

**Politeness Strategies in The Communicative Sequence of Characters in Toyin
Abiodun's *The Trials Of Afonja***

Salawu Rashidat Omotola

Department of English and Linguistics,

Kwara State University,

Malete, Kwara State.

Phone Number: 07034423147

Email: rashidato.salawu@kwasu.edu.ng or omotola2010@gmail.com

Abstract

Politeness is a universal concept aimed at mitigating the potential harm of face-threatening acts in human interactions. It serves as a tool to prevent conflict and facilitate seamless communication among interlocutors, even amidst societal complexities. Studies on drama texts have largely examined the use of lexical choices, implicature and discourse patterns neglecting the choice of politeness among the characters' communicative sequence. This has however received little attention among linguists. This paper examined politeness strategies in Toyin Abiodun's *The Trials of Afonja* with a view of seeing how characters exchange different politeness strategies in their communicative sequence either directly or indirectly. The paper adopted a qualitative content analysis to select twelve extracts randomly in the text. Leech's politeness principle was adopted as the theoretical framework. Findings revealed that agreement maxim is a politeness strategy used to minimise disagreement among the characters in the text. The study also revealed that praises or eulogies are politeness strategies used by characters in the text to abate anger. Studies have also shown that not bragging or boasting about one's achievements, titles or ability is polite as characters minimise praises to themselves in the studied text. The study concludes that to achieve a conflict-free interaction among characters in the text, their public self-image must be consciously put into consideration. This study recommends that dramatists intentionally integrate diverse politeness strategies into character interactions to mirror real-life communication, foster conflict resolution and inspire audiences to embrace empathy and respect in their everyday interaction.

Keywords: *Linguistic Politeness, The Trials of Afonja, Leech's Politeness Principle, Context*

Background to the study

For quite a long time, the examination of literary works was the domain of literary critics. In the last four decades however, researchers and linguists began to examine literary texts using pragmatics theories and in so doing, there was a shift in the way in which such texts are analysed. One of the prevalent pragmatic theories used in the analysis of literary works is the politeness theory. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness is the action, linguistic or otherwise, that redresses the speaker's and hearer's face in a situation whereby face is threatened. They further add that attending to face will either minimize or avoid conflict during interaction. Widdowson (1992) asserts that literary texts are language in use in a specific, context-dependent manner, where the primary goal extends beyond mere communication to creating an aesthetic experience. Plays, in particular, present a rich ground for examining the dynamics of interaction, as characters' speech acts often involve implicit meanings, power negotiations, and strategic use of politeness or impoliteness.

Abdul-Majeed (2009) points out that politeness principle has gained a great deal of interest in the past twenty-five years; and since then, much has been written on politeness principles and theories. Politeness in the linguistic sense, however, has little to do with good manners, as Goffman (1971) explains: in this linguistic perspective, politeness, deference and tact have a sociological significance altogether beyond the level of table manners and etiquette book. As human beings who employ language for communicative purposes, politeness is pervasive in our interactions because of the intricacies of our diversities in terms of age, status, rank, etc. (Babatunde & Adedimeji, 2008). Without being polite in interactions, the chances of achieving success in communication are slim. Thus, Cruse (2000) asserts that the purpose of politeness is to maintain harmonious and smooth relations in the face of the necessity to convey belittling messages. This conforms to the view of Thomas (1995) that politeness is the means employed to show awareness of another person's face - where the face means the public self-image of a person, without which communication may fail. Politeness is a means to avoid conflict and promote smooth communication between interlocutors in the face of complexities in society. This is expressed through communication between interlocutors taking cognizance of the social distance (mostly elderly to a younger person) and relative power (superior to subordinate). The primary aim of this paper, therefore, is to gain a comprehensive understanding of politeness theory by investigating

how Abiodun utilises politeness strategies in the utterances of characters in the text. This paper examines the specific face-threatening acts and politeness maxims employed by characters in *The Trials of Afonja*. It explores the cultural and contextual relevance of these strategies, situating them within the Yoruba socio-cultural setting depicted in the play. This study adopts Leech's (2014) politeness principle to investigate how characters in Abiodun's *The Trials of Afonja* use different politeness strategies in their communicative sequence either directly or indirectly.

Literature review

Pragmatics: An overview

Fetzer (2001) explains that pragmatics is fundamentally concerned with communicative action and its felicity in context, investigating action concerning the questions of what action is, what may count as action, what action is composed of, what conditions need to be satisfied for action to be felicitous, and how action is related to context. Leech (1983) declares that we cannot understand the nature of language itself unless we understand pragmatics: how language is used in communication. He therefore defines pragmatics as the study of how utterances have meanings in situations because pragmatics is a shift from the paradigm of theoretical grammar, in particular syntax, to the paradigm of the language user. Mey (2001) suggests that pragmatics as the study of the way humans use their language in communication, bases itself on a study of those premises and determines how they actualise human language use. Hence, pragmatics studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society. Yule (1996) adds that pragmatics requires a consideration of how speakers organise what they want to say by who they are talking to, where, when and under what circumstances. Since the introduction of pragmatics, many classic theories and principles have been put forward by linguists targeting different aspects of pragmatics. Some of these include; speech acts, intention, presupposition, context, deixis, implicature, common ground, cooperative principle, politeness principle, etc.

