

Gender and Politeness/Hedging Strategies in English among Igbo Native Speakers in Nigeria: A Difference in Conversational Styles

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ABSTRACT

Gender and language studies in general have not been fully explored in most parts of the globe particularly in Nigeria. The objective of the study therefore was to examine the politeness and hedging strategies in the English language conversation of Igbo native speakers in Nigeria as well as establish whether men and women's conversational styles have been gendered. As a cross-sectional questionnaire and interview-based survey, the sample population was studied by means of ten-item questionnaire in the form of Discourse Completion Task and structured interview at seven Universities systematically selected from the South-East and South-South geo-political zones in Nigeria. The study instruments were completed, returned, transcribed and statistically analysed using the quantitative and qualitative tools for analysis of production and perception data respectively. Results showed that politeness and hedging are indispensable sociolinguistic elements in the conversational English of the study sample. Also, results revealed that to accomplish a communicative goal, the samples adopted different politeness/hedging strategies given the discourse situation. Also, findings showed that the female respondents were found to adhere more to linguistic politeness principles than their male counterparts considering the context hence demonstrating a difference in conversational style. The study found evidence to establish that females are more polite than males in conversations. In conclusion, findings of this study showed that respondents yielded to certain sociolinguistic factors such as age, culture, hierarchy, disposition and religion as they were believed to inform the use of a particular strategy or another.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of gender in conversation has generated so much attention nay controversy among researchers in sociolinguistics. This assertion appears to stem from an understanding that there exists a dichotomy in the speech/conversational style of men and women, the complexities of which involve not only the understanding of the language in use but also appreciation of the context of use. A fundamental aspect of this assumption is that there is always need to communicate efficiently in all spheres of human existence and it is indeed within the confines of communication that the theory of the difference in conversational style of men and women often arise. Gender has often been referred to as a social construct within the fields of cultural and gender studies as well as the social sciences and is easily understood to be of social

rather than biological origin. In other words, by gender, we would mean men and women exclusively and by extension the speech forms or habits of both in conversation. Human conversation in general and more specifically the Igbo bilinguals' is known to be fraught with strategies aimed at achieving the desired goal of communicativeness. Among these strategies are: politeness, hedging, turn-taking, code mixing, code switching, adjacency principle etc. The question that still rankles is whether men and women necessarily demonstrate any differences in their conversational style.

Politeness on the one hand is considered to be an anticipated socio-cultural standard of behavior that interactants are believed to be aware of and must knuckle under to facilitate conversation. It is primarily associated codes of good conduct, saying the socially correct thing, a sort of grace, a

way of smoothing social interaction and avoiding conflict between people as well as a show of competence in language use (Afolayan 1974; Lakoff 1975; Saville-Troike 1982; Nwoye 1992). The politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1978) plays a crucial role in maintaining interpersonal relationship. Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness comprises three basic tenets: face, face threatening acts (FTAs) and politeness strategies. Brown and Levinson believe that in human interaction, certain actions may threaten our interlocutor's face. As a result, to cushion the undesirable effects of FTAs, humans have developed politeness strategies which are ways of performing such face threatening acts to minimize the threat to the hearer's face. Again, Brown and Levinson proposed five strategies of redress of such acts to include: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness and don't do the FTA. In addition, Brown and Levinson suggested three factors which may influence how face threatening an interaction might be. They are: social distance – how well the interactants know each other, relative power or status of participants and the weightiness of an imposition.

Hedging on the other hand, as a discourse strategy entails the use of linguistic terms that avail interactants the opportunity to contribute in speech situations and not necessarily the use of unconditional terms. It indicates a non-committal approach to issues by means of utterance or the intentional use of ambiguous statement. Hedging has been variously described as a linguistic device that acts on the force of an utterance. It is known principally as the strategy used to make utterances fuzzier or less fuzzy, reduce the force of an utterance, increase the appeal of an utterance, show lack of commitment to the truth value of an accompanying proposition, facilitate turn-taking, show politeness and mitigate face threats (Lakoff 1972; Hübler 1983; Hyland 1998a; Holmes 2008; Boncea 2012). Thus hedging strategies are devices adopted in order to either downplay the force of an utterance; that is to lessen its effect on the addressee or to increase the force of an utterance; that is to heighten the force of an utterance on the addressee. Studies have shown that hedges are typically exemplified by such expressions as: approximately, roughly, though, must, could, I believe, presumably, possibly, presumably, I think, might, seem, would, so to say, strictly speaking, certainly, so-called, if, sort of, you know, a bit, I suppose, oh, well, kind of, in a way, virtually, literally, loosely speaking, technically, rather, so to say, very, truly, etc and remarked that the result of hedging was established in the construal of the utterance rather than in the semantic meaning as they are an indication of the speaker's intention (Hosman 1989; Dixon and Foster 1997; Fraser 2010).

Reviews of literature on politeness and hedging have shown that the concepts are impeccably paired to harness interaction. There is clear indication too, that politeness and hedging are not an exclusive preserve of men or women; rather, men and women adopt politeness and hedging strategies as the case may be in conversational situations. Politeness and hedging are thus manifested in such speech acts as requests, offers, apology, greetings, appreciation, criticism, excuses etc. The binary nature of the two skills mandates that failure to utilise the resources of hedging and politeness

by men and women in conversation, in the workforce and in all sectors of the national economy will result in general crises.

