speaker only needs to give a hint on what is being requested for the hearer to decipher the meaning and oblige. For instance, if you want somebody to help you, using this strategy, you may begin with *Are you free right now?* The hearer will take the hint and ask *can I help you?* The speaker can then go on from there to make the request.

The fifth strategy; *Do not do the FTA* prescribes silence as the ultimate expression of politeness; the speaker/hearer decides to say nothing. However, Brown and Levinson later disclaim this strategy. According to them:

... the pay-off for the fifth strategic choice "Don't do the FTA" is simply that S avoids offending at all with the particular FTA. Of course, S also fails to achieve his/her desired communication and as there are naturally no interesting linguistic reflexes of this last ditch strategy, we will ignore it in our discussion henceforth. Indeed, this shows that this strategy is considered as the most polite one since it includes no intention for doing a face-threatening act, (1987, p.79)

Though silence is not much recognized by this model, it is argued that it may be inserted as useful in

other strategies since, from all indications, it can realize positive, negative and off-record strategies in order to avoid imposition. In this work we shall apply the first four politeness strategies to the various address terms we use in kinship relationships in Igbo and Igala language to address parents, spouses, siblings, extended family relations and elders in the family and how these agree with the politeness strategies stipulated by Brown and Levinson. But first we shall look at the concepts of addressivity and honorifics and how they relate to politeness.

## 3. ADDRESS TERMS

Address terms are also culture-bound politeness conventions that deal with how participants call on one another in the course of talking to them. The Russian linguist, Mikhail Bakhtin coined the term "addressivity" when he claimed that every utterance is "dialogic"; that is, addressed to somebody (Mey, 2001, p.271). Decisions on forms of address to be used for people depend, to a large extent, on the dimensions of formality. For instance, in referring to your lecturer, using title + last name (TLN) is an expression of negative politeness, preserving the hearer's negative face, the need for their rights not to be infringed upon. On the other hand, to address such a lecturer on first name bases (FN) would be considered impolite, in just the same way as addressing your father and mother by their FN. Similarly, addressing your brother as *lyke* when, as a high court judge, he is presiding over a case which you are in attendance, is as inappropriate as addressing the same person as *Your Honour* during a family dinner. Just imagine how pragmatically odd it would sound if we, as students, address our governor, when he comes visiting the university, by his first name!

Holmes asserts that "forms of address are derived from identity in the context" (Holmes, 2008, p.283). Thus, such addresses as Prof. Okeke, Dr Chike, Engr. Okpala (title + last name – TLN), for professionals; Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms Okafor + last name (TLN) for married/unmarried adult male and females respectively; Your Excellency, (Mr) Chairman, My Lord (title only – T); Aunt/Uncle + first name (Uncle Ikem – TFN) or simply first name (Okechukwu, John – FN) all point to what could be considered the proper way of addressing individuals based on the social roles at particular points in time and space. Younger people are not expected to address adults by their first names; neither would subordinates do the same to their superiors. However, a superior may indicate willingness to give the subordinate the freedom to address them on FN bases, as in *please drop the Prof. Ogu, just call me Chinwe*.

Some titles have become stable address terms for some professionals like *Doctor* for medical doctors, *Sister* for reverend sisters, *Prof.* for professors and so on. So also are some honorifics like *Sir*, *ma'am*, *auntie*, *uncle*, and others assumed stable and sufficient address terms for some interactants depending on the social relationships

the addressee hold with the addresser. Thus it is not uncommon to hear such expressions like *Auntie, please can I ask you for a favour?* In some parts of Igbo, for instance, younger siblings address their elder ones as *deede* (male) or *dada* (female) while couples reserve some address terms for showing intimacy or detachment. We shall, in this work see the various forms of address and honorifics that are prevalent for certain kinship relationships in Igbo and Igala culture and how they speak to the strategies being discussed.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

Participant observation is the major data-gathering technique in the research. The two authors are indigenes of Igbo and Igala cultures respectively and are conversant with some of the politeness conventions and address terms regarding kinship relations in the cultures. These two cultures also cherish respect for seniority and age, such that it is usually expected that the younger person will always take the lead in greeting the elder one and also use appropriate honorifics. We have thus selected some

samples of data that best illustrate the different politeness strategies and address terms as they obtain in the two languages. Awka and Owerri dialects were selected in Igbo while Ejule is selected in Igala language.

