

Generic Structure Potential and (Im)Politeness in Nigerian Online Service Encounters on WhatsApp and Instagram

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Abstract

In modern business landscapes, the transition to computer-mediated channels has revolutionized service encounters, encompassing both transactional and interactional functions of language. This study examines the Generic Structure Potential (GSP) and politeness maxims between online vendors and buyers in Nigerian online service encounters. Drawing from Halliday and Hassan's (1989) model of GSP and Leech's framework of politeness, the study analyses 12 conversations from WhatsApp and Instagram platforms. The study identifies four obligatory elements: Uploading and Tagging of Sample Product (UTSP), Confirmation of Product Availability (CPA), Payment Process (PP), and Request for Delivery Details (RDD), and six optional elements: Greeting Initiation (GI), Calculation of Total Price of Product (CTPP), Demand for Discount (DD), Request for Notification of Payment (RNP), Appreciation/Gratitude for Payment (AGP), and Feedback on Product (FAP). The generic structure potential of a typical Nigerian online service encounter is catalogued as [UTSP]^(GI)^(CPA)^(CTPP)^(DD)^(PP)^(RNP)^(RDL)^(AGP)^(FOP). Furthermore, Nigerian online vendors exhibit a greater emphasis on politeness compared to buyers, with tact, generosity, and approbation as the commonly deployed politeness maxims in online service encounters. While WhatsApp and Instagram exhibit distinct features, understanding their patterns empowers businesses in Nigeria with effective communication strategies, potentially enhancing customer satisfaction and transaction outcomes in the digital marketplace.

Keywords: Business discourse, online service encounter, WhatsApp, Instagram, generic structure potential, politeness

Introduction

The advent of globalization in the 21st century has redefined the landscape of business operations, ushering in a new era facilitated by the internet, Information Communication Technology (ICT), and social media. Social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and

Instagram, boasting approximately 3.8 billion users globally, have become indispensable channels for businesses to harness the market's potential. These platforms offer businesses opportunities to reach potential customers through features such as business pages, advertisements, and messaging components, thereby facilitating online transactions and customer service interactions.

In the business context, social media platforms have empowered customers, enabling them to make online purchases, share information, and engage with companies, fundamentally altering the dynamics of customer service interactions. This ease of information dissemination, liberated from spatial and temporal constraints, fosters productive communication between individuals and online vendors. Moreover, customer service, integral to business operations, encompasses providing assistance to customers throughout the service delivery process, aiming to maintain customer loyalty and satisfaction by promptly addressing their needs and concerns.

Despite numerous global studies focusing on linguistic strategies in customer service interactions (Clark et al., 2013; Wieseke et al., 2012; Félix-Brasdefer, 2015), there is limited research on Nigerian online service encounters. This gap underscores the importance of investigating the dynamics of customer service interactions on social media platforms in Nigeria. Thus, this research aims to examine the generic structure potential and politeness maxims in online service encounters on WhatsApp and Instagram in Nigeria. This highlights the necessity for the current study, which aims to address the following inquiries:

- i. What is the generic structure potential of online service encounters between vendors and buyers on WhatsApp and Instagram platforms in Nigeria?
- ii. What are the politeness maxims observed in these online service encounters?

Theoretical Orientation and Previous Studies

The concept of Generic Structure Potential (GSP) is deeply rooted in Systemic Functional Linguistics, as pioneered by Halliday and Hassan in 1985 and 1996. GSP refers to the range of obligatory and optional elements in a text and their orderliness, providing an analytical framework to identify the textual elements available for developing a genre. According to Hassan (1989), GSP deals with the structural resource of speech in a given genre, implying that every genre has its own unique GSP. However, texts within the same genre may have different optional structures, as indicated by Halliday and Hassan (1985).

Numerous studies have explored GSP in various text genres, providing insights into the structure and linguistic properties of different types of texts. For example, Omoniyi and Akinseye (2020) identified five obligatory elements and four optional elements in selected banking discourses in Nigeria. Henry and Roseberry (1997) found obligatory elements like Introducing the Topic, Narrowing the Focus, and staging the Central Ideas, along with optional elements such as Commitment to Central Idea and Expansion in their studied essays from newspapers and magazines.

Similarly, Olagunju (2015) explored GSP in football match reports, uncovering four obligatory elements and six optional elements. In their paper, Ansary and Babaii (2004) investigated the GSP of English newspaper editorials, identifying obligatory elements like Run-on Headline, Addressing an Issue, Argumentation, and Articulating a Position, along with optional elements such as providing Background Information, Initiation of Argumentation, and Closure of Argumentation.

Other related studies on GSP include Sunday and Fagunleka (2017), who analysed feature articles in Nigerian newspapers, identifying obligatory elements like Headline, Orientation, and Addressing the Issue, and optional elements such as Feature Lead, Proffering a Solution, and Moral Lesson. Olaniyan (2014) examined the GSP and discourse functions of art-based research article abstracts, identifying eight generic structural elements, of which only Statement of Objectives, Methodology, and Findings were obligatory. Finally, Unuabonah (2012) explored the GSP of presentations in quasi-judicial public hearings, identifying four obligatory elements and one optional element.

While these existing studies have contributed significantly to our understanding of GSP theory and its application to various text genres, there is a noticeable gap in the literature concerning the examination of GSP in online service encounters, particularly in the Nigerian context. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining the GSP and politeness maxims between online vendors and buyers in Nigerian online service encounters, drawing from Halliday and Hassan's model of GSP and Leech's framework of politeness. By analysing these conversations from WhatsApp and Instagram platforms, this study seeks to provide insights into the structure and linguistic properties of online service encounters, thereby contributing to our understanding of how texts are organized and function in digital communication.