The thrust of this study therefore was to establish whether men and women's conversational styles have been gendered as well as to examine the politeness and hedging strategies in the English language conversation of Igbo bilingual men and women in Nigeria.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

This work is hinged on the Gender and Language Theory of Litosseliti (2013) which captures in great detail various earlier approaches which dealt with language on the one hand as a closed system marked by internal rules and not as a dynamic entity largely controlled by social factors and employed by humans who are the users, speakers and writers of language, and on the other hand, made very narrow definitions of the concept of gender by mere biological categorizations. Litosseliti's theory however, looked beyond various assumptions which tried to view language from the dimension of a purely human tool for communication but x-rayed language using parameters such as contexts- age, status and in which case, gender and language issues is applied with emphasis on discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis to determine what constitutes and or impels a particular utterance. The 2013 gender and language theory adequately contextualized a huge range of gendered norms, practices, relations, representations and identities which manifest through physical and verbal interactions and not necessarily by biological paradigm. Thus, according to Litosseliti, "gender polarization only works on the level of assumption or presupposition" in other words, people are more inclined to traditional stereotypes that conveniently construct males as strong and vocal while labeling females as weak and reserved which accordingly rubs off on their conversational style regardless of context which validates research in discourse in particular and speech act in general.

METHOD

Approaches in Language and Speech Acts Studies

Language and speech act studies may be investigated using any of the three established data collection methods namely: observation of authentic discourse, role plays and discourse completion task (DCT) since each method can influence the reliability and validity of results bearing in mind their many advantages and disadvantages (Wolfson 1983; Wolfson, Marmor and Jones 1989; Kasper and Dahl 1991; Rose 1992; Cohen 1996; Hoza 2001; Jung 2004). Considering that the DCT method is an effective means of gathering a large number of data in a short period and can equally provide a controlled context for speech acts as well as help to classify strategies that may occur in natural speech, it was adopted as the production data collection method for the present study. The choice of this method for the present study therefore took into account: the vastness of the study area, the study population as well as the linguistic background of the targeted

samples. This study was a cross-sectional questionnaire (DCT) and interview-based survey.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The study population was undergraduate students; males and females, aged between 17 and 25 years, purposively drawn from various federal and state universities in the five core Igbo speaking states that make up the South-East geo-political zone of Nigeria, namely Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo State and the Igbo speaking areas of Delta and River States in the South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria. These universities which were selected through a Systematic Sampling Process (SSP) included Michael Okpara University of Agriculture Umudike (MOUAU) Abia State, Nnamdi Azikiwe University (NAU) Awka, Anambra State, Ebonyi State University (EBSU) Ebonyi State, University of Nigeria Nsukka (UNN) Enugu State, Federal University of Technology Owerri (FUTO) Imo State, Delta State University (DELSU) Delta State and University of Port-Harcourt (UNIPORT) Rivers State. Similarly, in the choice of faculties to be represented for all institutions, the systematic sampling process was also applied. Furthermore, using a self-designed balloting strategy, the various disciplines in the faculties were selected. A total of 3,000 respondents were sampled from the chosen population for the production data while 2,748 copies of questionnaire were duly completed and returned for analysis.

Also, for the structured interview design which aimed to elicit in depth perception data about participant's general knowledge of the concept of politeness to substantiate the questionnaire study, participants comprised teaching and senior non-teaching staff in the various faculties of the same institutions selected for the study. Statistical evaluation provided on "data presentation, statistical evaluation and analysis in arts and management showed that any figure between 0.8% - 1.0% of the study questionnaire sample population was significant and representative for key person interview" (T. Ebiringa, personal communication, September 2, 2015). The analysis gave rise to between 24 and 30 persons. As such, 30 members of staff were selected from the pool that agreed to be part of the study. Five key persons were drawn from each of the institutions of study in the core Igbo speaking states of the South-East geo-political zone and the other five key persons were selected from the other institutions in the Igbo speaking areas of the South-South geo-political zone. Thus 30 key persons participated willingly in the interview. Having meticulously considered gender parity in this phase of the study, the 30 key persons who participated in the interviews were 15 males and 15 females.

Data were collected at the seven institutions of the study during the second or rain semester of the 2016/2017 academic session.

Instruments

The participants were studied by means of a pretested and validated ten-item varied discourse questionnaire – Discourse Completion Task – DCT. The ten situations were

designed to evoke politeness/hedging strategies in form of greeting, offer, excuse and breaking bad news which are: (1) You picked up a wallet in front of a general office as you got to work in the morning. When you walked into the office, you found everyone busy with work but you must announce the lost-but-found article. What would you say? (2) You walked into an office at 10:00am to deliver mail to an unknown staff, what would you say upon entering? (3) As a boss, you walked into your subordinates' office to pass information. What would you say upon entering? (4) You missed your way to a certain place and you sought for the right direction. What would you say to a passer-by? (5) A visitor walks into your home while you are at a table with your family. What would you say to him/her having met you at that point? (6) You saw an elderly woman carrying along two heavy bags and you felt the need to help her with the load. What would you say to her? (7) What would you say to a senior colleague who walks into your home and meets you eating? (8) A colleague of yours has just invited you for his wedding and wants to know if you would be at the occasion, but you are aware that you will not be there for no obvious reason. What would you say to him in response? (9) You promised to give a friend some money on a particular day but realized the said money wouldn't be available. What would you say to him/her? (10) You witnessed the passing away of a dear uncle of yours. Now being the only relative present at the time of death, you are required to break the news to your father. What would you say to him?