### 5. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

#### 5.1 Politeness Strategies in Igbo and Igala Culture

Politeness strategies are used in Igbo and Igala cultures to formulate messages to save the hearer's positive face when face threatening acts are inevitable or advocated/desired. The major politeness strategies observed in the two cultures are presented in the tables below:

#### 5.2 Bald on-Record

This type of strategy is used without any concern for affront to the addressee, and so this strategy must often be utilized in situation where the speaker has a close relationship with the listener such as siblings/mates in the family or parents to their children. There is often no mitigation or hedging strategies on the part of the interactants.

**Table 1**  
**Samples of Language Choices Illustrating Bald on-Record Strategy**

S/No.	Situation of use	Igala language	Igbo language	English Language
1.	Urgency	Nango che-ye Na dibe che	Kpachara anya	Watch out!
2.	When efficiency is needed	Gbenwukunaka netirumi gbolami	Gee nti	Hear me out
3.	Task-oriented	Mugbalę duwa jenwu nwuğbale kitemi dugbalemi oje bo taa?	Nye m afere ahu	Pass me the plate.
4.	Little or no interest	oje le takpa? oje le bogen?	Nri o gwugo?	Has the swallow finished?

#### 5.3 Positive Politeness

This politeness strategy is used in Igbo and Igala culture to make the hearer feel better and good. This also

happens where there is a close social distance or intimate relationship among interactants.

**Table 2**  
**Samples of Positive Politeness Linguistic Choices**

S/No.	The situation in use	Igala culture	Igbo culture	English language
1.	To attend to someone's needs, interests and wants.	Ejuwe nyonw, inenwu kuneche nwe? Ejuwe chekpa, un eke chatę ko we? Edo we bon, etene ateko?	Aru adikwa, I choro enyemaka?	You look sad, can I help you?
2.	Use of solidarity in group identity	Agba, chateko mi kpai oko pe? - eneke mu mi oko pee? - eneke chabunę mi kpai oko pee? - chemi atęko	Biko, I ga-ebinye m obere ego	Hey, can you help me with some money?
3.	Translation	- dulieju mi agba chatęko mi chabu ne mi		Do a favour for me.
4.	Be optimistic	Nale be, ichenwu keje - omi kpai uwe ale, ichenwu ke je - uneke lo kpai uwe ichenwu ke towo no nwumi.	O buru na o ga-amasi gi, m biawa	I will just come if you don't mind.
5.	Both speaker and the hearer in the activity	I chęnwu kale, ia nyotabale - omi kpai uwe ale onwu ianyotule.	O ga-aka mma anyi abuo igawa	It will be good when both of us go there.
6.	To make offer or promise.	Duje kunadomu ne nwe. Che kudo mune nwe.	I chokwuo ozo, I nwere ike iwere ya.	Finish it and get another one.
7.	Exaggerate interest	Ojiwe ke lai chenyọ; Ugbọ ęla kwo? Ojiwe kila achuto; Ugbọ ęlakwo taa?	Isi gi amakazikwa; onye kpuru gi ya?	That is a nice hair cut you got; where did you get it from?
8.	Avoid disagreement	Ochochi, ichejiji ogecha, iche, idekpi	Ihe I kwuru bu eziokwu, o tego.	Truly, it is rather long, not short certainly.

### 5.4 Negative Politeness

In Igbo and Igala culture, negative politeness exists. This happens when the speaker imposes his will on the hearer. When a father, mother, elder uncle/aunt addresses

a younger member of the family, negative politeness is observed. It can also be observed when elderly relations talk to one another

**Table 3**  
Samples Illustrating Negative Politeness

Situation of use	Igala language	Igbo language	English language
Be direct	Ugbo chunyi joni ta? Ugbo joni dodota? Ugbo joni gēneta? Ugbo joni Ugbo joni gwugwu ta?	Ebee ka ulo Jon di biko	Where is John's house?
The use of questions	Agba, motakadai dumi Agba, mēnwu ukē nwu toidumi	I nwere ike iweketere m akwukwo ahu	Could you pass the book
Be pessimistic	ēne ke mu oko nwu mi? ēneke? ēneke chateko mi? ēneke?	Ama m na I gaghi enwe ike igbazinye m ego ahu	You could not find your way to lending me money, could you?
Minimize the imposition	eyi tukpahu wē len	Ama m na o gaghi agbaka gi aka	It is not too much out of your power.
Apologetic	edowe kikpabien, ene kemuoko nwu mi?	Ama m nke oma na ihe m na-ario gi siri ike, mana biko nyere m aka.	I am sorry, it is a lot to ask, but can you lend me money?

### 5.5 Off-Record or Indirect Politeness

Igbo and Igala cultures use this politeness strategy to remove completely any sign of imposition from the speaker's speech. It is mainly achieved by dropping a hint for the addressee to take a cue from and do the needful.