Principles of Politeness

Scholars such as Lackoff (1989), Watts (2003), and Trosberg (1995) have approached politeness from different angles. Lackoff (1989) viewed politeness as a means of avoiding conflict in human relationships, while Watts (2003) considered it a pragmatic mechanism that involves various linguistic structures working together to achieve smooth communication. Trosberg emphasized politeness as a social concept centred on showing consideration to others.

Impoliteness, on the other hand, can be seen as an outgrowth of politeness theory. According to Terkourafi (1999), impoliteness occurs when expressions used do not align with the context of occurrence. Watts argued that a comprehensive understanding of politeness requires an examination of social interactions. Culpeper (2005) explained impoliteness in terms of face-attack, where a speaker deliberately communicates in a way that threatens the hearer's face or social identity. Mills (2005) defined impoliteness as any linguistic behaviour that transgresses community norms, appropriacy, and threatens the hearer's face or social identity. With respect to Leech's (2005) theory of politeness, impoliteness manifests when the maxims of politeness are flouted during a speech event, most especially the agreement, approbation, and modesty maxims which are the conventionalized principles of politeness.

Moreover, other theories, such as Brown and Levinson's model of politeness, are deeply rooted in cultural and social constraints, making them less suitable for analysing online service encounters in a digital-driven environment. Brown and Levinson's model, for instance, focuses heavily on the notion of "face" and the social hierarchies that influence linguistic politeness. While this model is valuable for understanding politeness in face-to-face interactions, it may not adequately capture the dynamics of politeness in digital communication, where social cues and hierarchies are often less pronounced. Similarly, Watts' model of politeness is criticized for its subjective nature and strong connection to cultural norms. Watts' model involves a broader scope of analysis that may extend beyond the specific focus of this study, potentially leading the analysis into areas of pragmatics that are beyond the scope of online service encounters. Moreover, Watts' model may not provide the level of granularity needed to analyse the specific (im)politeness strategies employed in digital communication. In contrast, Leech's (2005) model of politeness offers a more objective and systematic framework for analysing (im)politeness in online service encounters. Leech's focus on the addressee, as well as his emphasis on specific linguistic strategies, makes his model particularly well-suited for analysing the linguistic

dynamics of digital communication. Additionally, Leech's model provides a clear framework for identifying the extent to which vendors and customers practice politeness in online encounters, as well as the obligatory or optional structures that match these polite speech acts. Therefore, Leech's model is the most appropriate theoretical framework for this study, as it provides the necessary tools for analysing the (im)politeness strategies employed in online service encounters on platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram.

Leech's model of politeness is an expansion of Grice's maxim of cooperation. In reaction to criticism in this respect, the term 'maxim' which was also used by Grice, was changed to 'constraints'. According to him, these constraints are manifestation of what he calls the super-constraints, that is, the Grand Strategy of Politeness (GSP). Leech (2007) politeness strategy has two major principles: 1) speaker places value on what relates to the addressee 2) speaker places low value on what relates to himself. Statements and responses that are loaded with maxim A are more powerful than statements and responses that are loaded with constraint B. Leech's politeness principle consists of six maxims:

- i. The Tact Maxim: This maxim seeks to 'minimize the expression of beliefs which imply cost to other, also maximize the expression of beliefs which imply benefit to other.' Examples of the tact maxim are "give me a glass of water", "remove the dirt", "would you mind buying me a soda" and so on. Leech argues that there are two levels of politeness in the tact maxim. Commands like "stand up", "get out" are considered impolite while requests that are introduced by "please", "could" or other modal auxiliary are more polite because they give the person being addresses a choice—whether to obey or not. For Leech, this is more powerful than the generosity maxim.
- ii. The Generosity Maxim: This maxim seeks to 'minimize the expression of benefit to self; maximize the expression of cost to self.' Unlike the tact maxim, the maxim of generosity focuses on the speaker, and says that others should be put first instead of the self.
- iii. The Approbation Maxim: This maxim seeks to 'minimize the expression of beliefs which express dispraise of others; maximize the expression of beliefs which express approval of others.'
- iv. The Modesty Maxim: This maxim seeks to 'minimize the expression of praise of self; maximize the expression of dispraise of self.'

- v. The Agreement Maxim: This maxim seeks to ‘minimize the expression of disagreement between self and other; maximize the expression of agreement between self and other.’
- vi. The Sympathy Maxim: This maxim seeks to ‘minimize antipathy between self and other; maximize sympathy between self and other’.

Even though Leech claimed that indirect illocutions are more instrumental in realizing politeness as they give listeners opportunity to make choices, he also conceded that indirectness can lead to impoliteness and may also not lead to it. This proposition is connected to his idea of impolite belief. For Leech, impolite beliefs are competitive goals “which are essentially less aggressive” (Giora, 2003: 86).

Researchers have also shown interest in exploring politeness within political contexts. For example, Odebunmi (2009) investigated politeness in print media political interviews in Nigeria, employing Watts' model. Ndubusi (2011) critically analysed politeness strategies in a novel, focusing on their implications for effective communication and national development. Additionally, Maia (2019) examined the concept of politeness in President Donald Trump's speeches, while Akinseye and Oyeyemi (2023) investigated the occurrences of impoliteness and politeness in the 2020 Edo and Ondo state governorship debates, with a focus on identifying the face-saving and face-threatening acts used by political candidates and moderators.

Meanwhile, the explorations of politeness and impoliteness strategies above have mainly focused on various political communication contexts. However, this study aims to fill a gap in the literature by examining the (im)politeness strategies employed in conversations between vendors and customers on WhatsApp and Instagram. By focusing on these digital interactions, this research offers insights into the unique dynamics of politeness in online business transactions, contributing to a deeper understanding of how politeness principles are applied in the digital marketplace.