Every item on the questionnaire was followed by three guided options occasioned by the rather haphazard compliance of our pilot test in an open-ended/role-play method at a non-study institution in Owerri, the Imo state capital. These options were marked alphabetically from A – C on the scale of which A was the least polite while C was the most polite option. Again, these options were written with particular attention paid to hedges and hedging where necessary. As this investigation focused on the English language conversation of men and women of Igbo extraction who in this study are referred to as Igbo bilinguals particularly as they employed politeness and hedging strategies in dialogue, sociolinguistic variables such as social status, social distance and cultural variations as well as gender were considered. The participants were required to choose options which best exemplified their own in similar situations. The participants took approximately 15 minutes to complete the task.

In addition, for the perception data, there were 6 questions grouped into 3 and written to reflect the purpose of the study and by extension related to the situations in the DCT and they are: (1) Significance of politeness in conversation-Do you think politeness is important in conversation? Why? Do you think politeness necessarily facilitates conversation? Why?

(2) Factors that necessitate Politeness/hedging in the speech of Igbo bilinguals- Do you think there are factors that necessitate politeness in the conversational English of Igbo bilinguals? What words/phrases do you think Igbo bilinguals use to show politeness in conversation? (3) Effects of politeness in Conversation-Do you think politeness impacts

positively on conversation? Why? In your opinion, who do you think tends to be more polite in conversations, males/females? Why?

The interview sessions which lasted approximately 8 minutes with each respondent, were audio taped for accuracy of responses and transcribed for further analysis.

Data Analysis

A quantitative analysis was used to evaluate and appraise the respondents' expressed opinions duly presented in frequency tables and simple percentage calculations were used to represent the respondents' opinions on various items. Also, a qualitative analysis took into account the participants' opinion on the significance, strategies and effects of politeness/hedging in English language conversation of bilinguals. Demographic characteristics of interview participants as well as summary of interview excerpts were graphically presented in frequency table, Bar and Pie charts respectively.

Ethical Considerations

As the study focused on human subjects, ethical concerns were carefully deliberated and only participants who gave consent after the objectives of the research were made clear were recruited for the study.

RESULTS

Quantitative Data Analysis

Gender distribution and return of questionnaire by respondents according to institutions.

Table 1 shows that out of the 3,000 copies of questionnaire distributed, 2,748 representing 92% was returned consisting of 42% males and 58% females from different institutions.

Responses on Greetings/Offers/Excuses/Breaking Bad news discourse

Table 2 shows the frequency of respondents' Responses on the mixed discourse of Greeting/Offer/Excuses/ Breaking

Bad News observing the situations projected by different scenarios and working with the guided options provided.

Assessment of overall respondents' Discourse on greetings/offers/excuses/breaking bad news

Table 3 Demonstrates that 60.00% of the option A responses were recorded by the male respondents while 40.00% of the option A responses were by the female respondents. However, of the option B responses, 30.00% were by the males and 70.00% were recorded by the female respondents. Similarly, the most polite option C had 75.00% of female responses as against 25.00% of male responses

Demographic distribution characteristics of interview participants by gender

Table 4 shows background information of the study interview participants. A total of 30 participants comprising teaching and senior non-teaching staff of the institutions of study were interviewed. The participants were of equal number of males and females (15: 50%, each). Their level of education was such that 9 (30%) had PhD, 8 (26.7%) had a Masters degree, 1 (3.3%) had an OD, 10 (33.33%) had a Bachelors degree and 2 (6.7%) had a Higher National Diploma in various fields in Agriculture, Social Sciences, Pharmaceutical Sciences, Health Technology, Education and Business Sciences. The Ph.D and Masters level participants were higher among the female participants at 33.3% and 40% respectively compared to 26.7% for each of the two levels of education in male. In addition, 14 (46.7%) of the participants were lecturers at various levels and the remaining 16 (53.3%) were senior non-teaching staff who worked in various capacities. The teaching staff was higher in females (66.7%), while the senior non-teaching staff was higher in males (73.3%). In terms of the level of English Language proficiency, 5 (16.7%) assessed their English proficiency level as 'Excellent', 17 (56.7%) evaluated theirs as 'Very good' while 8 (26.7%) judged theirs as 'Good'. None of them rated his or her level of English Language proficiency as 'poor'. Up to 20% were 'Excellent' in females against 13.3% in males. Also, 66.7% were "Very good" in females compared to 44.7% in males.