**Table 4**  
Sample Data Illustrating off-Record Strategy

Igala	Igbo	English
Afu'akpa tabale	Oyi na-atu m ebe a	It is very cold here.
ebi akpami ololo	Aguu na-agu m	I'm very hungry.
uma fukpoi'ila, ichenwu kuma ne oko	Akwa a di mma mana ejighi m ego	I would have bought this cloth but I have no money.

The above examples show how the addresser consciously avoids direct speech acts of "close the door", "give me some food", "lend me some money" by using indirect speech acts which drops the hint to the addressee that when someone is cold, the door needs to be close, when they are hungry they need food and when they do not have money to buy the cloth they admire, they might require to be lent money to do so.

In summary, it is shown that the greater the age and the higher the cultural and social status attained by an addressee, the greater the need a speaker feels to employ politeness strategies. This takes us to the address terms used in the two cultures to achieve politeness.

### 5.6 Address Terms

Address terms are linguistic items that used to refer to or call the attention of addressees in face-to-face interaction. They are usually used by speakers to appeal to or designate addressees while talk is in progress. Address terms are important linguistic items in Igbo and Igala languages that encode the social status of interactions and the relationship that exists between the addresser and the addressee. In kinship relationships, these terms appear in several forms.

**Table 5**  
Address Terms Between Spouses: Wife Address Terms for Husband

Igala	Igbo	English translation
enefinyi mi	Oga m	The owner of my house. My Lord
oko mi	Di m oma	My husband
Oji mi	Dibulo	My head. Pillar of the house

**Table 6**  
Address Terms Between Spouses: Husband's Address to Wife

Igala	Igbo	English
Oyami	nwunye m	My wife
iye unyi mi	Onye be m/ogoli m	woman/person of my house
onobule mi	Nwaanyi m	My woman

In respect to age, in Igbo and Igala, the practice is to avoid calling of older persons by name in both the family circles and in the wider community. Examples:

**Table 7**  
Address Terms for Elder Relations

Igala	Igbo	English
Iye mi/mama mi	Nne	Mother
Ata mi /baba mi	Nna	Father
Ogijoi	Deede	Uncle/an adult male
Iyei	Daada	Aunt/an adult female
Okolobia	Nwanna	a young male sibling
Igbeleji	Nwada	a young female sibling

**Table 8**  
Address Terms Among the Siblings

Igala	Igbo	English
Omaye onekele	Nwanne m nwoke	Brother
Omayi onobule	Nwanne m nwaanyi	Sister
Oma-omaye atami	Nwa nwanne nne/nna m	Cousin
Oma-omaye atami enekele	Nwa nwanne m nwoke	Nephew
Oma-omaye atami onobule	Nwa nwanne m nwaanyi	Niece

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## DISCUSSION

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From the above data, it is seen that the Igbo and Igala cultures share some similarities in the enactment of politeness conventions especially in kinship terms of address and how they avoid face-threatening acts. Unlike in some cultures where first name bases are prevalent in addressing parents and elders, the Igbo and Igala languages reserve special address terms that not only mitigate face affronts but also accord respect to individuals based on the roles they have assumed in the two cultures. This shows that kinship ties are very strong and thus members approach others with some kind of deference to avoid undue imposition and make interaction more harmonious.

It is obvious that in addressing parents, children do not use bald on-record strategy. What may be more appropriate in this instance of parent-child relationship may be off-record or negative politeness where children either drop hints of illocutionary acts to achieve uptake from their parents, or minimize imposition by mitigating with some tag questions, or be direct when they know that the directness of the illocutionary force will be of benefit to the parents such as *where is John's house* in a situation where knowing John's house takes precedence over all other considerations because of the expedience of the situation. Bald on-record strategies are mostly prevalent among siblings and peers like cousins, nephews and nieces.

However, an interesting part of the analysis is the address terms for spouses. Whereas the wife uses such honorifics for the husband as *my Lord/master, my head/head of my house*, the husband seems to give the wife more condescending terms like *the person of my house, my woman* in the two cultures. This calls for more deconstructive reading as *the person of my house* more or less connotes *my property, what I own* and so on. It is on this note that such address terms may be affronts to the face of the womenfolk as they are addressed as inferior and appendages to men.

In conclusion, politeness and address terms are important factors of human interaction, as no rational person may want to infringe on another's face. For human interaction to flow smoothly, illocutionary acts that are face threatening should be mitigated and more indirectness should be employed in human interaction. Face is a mask that should not be damaged in interaction and any such damage especially among people who share the same kinship relations may lead to rancor, discord and interpersonal misunderstanding.

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