Methods

The data involved online conversations between online vendors and buyers on WhatsApp and Instagram. The period from April to December 2021 was selected for data collection as it ensured the availability of screenshots and chats from online vendors and guaranteeing the validity of the data. The data were obtained from online vendors who randomly forwarded their

conversations to the researcher. The texts were anonymized and stripped of sensitive information, such as bank account details.

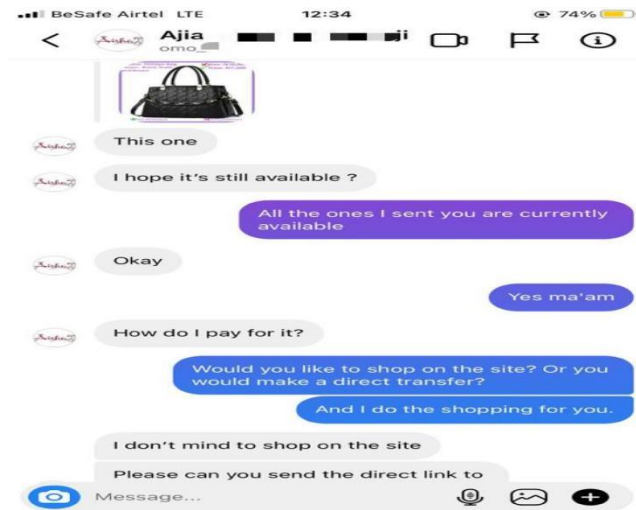
The study population consisted of a total of 100 screenshots and twelve conversations, with six each from Instagram and WhatsApp. The data were collected from the three major regions of Nigeria: Southern, Northern, and Eastern Nigeria. The selection of data was justified as it was purposively collected from individuals running businesses on WhatsApp and Instagram, who provided the data after being informed of the research purpose and verified their Instagram pages and WhatsApp chats. WhatsApp and Instagram were chosen as social media platforms for the study because they are the most widely used platforms in Nigeria and both platforms are business-friendly and contextually compatible with the research objectives. According to a report by Statista, WhatsApp and Instagram are among the top social media platforms in Nigeria in terms of user penetration and engagement (Statista, 2022). WhatsApp allows easy communication between users through texting, phone calls, or video calls, while Instagram provides a shopping-friendly environment where users can view high-quality images and videos of products shared by online vendors.

The data analysis procedure involved a qualitative analysis using the Generic Structure Potential approach and Leech's Politeness theory. These theoretical frameworks were chosen based on their compatibility and prevalence in the data. The analytical framework for online service encounters in Nigeria on WhatsApp and Instagram was developed based on the research objectives. Hassan (1985) gave some symbols with which a text can be written and interpreted in a genetically coded form, some of these symbols of generic structure potential include: ^, [], (), { } and <>. ^ - This is a caret sign that shows sequence. That is, how elements are arranged in their sequential order. []- The square brackets include restriction of elements. This indicates stability of occurrence, it means that elements enclosed with the square brackets can only occur in a given position. () - This indicates optionality, whenever an element is enclosed with plain brackets it means the element may or may not occur. { } - This symbol indicates recursiveness as a whole; <> - This symbol indicates recursiveness at once

Analysis and Discussion

Section 1: Generic Structure Potential in Nigerian online service encounter

Obligatory elements in Nigerian online service encounter on WhatsApp and Instagram



i. Uploading/ selection of product sample

Figure 1: *Bejaid Wears, Bags and Shoes: Southwest Nigeria*

This feature is an obligatory element in Nigerian online encounter on WhatsApp. It is the most essential element because buyers need to know available products before they can make a selection and then decide whether to make a purchase or not. Based on Figure 1, it is evident that this element occurs after greetings, self-introduction, or stating the purpose of the chat by the vendor. During the uploading or selection of product samples, the buyers either tag or send messages containing the specific product they wish to purchase, while in the chat room with the online vendor. Alternatively, the online vendor may also send samples of available products for the buyer to choose from. In such cases, the buyer simply needs to make a selection, and a conversation regarding the chosen product is initiated.

ii. Confirmation of product availability

Confirmation of product availability is a crucial element in Nigerian online service encounters, and it is typically accomplished through the adjacency pair of a question and an answer. Primarily, this element occurs after the customer has tagged or uploaded the specific item they

wish to purchase. Upon receiving the customer's inquiry, the online vendor affirms the availability of the selected product, often accompanied by providing the corresponding price information.

Conversation 1: WhatsApp: CHINESE CLOSET (Unisex Clothes seller)

Customer: hi, do you sell polo? Wholesale
Online vendor: hi, good morning dear. Yes I do

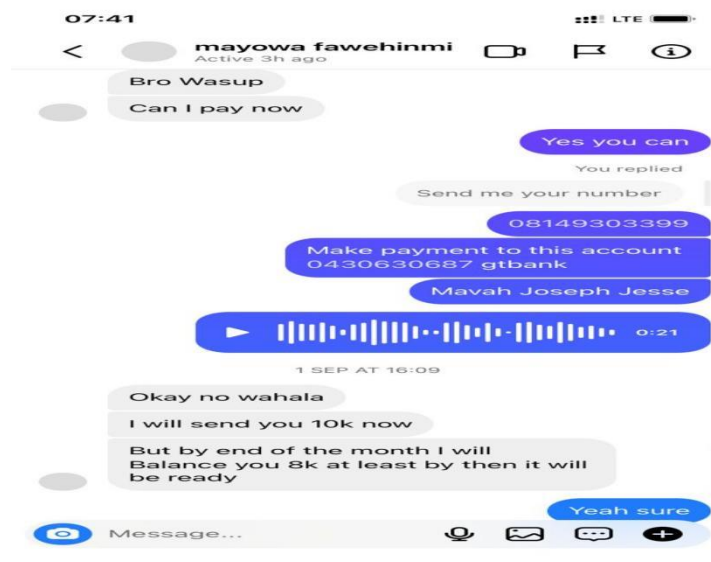
Conversation 2: Instagram: BEES SURPRISES (Decoration and events planning services)