Table 1. Gender distribution and return of questionnaire by respondents

Institutions	No. of Questionnaire distributed	No (%) of questionnaire returned	Male		Female	
			Freq	(%)	Freq	(%)
MOUAU	500	440 (88.0)	200	45.5	240	54.5
NAU	500	461 (92.2)	198	43.0	263	57.0
EBSU	500	464 (92.8)	204	44.0	260	56.0
UNN	500	446 (92.2)	257	58.0	189	42.0
FUTO	500	478 (95.6)	148	31.0	330	69.0
DELSU	500	227 (90.8)	70	31.0	157	69.0
UNIPOINT	500	232 (92.8)	76	32.8	156	67.2
TOTAL	500	2748 (92.00)	1153	42.0	1595	58.0

Key: MOUAU = Michael Okpara University of Agriculture Umudike, NAU = Nnamdi Azikiwe University, EBSU = Ebonyi State University, UNN = University of Nigeria Nsukka, FUTO = Federal University of Technology Owerri, DELSU = Delta State University, UNIPOINT = University of Port Harcourt

Table 2. Summary of respondents' responses on greetings/offers/excuses/breaking bad news discourse

Situation	Option A												Option B												Option C																																																																																																																																																																																																																								
	Polite						More Polite						More Polite						Most Polite																																																																																																																																																																																																																														
	MOU	NAU	EBSU	UNN	FUTO	DELSU	UNIPORT	MOU	NAU	EBSU	UNN	FUTO	DELSU	UNIPORT	MOU	NAU	EBSU	UNN	FUTO	DELSU	UNIPORT	MOU	NAU	EBSU	UNN	FUTO	DELSU	UNIPORT																																																																																																																																																																																																																					
1	64	68	68	65	70	33	34	98	102	103	99	106	50	51	278	291	293	282	302	143	147	2	9	10	10	9	10	5	5	86	90	90	87	93	44	45	345	362	364	350	375	178	182	4	168	176	178	171	183	87	89	101	106	107	103	110	52	53	170	178	180	173	185	88	90	3	137	144	145	139	149	71	72	260	272	274	263	282	134	137	43	45	46	44	47	22	23	5	100	105	106	102	109	52	53	233	244	246	236	253	120	123	107	112	113	108	116	55	56	8	219	230	231	222	238	113	116	121	126	127	122	131	62	64	100	105	106	102	109	52	53	9	140	147	148	142	152	72	74	31	33	33	32	34	16	17	269	282	283	272	292	139	142	6	71	74	75	72	77	37	37	27	28	28	27	29	14	14	342	359	361	347	372	177	181	7	138	145	146	140	150	71	73	138	145	146	140	150	71	73	164	172	173	166	178	85	86	10	87	92	92	89	95	45	46	17	18	18	18	19	9	9	335	351	353	340	364	173	177	Total	1133	1191	1199	1151	1233	586	599	1112	1164	1172	1127	1207	572	586	2153	2257	2272	2184	2340	1112	1137

Key: MOU=440, NAU=461, EBSU=464, UNN=446, FUTO=478, DELSU=227, UNIPORT=232, TOTAL=2,748

Table 3. Assessment of respondents' responses on greetings/offers/excuses/breaking bad news discourse (n=2748)

Situation	Social Status	Social Distance	Option A Polite			Option B More Polite			Option C Most Polite											
			Total Freq	%	Male Freq	%	Female Freq	%	Total Freq	%	Male Freq	%	Female Freq	%						
1	S 0 H	-SD	402	5.67	241	3.40	161	2.27	609	8.78	183	2.63	426	6.14	1736	12.90	434	3.23	1302	9.68
2	S 0 H	-SD	58	0.82	35	0.49	23	0.33	535	7.71	161	2.31	375	5.40	2156	16.02	539	4.01	1617	12.02
4	S 0 H	-SD	1052	14.83	631	8.90	421	5.93	632	9.11	190	2.73	442	6.37	1064	7.91	266	1.98	798	5.93
3	S > H	-SD	857	12.08	514	7.25	343	4.83	1622	23.37	487	7.01	1135	16.36	270	2.01	68	0.50	203	1.51
5	S = H	0SD	627	8.84	376	5.30	251	3.54	1455	20.97	437	6.29	1019	14.68	667	4.96	167	1.24	500	3.72
8	S = H	+SD	1369	19.30	821	11.58	548	7.72	753	10.85	226	3.26	527	7.60	627	4.66	157	1.16	470	3.49
9	S = H	0SD	875	12.34	525	7.40	350	4.94	196	2.82	59	0.85	137	1.98	1679	12.48	420	3.12	1259	9.36
6	S < H	-SD	443	6.25	266	3.75	177	2.50	167	2.41	50	0.72	117	1.68	2139	15.90	535	3.97	1604	11.92
7	S < H	0SD	863	12.17	518	7.30	345	4.87	863	12.44	259	3.73	604	8.70	1024	7.61	256	1.90	768	5.71
10	S < H	+SD	546	7.70	328	4.62	218	3.08	108	1.56	32	0.47	76	1.09	2093	15.56	523	3.89	1570	11.67
Total			7092	100.00	4255	60.00	2837	40.00	6940	100.00	2082	30.00	4858	70.00	13455	100.00	3364	25.00	10091	75.00

S = Speaker; H = Hearer, SD = Social Distance, < = Lower; = equal; > = higher; 0 = not established, + = close; - = distant; 0 = neutral

Table 4. Demographic distribution characteristics of interview participants by gender

Background information	Male (n=15)		Female (n=15)		Total (n=30)	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Level of education						
Ph.D	4	26.7	5	33.3	9	30.0
Masters (M.Sc, MA, M.Ed, etc)	4	26.7	6	40.0	10	33.3
OD	0	0.0	1	6.7	1	3.3
B.Sc	5	33.3	3	20.0	8	26.7
HND	2	13.3	0	0.0	2	6.7
Staff type						
Teaching staff	4	26.7	10	66.7	14	46.7
Senior non-teaching	11	73.3	5	33.3	16	53.3
Level of english language proficiency						
Excellent	2	13.3	3	20.0	5	16.7
Very good	7	46.7	10	66.7	17	56.7
Good	6	40.0	2	13.3	8	26.7
Poor	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0

DISCUSSION

Quantitative Data

Analysis of data from the questionnaire study – Discourse Completion Task (DCT) took a holistic approach to the ten situations portrayed in the various social contexts i.e. Greetings, Offers, Excuses, Breaking Bad news discourse as the case may be. In other words, analysis was based on the frequencies/percentages of responses given to the ten situations by 2,748 respondents on various indices of politeness as discourse strategy using the guided options provided. Politeness/hedging strategies in the form of greeting, offer, excuse and breaking bad news were found to be commonly used in the conversational English of the study participants.

Greetings

Greeting discourse generally plays a vital role in the lives of a people particularly as it signals presence, attention and often suggests a cordial relationship. The present study confirms that greetings are a common feature in interactions among Igbo bilinguals. For instance, different situations (1, 2, 3 and 4) address greetings and in any case, greetings between interactants whose statuses are not established as in (situations 1, 2 and 4) are inclined to the most polite option C. Also, when greeting act is between interlocutors where the speaker is higher than the hearer situation (3), results show that the responses were majorly on the more polite option B. This finding is a clear indication that greetings are conversational habits of Igbo bilinguals. Note that the results reveal that even among strangers situations (1, 2 and 4), greetings are done in the most polite manner. In addition, between a boss and his subordinate, the boss initiates the greeting in the more polite option B. It is therefore safe to say that the result is a manifestation of the routineness of the greeting discourse. As a tradition, greeting is so common that one gets to salute a passer-by without necessarily engag-

ing in any further conversation. The importance attached to greetings is brought to bear when the act is not performed or neglected. It is therefore not out of place that the majority of the respondents chose the most polite option C as a manifestation of the routineness of greetings among the Igbo. The act of greeting is thus ingrained in the bones of the Igbo so much so that it has been incorporated in a particular proverb: *E kelee ekele, ihu asaa* – greeting breeds acceptance and warm reception. This result corroborates previous studies by Nwoye (1989) who noted that “greetings and leave-takings among the Igbo are elaborate and asking after the health of relations of the other party is not only evidence of the cordiality of the relationship but also part of one’s competence in greeting as speech acts”. This act of greeting as a quality becomes real as a mental concept and ultimately predicated on the spontaneity of its expression by the Igbo in general.

Offers

Offer discourse typifies a proposal, overture or expression of one’s willingness to do something. In situations (5, 6 and 7), the scenarios depict that offers abound in the culture of the Igbo bilinguals and suggest in more ways; warm welcome, acceptability, good upbringing and hospitality. Results also show that the acts of offering across relationships in vertical, horizontal and even diagonal/seesaw are basically done in the most polite option C and the more polite option B. The result is clear evidence that offers are habits of Igbo bilinguals and are hardly an imposition as they are always well-intentioned as opposed to interpretations in other societies of the world. The result validates earlier studies by Nwoye (1992) that in societies where mutual cooperation is seen as the norm in social interaction, offers are not only expected but are frequently made with little or no imposition on both sides. He noted that eating and drinking together are other forms of hospitality expected among neighbours and extended to visitors. Nwoye reiterates that visitors and

neighbours are formally invited to share meals with their host and that for the Igbo, this is not mere courtesy; it is sincere and to refuse such hospitality was considered a grave insult. Nwoye's study also noted that an offer for help made to somebody seen struggling with many bags as in (situation 6) was expected of any well-behaved member of the society who encounters another member in a situation requiring help. Succinctly put by Nwoye, "it is normal practice to make an offer; in fact, it is a social obligation as opposed to Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness where an offer is regarded as an imposition because the hearer may be constrained in some way by such an utterance". In other words, within the context of use as well as culture, offers do not constitute an imposition as is evident from the findings.