Customer: hello. I want to get find out the cost of getting a money bouquet and money cake ...or better still if there are surprise packages I can review

In the first excerpt, the customer initiates the interaction by inquiring about the availability of polo shirts in wholesale from the online vendor. The interrogative nature of the question suggests that this customer is a first-time buyer. It can be inferred that this obligatory element is typically presented by customers who are contacting the online vendor for the first time. Also in the second sample, obligatory element is used by the client who is unfamiliar with the online vendor and in this particular case, the customer not only seeks information about the desired service's cost but also expresses a desire to review samples or explore alternative surprise packages. In summary, confirmation of a product is a critical element within Nigerian online service encounters as it builds trust and facilitates further interactions.

iii. Payment process

Figure 3: Instagram EMPEROR SHOES (Shoe maker) Northeast Nigeria



At the core of any successful online service encounter is the seamless integration of sales and customer satisfaction. In order to achieve this, it is imperative for the buyer to complete the payment process, followed by the delivery of goods by the online vendor. Thus, the payment process emerges as an obligatory element within Nigerian online encounters on WhatsApp and Instagram. As exemplified above and upon confirmation of product availability, the buyer assumes the responsibility of initiating the payment, thereby demonstrating their commitment to the purchase. The payment process primarily involves the buyer requesting the bank account details of the online vendor, subsequently effecting payment through transfer using their mobile phone. This process represents a crucial step that ensures the completion of the transaction, allowing for the buyer's financial commitment and the subsequent delivery of goods by the online vendor. This essential element contributes to the overall success of the online service encounter, fostering customer satisfaction and the establishment of a trustworthy relationship between the buyer and the vendor.

Optional elements in Nigerian online service encounter on WhatsApp and Instagram

According to the generic structure potential, a generic structure is considered optional if it does not consistently occur in every discourse within the same context. In the context of Nigerian online service encounters on platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp, there are certain optional elements that can be observed:

i. Opening Greetings

Unlike the social norms observed in physical markets, greetings are found to be an optional element in Nigerian online service encounters on Instagram and WhatsApp. There are instances where the greeting is omitted by online vendors and customers.

Excerpt 1: WhatsApp (Chinese closet)

Customer:	...Do you sell polo? Wholesale
Online vendor:	hi, good morning dear

In the provided WhatsApp excerpt, the customer initiates the discourse by directly stating her desired product. However, the online vendor, in contrast, greets before responding. In the analysed data, the online vendors place more socio-cultural significance on greetings compared

to online buyers. In most cases, online vendors greet before responding to their clients' inquiries, even when their customers fail to demonstrate the social etiquette of greeting.

The optional nature of greetings in Nigerian online service encounters reflects the evolving dynamics of online communication and the influence of technological platforms. While greetings may still hold significance for some online vendors, the customer's focus is often on efficiently communicating their needs and making inquiries without the traditional formalities associated with face-to-face interactions. This highlights the distinctive nature of online service encounters, where convenience and directness play a crucial role.

ii. Calculation of total price of product selected

Within Nigerian online service encounters, particularly on WhatsApp, the calculation of the total price of selected products emerges as an optional element. This element is typically employed when buyers have chosen multiple products and engaged in substantial negotiations with the online vendors. This optional element enhances the flexibility and personalized nature of online transactions, ultimately contributing to customer satisfaction and a successful online service encounter.

Excerpt 2:

Customer:	I just noticed there is a 50k cash in the luxury red theme box What will be the total without the red theme box?
Online vendor:	Yes there is.
Customer:	And the total without the cash?
Online vendor:	226,000

In the provided excerpt, the customer observes a particular item among the selected products and inquiries about the total price of the package without that specific item. The online vendor acknowledges the observation and responds by stating the revised total price after removing the item. This dialogue highlights the optional nature of calculating the total price of selected products within Nigerian online service encounters. It demonstrates that this element is invoked when there is a need to customize the package or revise the pricing based on specific customer preferences or changes in the product selection. Moreover, the use of WhatsApp as a platform

for these interactions is notable, as it provides a convenient and efficient means for both parties to engage in detailed discussions and exchange necessary information. The text-based nature of WhatsApp conversations allows for clear communication and easy reference to previous messages, facilitating the calculation of the total price and accommodating any adjustments requested by the buyer. Therefore, the calculation of the total price of selected products is not a mandatory step in every online transaction. It occurs selectively, primarily when buyers have engaged in significant negotiations or have expressed specific preferences for modifications to the package. This optional element allows for flexibility and personalized pricing arrangements, ensuring that the final price accurately reflects the buyer's requirements.

iii. Request for notification of payment

The request for notification of payment is an optional element in Nigerian online service encounters on WhatsApp and Instagram. It is a sub-element of the overall payment process but does not consistently occur in all instances on these platforms. Requesting notification of payment is more likely to be employed when significant amounts are involved, ensuring transparency and accountability in the transaction.

Excerpt 3:

Online vendor:	276,000 is total
Customer:	okay
Online vendor:	when you make payment, let me know

In the provided excerpt, the online vendor requests the buyer to notify him after completing a money transfer. This element is only observed in one of the analysed online service encounters. It can be inferred that this request is typically made when a substantial amount of money is involved in the transaction, ensuring that the vendor is aware of the payment and can proceed accordingly.

iv. Acknowledging payment

The act of acknowledging payment, which occurs when the buyer informs the online vendor about the completion of the payment, is not a common practice in Nigerian online service encounters on Instagram and WhatsApp. In other words, it is an optional element. Among the

twelve analysed data samples, only two online vendors acknowledged the payments made by the buyers.

Excerpt 4: Emperor Shoes

Online vendor: Okay bro. Received with thanks.

Excerpt 5: Bi-Great Shoes

Buyer: sent
Online vendor: Good morning received it

In Excerpt 4, the vendor explicitly acknowledges the receipt of the wire transfer and expresses appreciation to the buyer. It is also the same in Excerpt 5 but in an elliptical style. The optional nature of acknowledging payment indicates that it is not an obligatory practice within Nigerian online service encounters. While some vendors may choose to acknowledge payments as a means of providing reassurance and maintaining good customer relations, it is not considered a norm. However, the convenience and speed of online transactions may reduce the perceived need for explicit acknowledgment, as the completion of payment is often confirmed through digital records and notifications.

v. **Request for discount**

A discount is a reduction in the price of a product or service, which encourages buyers to make a purchase by offering them a lower price. In Nigerian online service encounters on WhatsApp and Instagram, the power to grant discounts lies solely with the online vendors. However, the request for discounts is not an obligatory element in these encounters.

Excerpt 15: Mo treats

Online vendor: Good morning ma. Ok. 800 per pack ma
Buyer: Good morning ma. Gimme discount na.

As observed in this study, not all customers engage in bargaining or haggling through language when exploring purchasing opportunities on social media. Therefore, the request for a discount is an optional element in Nigerian online service encounters.

vi. Gratitude/appreciation

Gratitude and appreciation are considered optional elements in Nigerian online service encounters, as they are mainly observed in WhatsApp conversations. Furthermore, they do not serve a common purpose in these encounters, thus not qualifying as obligatory elements.

Excerpt 1: Bejaid Wears

Buyer:	well done, may God continue to bless your business
Online vendor:	Amen ma, thank you so much ma, I'm grateful
Buyer:	I received my bag this. Thank you for your patience. I love it.

In this WhatsApp conversation, the online vendor expresses gratitude in response to the buyer's prayers. The buyer also expresses gratitude after receiving the ordered goods. This demonstrates that expressions of gratitude in Nigerian online service encounters on Instagram and WhatsApp are pseudo-obligatory, as they are contingent upon certain conditions.

vii. Feedback on product

The element of providing feedback on the product is an optional element that occurs occasionally in Nigerian online service encounters on social media platforms. It typically appears towards the end of the conversation. In the analysed data, only one instance of this element was found.

Excerpt: Bejaid Wears

Buyer:	I received my bag this morning. I love it Thank you for your patience
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In the above sample, the buyer expresses her satisfaction with the received product and extends gratitude to the online vendor for their patience. This feedback occurs after the obligatory elements of requesting delivery details or completing the payment process. The feedback quality is evident in the declarative statement "I love it," indicating the buyer's contentment with the delivered product.

Section 2: Politeness in Nigerian Online Service Encounter on WhatsApp and Instagram

Observance of tact maxim in Nigerian online service encounter

Politeness plays a crucial role in Nigerian online service encounters, particularly on platforms like Instagram. One aspect of politeness is the observance of the tact maxim, which suggests minimizing costs and maximizing benefits to others. The tact maxim operates in conjunction with principles of politeness, ensuring that the receiver feels respected and their "face" is protected. The following instances highlight the application of the tact maxim in these encounters:

Text 1: *Bejaid wears*

Online vendor: would you like to shop on the site?

Customer: please can you send the link to me?

In Text 1 above, the online vendor demonstrates politeness by adhering to the tact maxim. The vendor presents her proposition indirectly and similarly, the customer's request also follows the same pattern. These exchanges aim to increase options for both the customer and the vendor. This verbal behaviour aligns with the tact maxim. Through the use of polite language, both parties maximize the benefits to each other in a psychological manner. Here, the observance of the tact maxim facilitates effective communication and maintains a positive interaction between the vendor and the customer. In some other cases, the customer exhibits politeness by employing the term "please" while proposing a price reduction.

Observance of generosity maxim in Nigerian online service encounter

This positive face-saving strategy aims to enhance the listener's positive face. Instances of the generosity maxim can be observed in Nigerian online service encounters on platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp.

Text 4: Avese Clothier: Benue state (North central Nigeria)

Customer: "Please I want to see some outfits.
I don't know if you would help me..."

In Text 4, the implicature indicates that the buyer intends to purchase outfits at a certain cost, she frames her request with an indirect illocution. This proposition reflects the observance of the generosity maxim as the customer maximizes benefits for the seller by giving them the option to accept or reject her request. The observance of the generosity maxim in Nigerian online service encounters showcases the interactional dynamics between customers and vendors. Customers employ tactful requests and indirect illocutionary acts, allowing vendors the flexibility to accept or reject their requests. Understanding the generosity maxim enhances the overall quality of communication and fosters positive relationships between customers and vendors in the Nigerian online marketplace.

Observance of sympathy maxim in Nigerian online service encounter as a negative face-saving strategy

According to Leech (1983), the sympathy maxim occurs when both the speaker and the listener minimize antipathy towards each other, showcasing the value placed on the second party. It serves as a negative face-saving act for both parties involved. Instances of the sympathy maxim can be observed in Nigerian online service encounters.

Text 6: Bi –Great Shoe store: Abuja (North central Nigeria)

Online vendor:	“Sorry, it’s not available in 45. I just confirmed. ‘pele’ How about chose another design
Customer:	Send the ones available in 45. Lemme see

In this excerpt, politeness is achieved through the observance of the sympathy maxim. The online vendor initially informed the buyer that a selected shoe type in size 45 was available, but later discovered that it was not. Consequently, the vendor apologized and suggested an alternative. Politeness is demonstrated through the act of apology, which is even repeated using code-switching to a local language understood by the customer. By offering a suggestion in the form of a question, the online vendor shows sympathy towards the customer, thus engaging in a face-saving act. The intention behind this is to minimize disappointment and keep the possibility of a sale open. The observance of the sympathy maxim in Nigerian online service encounters demonstrates the importance of minimizing antipathy and valuing both parties involved.