Excuses

Excuse discourse is employed to avoid a threat to the hearer's face. It is usually a polite explanation for not living up to the expectations placed upon oneself. Results show that Igbo bilinguals resort to excuses as an alternative explanation for renegeing on a promise which is potentially a face-threatening act or behaviour as in situations 8 and 9. The excuse discourse in the study occurred between interlocutors who are equals. Results show that the prevailing scenario in situation 8 was more of a decision even before the invitation gesture. And as a result, the greater percentage 19.30% of the responses was on the polite (option A) choice which reflects a bald-on-record /directness strategy prefaced by a hedge word 'well' which is still intended to paint a picture of the possibility of being at the event. This observation supports earlier studies by Holmes (2008) that "hedging and hedging strategies are linguistic devices that may be used to either reduce or intensify the force of an utterance". Again, results show that respondents were more inclined to the most polite option C in situation 9 as the scenario portrayed speaker's initial willingness to be of help but could not eventually. In that case, the response is a mixture of an apology and an excuse. The above supports findings in earlier studies by Eze (2010) that "excuse discourse is a motivation or explanation to avoid impeding the face of the others". By this response therefore which depicts an apology as well as excuse, a supposed infraction is duly mitigated and interactants carry on as usual without a grudge.

Breaking bad news

Breaking bad news discourse is normal with communal living as circumstances that necessitate such discourse are hardly avoidable. Among the Igbo, such discourse is always a delicate issue and the speaker is often burdened with such a task. The feeling of empathy towards the hearer is paramount in such situations, thus the speaker tries to find a subtle way or to lace his utterance to cushion or mitigate the effect a direct mention would pose. Result of the study shows that Igbo bilinguals accomplish the act of breaking bad news by a careful choice of words to convey the sore message while mitigating threat to the hearer's face. The scenario in situation 10 therefore recorded almost all responses

on the most polite option C. This is obviously attributable to the delicateness of the issue regardless of the other social variables. This significant finding buttresses Nwoye's (1989) view that "indirectness subsumes all strategies of avoidance, i.e. a means by which an item or an expression is not directly mentioned or referred to but is indirectly alluded to". Nwoye equally states that both proverbs and euphemisms could be used to achieve indirectness. In other words the option C of situation 10 is a typical example of forms of indirectness. Again, as established in previous studies by Lakoff (1975), the overriding response to situation 10 agrees with Lakoff's third rule for politeness in English – Camaraderie which stipulates the show of sympathy. This is part of Igbo communal living as one shows concern for the welfare of others. Also, based on the prevailing response (option c) to situation 10, the study reveals some degree of inclusiveness by the use of the word 'We' to show that the spirit of one is the spirit of all. As reported earlier by Eze (2010), this, is referred to as "Impersonalizing: a strategy which involves the use of inclusive 'We' for the avoidance of exclusive 'I' and 'You' which actually functions to bridge the disconnect or distance between the speaker and the hearer".

Lastly, it is important to state that statistics from the mixed discourse of Greetings/Offers/Excuses/Breaking Bad News show that while the female respondents constituted 75.00% of the most polite option C responses, the male respondents represented only 25.00% of the same option (Figure 1). It is therefore hardly a hasty or sweeping generalization to assert that the females in the study sample have been found to adhere more to linguistic politeness principles than their male counterparts.

Qualitative Data

This type of analysis took into account the participants' perception/opinions about the significance, factors and effects of politeness/hedging in the English language conversation of the bilinguals. The structured interview sessions which consisted of text documents were audio taped, duly transcribed verbatim and analyzed. Thus, analysis of data was based on participants' responses to the significance of politeness in

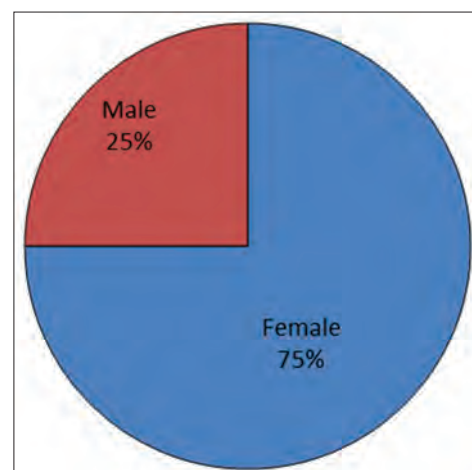


Figure 1. Proportion of female and male for the most polite option C responses

conversation, factors that necessitate politeness/hedging in the speech of Igbo bilinguals and the effects of politeness in conversation.

Significance of politeness in conversation

Results obtained from the perception data of the interview study on the significance of politeness in conversation show that every participant agrees that politeness is very important in conversation. Among other things, participants stress the virtue in being polite and the unimaginable accord which it creates between interactants regardless of the subject matter. The participants agree that apart from conveying the message with ease, politeness gives room for reciprocal concessions. Scholars (Afolayan, 1974; Lakoff, 1975; Fraser and Nolen, 1981; Adegbija, 1989; Nwoye, 1992; Akpan, 2003) agree that politeness is an expected socially required norm of behavior which makes individuals within and outside any given society live in harmony with other people. These scholars reiterate that at each point of interaction between people, politeness plays a vital role. It can therefore be inferred that politeness is that great integral part that completes the cycle of communication. To this extent, the interview results on the significance of politeness supports in no mean measure the importance of politeness as an indispensable sociolinguistic element in conversation.