Text 9: Avese clothier (North central Nigeria)

Customer: what about this one?

Online vendor: “if I do this one, it may look like low budget”

In text 9, the customer initially showed interest in a particular clothing item but reconsidered due to limited purchasing power. The online vendor demonstrates politeness by not violating the tact maxim and by adhering to the maxim of sympathy. By providing an informative response, the vendor shows sensitivity towards the buyer's feelings and minimizes personal benefit. The vendor's explanation for not recommending the specific clothing item avoids appearing self-centred by transparently sharing the potential negative perception it may convey. This face-saving act allows the customer to make an informed decision without feeling deceived or misinformed. Analysing the interaction, the vendor's adherence to the maxim of sympathy can be seen as an effective face-saving strategy. The maxim of sympathy, as outlined by Leech (1983), emphasizes minimizing antipathy and valuing the feelings of both the speaker and listener. In this case, the vendor's informative act aligns with the maxim of sympathy by considering the buyer's perspective and avoiding actions that could lead to negative emotions or judgments. This empathetic response helps preserve the customer's positive face by avoiding any direct criticism or judgment. Moreover, the vendor's transparency in explaining their reasoning prevents the customer from feeling deceived or misinformed, contributing to the maintenance of a positive customer-vendor relationship.

Observance of maxim of approbation in Nigerian online service encounter

The maxim of approbation, as defined by Leech (1983), emphasizes minimizing expressions of dispraise and maximizing expressions of approval towards others. In Nigerian online service encounters, the observance of this maxim plays a crucial role in maintaining positive face and fostering harmonious customer-vendor relationships. This analysis examines various instances where the maxim of approbation is employed as a face-saving strategy in Nigerian online service encounters.

Text 10: Bejaid Wears

Buyer: I received my bag this morning. I love it

Thank you for your patience

In this interaction, the buyer exemplifies the maxim of approbation by expressing approval and satisfaction towards the online vendor. Through the use of emotive language, the buyer conveys a positive evaluation of the product. Additionally, the buyer acknowledges the vendor's patience, attributing a positive trait to the vendor's behaviour. By maximizing expressions of approval, the buyer engages in a face-saving act that reinforces the vendor's positive self-image and fosters a positive customer-vendor relationship.

Maxim of approbation as face saving act strategy

Text 12: Bejaid wears

- Online Vendor: I understand your fear but will I scam myself?
Is it because I asked you to transfer to me?
- Customer: I choose to trust you o.
- Online Vendor: Don't worry. You will surely come back for more after this first purchase.
- Customer: Okay o. I pray so.

In this dialogue, the online vendor performs a face-saving act by addressing the customer's fear and assuring them of a positive experience. By acknowledging the customer's concerns and countering them with reassurance, the vendor minimizes the potential damage to the customer's positive face. The vendor's commitment to customer satisfaction and the promise of future transactions aim to build trust and maintain a positive customer-vendor relationship.

Text 13: Bejaid Wears

- Customer: "I will send 15k now ma. Then will balance...."
- Online vendor: "Oh. It's full payment days..."

In this example, the maxim of approbation is utilized as a negative face-saving strategy. Instead of directly informing the customer that full payment is required before delivery, the online vendor employs an indirect approach to communicate the delivery policy. The customer interprets the message as expected and assures the vendor of their intention to fulfil the payment before the due date. This face-saving act allows for a smoother transaction and preserves the positive face of both parties.

Observance of maxim of agreement in Nigerian online service encounter

The maxim of agreement, as outlined in linguistic politeness theories, emphasizes minimizing expressions of disagreement and maximizing expressions of agreement between interlocutors. In Nigerian online service encounters, the observance of this maxim plays a significant role in maintaining positive face and fostering effective communication. This analysis examines instances where the maxim of agreement is employed as a face-saving strategy in Nigerian online service encounters.

Text 11: Bejaid Wears

“Yes. Appointment still stands”

Text 12: Emperor shoes (Kaduna Instagram)

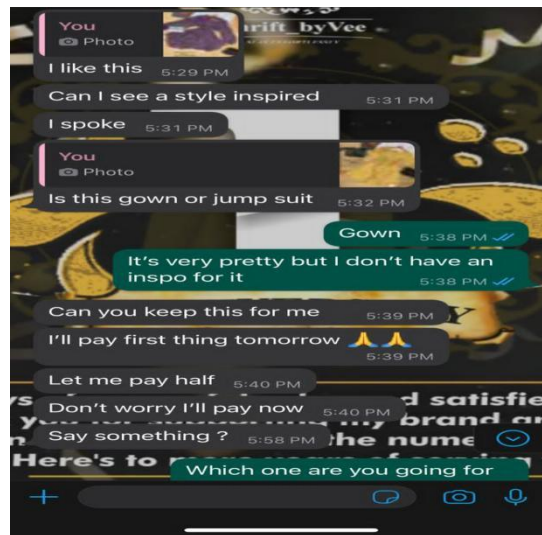
Bro Wasup. Can I pay now?’

In Text 11, the online vendor demonstrates the maxim of agreement by affirming the customer's question and assuring them that the appointment is still valid. This affirmation eliminates any doubt the customer may have had and strengthens the vendor's credibility and reliability. Here, by assuring the customer that the appointment still stands, the vendor protects their own negative face by projecting reliability and commitment to the agreed-upon arrangement. Also in Text 12, the buyer's request to make payment is interpreted as a request for the online vendor's account details. This observance is essential in this context as the buyer wants to establish an agreement between themselves and the vendor, considering they are not paying the full amount upfront. Recognizing and practicing the maxim of agreement is crucial for vendors to maintain positive customer relationships and ensure smooth transactional processes.

Indirect speech act as politeness strategy in Nigerian online service encounter

In Nigerian online service encounters, the use of indirect illocutionary acts contributes to the enhancement of politeness. By employing indirect acts, speakers reduce the imposition of choice on listeners, thereby adhering to the politeness principle. This study explores how online vendors strategically utilize indirect acts as a means of achieving politeness in their communication. The

In Text 24, the online vendor frequently employs the honorific "ma'am" in her responses to the customer's inquiries and comments. The honorific is used four times, primarily in response to the informative acts of the customer. This further substantiates the evidence that Nigerian online vendors adhere to politeness maxims and prioritize positive face-saving for their customers. It is worth noting that the use of honorifics is primarily observed among the online vendors themselves, emphasizing their role in fostering politeness in online service encounters."



Emoticons as tools for observing politeness maxims

Emoticon is a pictorial representation of a facial expression or gesture, used to convey the writer's emotions, tone, or intention in digital communication. Emoticons are commonly used in social media posts to add context or convey nuances that may be lost in written text alone.

Figure 7: ThriftbyVee Akwa Ibom

In this excerpt, the buyer utilizes emoticons as a means to convey a plea for purchasing the item on an instalment basis to the online vendor. Within the realm of social media communication, this particular emoticon employed by the buyer above signifies 'please.' This practice serves as a face-saving act towards the online vendor, drawing upon the shared socio-cultural understanding that sellers typically prefer receiving full payment upfront. Therefore, the intentional use of appropriate emoticons aligns with the politeness maxim of generosity, as the buyer employs them sincerely to request the vendor's understanding and willingness to allow her until the

following day to balance the payment. This utilization of emoticons as tools for observing politeness maxims highlights the dynamic nature of online interactions and the adaptation of linguistic resources within digital communication platforms. It demonstrates the buyer's awareness of the social norms and expectations governing online transactions and her conscious effort to navigate them with politeness and consideration.

Discussion of findings

The findings of this study reveal a notable linguistic discrepancy in the generic structure of Nigerian online encounters on Instagram and WhatsApp. Despite involving similar products and services, these two social media platforms do not host identical contextual configurations. One of the major reasons for this divergence is the presence of different vendors offering various services. In WhatsApp, the obligatory items include the selection/uploading of product samples, inquiries about product availability, the payment process, question-and-answer interactions, confirmation/acknowledgment of payment, notifications of payment, expressions of appreciation, and requests for the delivery period. On the other hand, Instagram has a more limited set of obligatory items, which comprise uploading product samples, confirming product availability, stating product prices, the payment process, question-and-response interactions, and requesting the delivery period. The optional generic features in Nigerian Instagram and WhatsApp online service encounters include greetings, providing payment options, offering feedback on products, assurance of continuous patronage, requests for proof of business legitimacy, calculating the total price of selected products, permission to pay, requesting confirmation of the amount to be paid, and requesting notifications of payment. In a typical Nigerian WhatsApp online encounter, optional elements include greetings, demands for discounts, requests for the vendor's opinion, requests for details on delivery, and notifications of product delivery. The generic structure of deliberation on instalment payment can be either optional or obligatory, depending on the relationship between the online vendor and the customer. The evidence from this study demonstrates that the obligatory features of Nigerian online service encounters on Instagram and WhatsApp usually follow a generic structure potential that includes uploading/selection of product samples, confirming product availability, the payment process (which involves requesting product details), and finally, requesting delivery details (including time and venue). The optional elements in a typical Nigerian online service encounter on these social media platforms often encompass greetings, calculating the total price

of selected products, demanding discounts, requesting notifications of payment, offering feedback on products, requesting proof of business legitimacy, and expressing appreciation for patronage. Consequently, this study concludes that Nigerians employ different linguistic features on Instagram and WhatsApp to achieve customer satisfaction and increase sales. Furthermore, it is evident that Instagram online encounters among Nigerians tend to be less friendly and congenial compared to WhatsApp online encounters.