Factors that necessitate politeness/hedging in the speech of Igbo bilinguals

Analysis of factors that necessitate politeness/hedging strategies used by Igbo bilinguals showed that all participants strongly believe that there are factors that necessitate politeness in the conversational English of the Igbo bilinguals. This finding is consistent with the questionnaire data which show that socio-cultural perceptions underlie linguistic politeness. The factors mentioned by the participants include – Age, Cultural background, Hierarchy, Disposition and Religion. The age factor got the highest mention among the participants. In fact 27 out of the 30 participants which represent 90.00% of the sample agree that age is one of the factors that necessitate politeness. In this context, age is likened to eldership in the Igbo society and beyond. This result supports the views earlier reported by Afolayan (1974), Adegbija (1989), Nwoye (1989) and Enang et al. (2014), that age took precedence over all other factors that governed the selection of an appropriate linguistic form and or appropriate behavior. In addition, 20 out of the 30 participants representing 60.67% of the sample population in the interview study mentioned cultural background as a factor that necessitates politeness among the Igbo. Culture reflects the way of life of a people and by extension irrevocably yoked with language. In other words, every act or expression of an act is essentially tied to the culture of the person/persons involved. The result recognizes that attention must be paid to culture in particular since differences may exist in ways various cultures view, express or even interpret concepts or phenomena. This fact is corroborated by earlier studies by Nwoye (1992), Demeter (2006) that speech acts primarily reflect the fundamental cultural

values and social norms of a language therefore expressions/utterances and interpretations/meanings are culture specific. Moreover, out of the 30 participants 23 representing 76.67% of the samples express their belief that hierarchy remains one of many factors that bring about politeness in conversation. In the Igbo culture, hierarchy is a status symbol marked by social and economic achievements, power, titles etc. Thus in every interaction, speakers tend to unconsciously classify one another to accord the due politeness to one another. This finding supports previous studies by Ambady et al. (1996), Habwe (2010), Holmes (1995), that hierarchy in communication involves the ability to recognize each other's social position. Also, 11 participants representing 36.67% of the interviewees acknowledge that disposition is one of the factors that bring about politeness. In this context, the addressees' dispositions matter a lot since interaction deals with the need to communicate effectively. This result is a further confirmation that politeness is more of a behavioural pattern, a code of behaviour which governs communication and which interactants must knuckle under to achieve the desired goal (Gu, 1990). Furthermore, six out of the 30 participants which represents 20.00% consent that religious affiliation is one of the factors that impel politeness (Figure 2). This significant finding corroborates the studies by Abdelaziz (2015) that the inclusion of religion as a factor that prompts politeness strategy appear to function as a way of protecting the self-image of both the speaker and the hearer and a reflection of their firm belief and the importance they attach to the holy book. Also in trying to find out some of the English words/phrases used by Igbo bilinguals to show politeness, the participants agree that these terms abound and are actuated by different discourse situations such as: Apology, Appreciation, Request, Terms of address, Greeting etc. These expressive terms as mentioned by participants according to discourse situations are: Apology – I'm sorry, my apologies, excuse me, bear with me, don't be offended, please forgive me. Appreciation – thank you, you're most kind, I'm grateful for, well done, God bless you, I appreciate all the effort, thank you very much. Request – please, if you don't mind, may I, could you, should I, do you mind, do me a favour. Terms of address – sir, ma, mummy, daddy, aunty, brother, papa, mama, Mr., Mrs., dear, ladies and gentlemen. Greeting – welcome, good morning, good afternoon, goodnight, how are you, did you sleep well, bye-bye.

Effects of politeness in conversation

Findings on the effects of politeness in conversation show that all the 30 participants agree that politeness impacts positively on conversation. The catena of the effects of politeness in conversation enumerated by the interview participants is encapsulated in the assertion derived from the interview study that politeness transcends the moment of discourse and ultimately resonates with the interactants. Finally, the participants reacted very enthusiastically to the final interview question which was on who appeared to be more polite in conversations male or female and why. Results arising from this study show that 17 out of the 30 participants representing 56.7% agree that females tend to be more polite