Sequence of Obligatory and Optional Elements

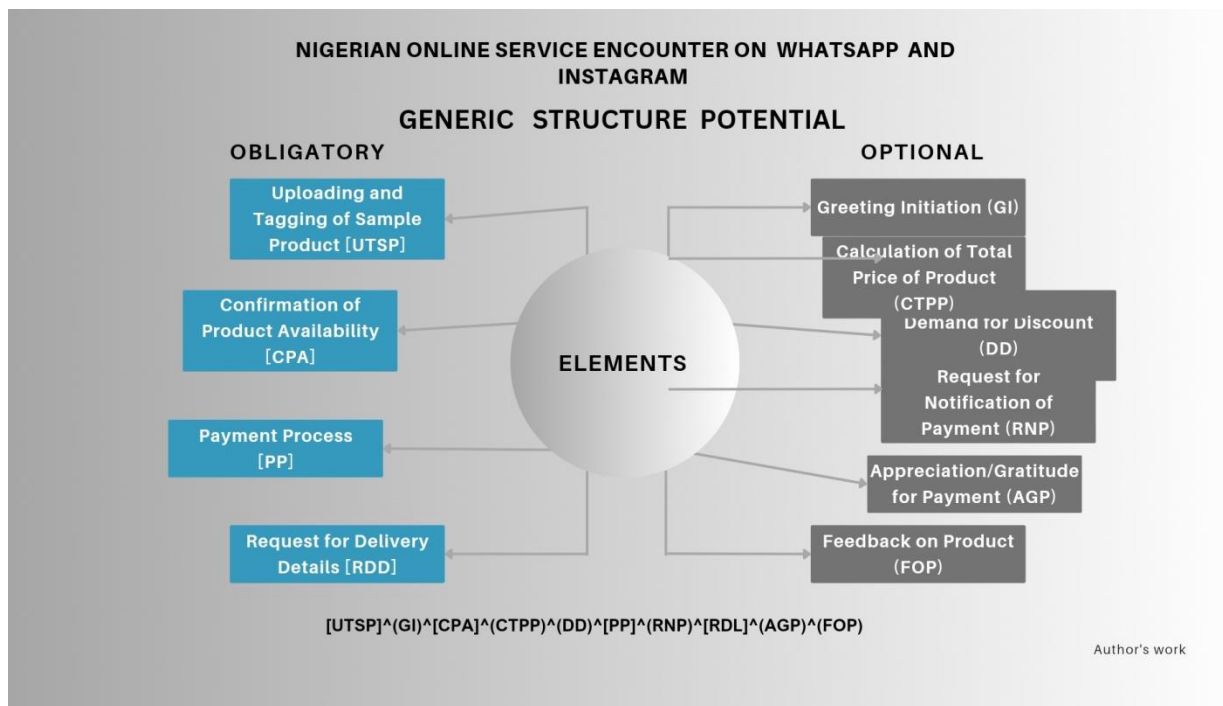


Figure 6: Nigerian online service encounter on WhatsApp and Instagram

The analysis revealed two types of elements: obligatory elements and optional elements. In total, ten elements were identified, namely Uploading and Tagging of Sample Product (UTSP), Greeting Initiation (GI), Confirmation of Product Availability (CPA), Calculation of Total Price of Product (CTPP), Demand for Discount (DD), Payment Process (PP), Request for Notification of Payment (RNP), Request for Delivery Details (RDD), Appreciation/Gratitude for Payment (AGP), and Feedback on Product (FOP). Among these elements, four were found to be obligatory, while six were categorized as optional. The obligatory elements include UTSP, CPA, PP, and RDD, and they can be sequenced as follows: [UTSP] ^ [CPA] ^ [PP] ^ [RDD]. The caret

symbol (^) represents sequencing markers or ordering in relation to another stage, while the square brackets [] indicate the stability of occurrence.

The optional elements consist of GI, CTPP, DD, RNP, AGP, and FOP, and they can be sequenced as <(GI) ^ (CTPP) ^ (DD) ^ (RNP) ^ (AGP) ^ (FOP)>. The round brackets () signify optionality, indicating that they do not appear in all the analysed conversations. Recursiveness at once (<>) is used for optional elements: Greeting Initiation (GI), Calculation of Total Price of Product (CTPP), Demand for Discount (DD), Request for Notification of Payment (RNP), Appreciation/Gratitude for Payment (AGP), and Feedback on Product (FOP) because they occur more than once but not throughout all the conversations. This symbol indicates that the element recurs within individual interactions but not universally across all interactions being analysed. The caret symbol (^) represents sequencing markers or ordering in relation to another stage. Therefore, the generic structure of a typical Nigerian online service encounter can be outlined as:

[UTSP] ^ (GI) ^ [CPA] ^ (CTPP) ^ (DD) ^ [PP] ^ (RNP) ^ [RDD] ^ (AGP) ^ (FOP)

It is worth noting that while Omoniyi and Akinseye (2020) identified Request for Account Details (RAD) as an optional element in banking discourse, this study positions RAD as an obligatory process within the Payment Process (PP). The Payment Process involves the adjacency pair of question and answer, encompassing the Request for Account Details and Confirmation of Amount to be paid. This finding highlights the distinct difference between physical service encounters and online service encounters.

Furthermore, the predominant politeness maxims observed in Nigerian online service encounters on Instagram and WhatsApp include the tact maxim, sympathy maxim, and generosity maxim. This study revealed that Nigerian online vendors tend to adhere to these politeness maxims more diligently than their buyers or customers. Regarding positive and negative face-saving acts in Nigerian online encounters on Instagram and WhatsApp, the study findings indicate that negative-face saving is accomplished through the utilization of politeness maxims such as tact, generosity, sympathy, and approbation. On the other hand, adherence to the maxim of approbation independently contributes to positive-face saving. It can be inferred that instances of impoliteness between online vendors and buyers are relatively infrequent in Nigerian online service encounters on WhatsApp and Instagram. The study also indicates that most of Leech's politeness maxims are generally observed, except for the maxim of modesty, which is rarely adhered to. Additionally, the study findings show that online vendors tend to observe the

politeness maxims more than customers. The analysis further demonstrates that politeness is reciprocal in Nigerian online service encounters on Instagram and WhatsApp. Also, lexical items used to underscore politeness include honorifics, and apologetic lexicons, which are also frequently employed to soften requests and demands.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has provided valuable insights into the correlation between politeness and the generic structure of Nigerian online service encounters on WhatsApp and Instagram. The analysis of social media conversations and screenshots has revealed that politeness is predominantly observed in the optional elements of these encounters, with online vendors demonstrating politeness primarily through the elements of Greetings Initiation (GI), Request for Notification of Payment (RNP), Request for Discount (RD), and Gratitude/Appreciation (GA). The findings strongly suggest that politeness plays a crucial role in enhancing the overall experience of the online service encounter between virtual vendors and their clients or buyers. By employing politeness strategies in these optional elements, vendors are able to establish a positive and friendly tone in their interactions with customers. Consequently, this contributes to increased satisfaction and enjoyment during the online service encounter. The presence of politeness in these optional elements creates a congenial atmosphere, fosters a sense of appreciation, and facilitates effective communication between all parties involved. Therefore, the incorporation of politeness in the optional elements of Nigerian online service encounters on WhatsApp and Instagram significantly enhances the overall quality of the interaction. This, in turn, leads to a more positive and favourable experience for both vendors and customers. By prioritizing politeness in their online interactions, vendors can establish strong customer relationships, foster trust, and ultimately drive customer satisfaction and loyalty. Future studies could further explore the specific linguistic strategies employed by vendors to enhance politeness in these online encounters and their impact on customer behaviour and business success.

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