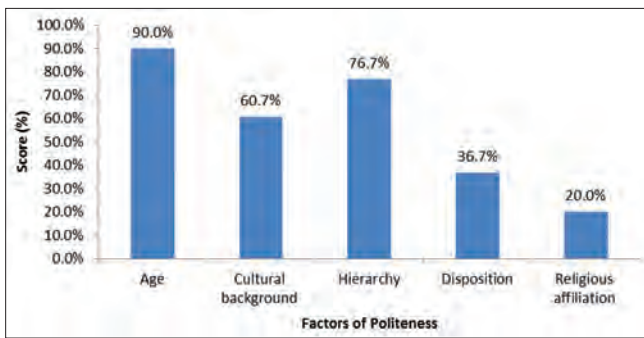


Figure 2. Factors that necessitate politeness 5.2.2

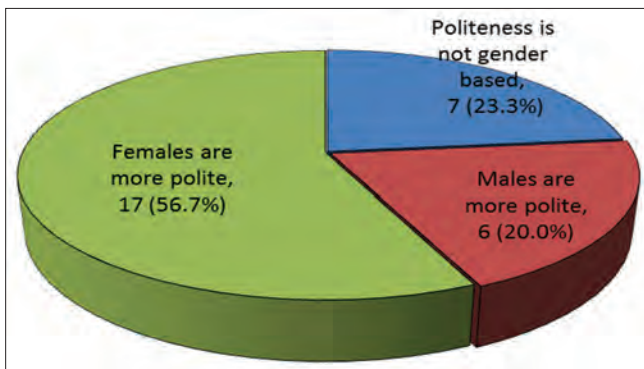


Figure 3. Influence of gender on politeness

in conversation. The reasons for this claim are many but are strongly corroborated by previous studies by Lakoff (1975), Adegbija (1989), Tannen (1991), Holmes (1995), Subon (2013), that females are more linguistically polite than their male counterparts. Again, six out of the 30 participants representing 20.0% of the samples are of the opinion that the males are more polite than the females. This finding is supported by earlier studies by Dang (2011) that men showed more sympathy in listening than women in the Vietnamese culture and by extension, men appeared to be more polite than females. However, seven out of the 30 participants representing 23.3% believe that politeness is not a gender-based issue (Figure 3). This view is confirmed in studies by Mills (2002) that politeness is not exactly a gender-based phenomenon but that context equally plays a major role in the notion of politeness and impoliteness.

On a general note, the study shows that the goal of these conversation strategies: politeness and hedging primarily tend to overlap as both rely on each other to fulfill a conversational demand. The interview session projects many instances of the use of hedge words or devices to give impetus to an utterance and to show politeness among other things. The transcript of the interviews showed the use of such hedge words and phrases as: ‘certainly’, ‘absolutely’, ‘I think’, ‘well’, ‘actually’, ‘of course’, ‘in my opinion’, ‘I would like to say’, ‘personally’, ‘may’, ‘can’, ‘should’ etc. These lexical terms perform different functions depending on the context of use. Previous studies by Caffi (1999), Lakoff (1972) have shown that hedging devices either serve as intensifiers/boosters or mitigators/attenuators to utterances and that is to say that they either heighten or soften the force of a given utterance on the addressee.

Also, previous studies by Jalilifar and Alvai (2011) confirmed that “hedges were used to create vitality, facilitate discussion, indicate politeness and lubricate phatic communication”. The use of these terms in the interview sessions by the participants without necessarily knowing the underlying implication, depict the various functions assigned to hedges/hedging. The study by Dixon and Foster (1997) summarizes that “hedges never express uncertainty, imprecision, warmth or any other social function in existence; rather, they do so only when they become mobilized in the concrete arenas of everyday talk, as forms of situated practice”. The above assertion is typical of the interview session aimed at finding out the politeness and hedging strategies among Igbo bilinguals. The synthesis is such that politeness relies on hedge words or devices to achieve its full meaning while hedging does not arise in any utterance until they are actualized in the context of everyday discourse – politeness. The finding of the interview shows that hedges/hedging devices appear more in spoken than written discourse. Again, the interview session was fraught with intercalary expressions like; ‘uh’, ‘um’, ‘erm’. There were also cases of repetition of words or phrases like; ‘more open’, ‘it does’, ‘of course’, ‘the females’ and even words like; ‘oh’, ‘you know’, ‘sort of’, ‘like’ etc in the course of the interview. The observation from our interview sessions agrees with previous findings by Ochs (1979) who noted that unplanned speech has certain characteristics such as repetition, simple active sentences, deletion of subjects, stringing of clauses and may also be filled with equivocations/hedges and intercalary expressions.

CONCLUSION

The study has established that there are differences in the speech style of men and women in the study sample as previously reported by different researchers. Granted that the samples were exposed to the same study instruments, the linguistic features of their responses still differed significantly. The result of the study indicated that considering the various contexts portrayed in the study instruments, the female samples were found to adhere more to linguistic politeness principles than their male counterparts. In addition, a conscious understanding of the concept of politeness/hedging vis-à-vis gender across the study samples revealed that females are believed to be more polite than males. The study found evidence to show that politeness and hedging interplay to bring about effective interaction in the conversational English of Igbo bilinguals. Also, findings show that different situations impelled the choice of strategies as the samples were found to adopt the bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness as well as indirectness strategies to achieve communicative goals. Furthermore, the samples yielded to certain sociolinguistic factors and other variables such as age, cultural background, hierarchy, disposition and religion as they were believed to inform the use of a particular strategy or another. Politeness therefore is a culture/context-bound phenomenon. Consequently, the findings of the study are limited to the Igbo bilinguals in Nigeria and cannot be generalized or used as a yardstick for assessment of other language groups. Findings showed that the study population

used politeness and hedging strategies very extensively in their English language conversations.

It is recommended that to achieve fidelity in any politeness/hedging, gender/language, as well as speech act study, context plays a vital role as it helps situate utterances and validates further analysis of discourse. It is therefore imperative to integrate context as part of the parameters for language and speech act studies. In addition, further and related studies involving a much smaller sample size should be carried out adopting primarily the observation of naturally occurring discourse and or the role-play methods for possible variance.

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