Context

Context according to Mey (2001) is dynamic, not a static concept: it is to be understood as the continually changing surroundings, in the widest sense, that enable the participants in the communication process to interact, and in which the linguistic expressions of their interaction

become intelligible. Adebija (1999) says that the term “context” refers to the relevant aspects of the physical or social setting of an utterance. Adebija (1999) further identifies at least four types of contexts as having an impact on utterance interpretation. These are: the physical context which includes the time, and the place where a communicative event takes place; the socio-cultural context which includes the beliefs, habits, value systems or the cultures of those involved, their religious and cultural beliefs and how these relate to the occasion at hand; the psychological context which is the state of mind of those involved in the interaction; and the linguistic context has to do with the words appearing in the environment of the discourse. Babatunde (2007) avers that context is taken to refer to the environment and the circumstances in which language is used. It refers to what we can observe, hear or see to enable us to fashion out the meaning of a particular situation by our application. He identifies context types to include social, psychological and physical. Understanding context is crucial for interpreting meaning, as it influences how linguistic choices are made and understood. This study leverages the concept of context to explore how politeness strategies are employed in literary texts, with a focus on how characters navigate social interactions and power dynamics through their communicative acts.

Linguistic politeness

Language serves many purposes, and linguistic politeness is only one of them. Politeness is seen as something universal, although, what is considered polite does naturally vary from group to group or situation to situation but the basic need for the maintenance of interpersonal relationships is present in any human communication (Riekkinen, 2009).

Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that quite unrelated languages show strikingly similar patterns in conveying politeness:

even if one doesn't know the language, on seeing one person approach another, and speak to him with hesitations, umms, ahhs and the like, we have a strong clue that he is making a request or doing something that he considers (or considers that the other will consider) imposing.

Linguistic politeness has generally been considered the proper concern of pragmatics, the area of linguistics that accounts for how we attribute meaning to utterances in contexts or meaning in interaction (Thomas, 1995). Linguistic politeness is thus a matter of strategic interaction aimed at

achieving goals such as avoiding conflict and maintaining harmonious relations with others (Kasper, 1993).

Cheepen (2000) comments that politeness is an interactionally motivated phenomenon, since it is not directly oriented towards a communicative goal, but rather maintains social equilibrium. Holmes (2001) believes that being linguistically polite involves speaking to people appropriately in the light of the relationship. Fairclough (1989) suggests that “politeness is based on the recognition of differences of power, degree of social distance” proposing that the scale of politeness in any community depends on two factors: an assessment of the social relationship between interlocutors and knowledge of the social values and norms of the socio-cultural community involved. Watts (2003) concludes that:

The goal of a theory of linguistic politeness which takes (im)politeness as its starting point should not be to explain why speakers say what they say and to predict the possible effect of utterances on addressees. It should aim to explain how all the interactants engaged in an ongoing verbal interaction, negotiate the development of emergent networks and evaluate their position and the positions of others within those networks.

The cooperative principle

Grice (1975) proposes that communicative utterance and exchanges, typically in conversation, are by a general principle of cooperation what he called the cooperative principle which states: “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which it is engaged” or Be helpful. The cooperative principle is observed in the application of four more specific maxims which fall under it, commonly called Grice’s Maxims (Kearns, 2000).

Maxim of Quality (also called the maxim of truthfulness)

1. Try to make your contribution one that is true.
2. Do not say what you believe to be false.

Maxim of Quantity (also called the maxim of informativeness)

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange).

2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Maxim of Relation (also called the maxim of relevance)

Be relevant

Maxim of Manner (also called the maxim of clarity)

Be perspicuous.

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (Avoid unnecessary prolixity)
4. Be orderly.

These maxims specify the convention that participants in a conversation normally obey. Grice observes that on many occasions, many people fail to observe these maxims. Non-observance of these maxims can be in different ways such as flouting a maxim, violating a maxim, infringing on a maxim, opting out of a maxim and suspending a maxim (Thomas 1995). This failure might either be due to a person's inability to speak clearly or the deliberate choice to lie. He also points out that when things are not stated with specification, hearers assume contrary things to what is said with the meaning usually derived from a deeper level.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts Leech's (2014) Politeness Principle Approach as the theoretical framework.

Leech's Politeness Principle Approach

Leech (2014) has proposed a way of explaining how politeness operates in communication with others, which is called Politeness Principles. Politeness principles are a series of maxims used in analyzing politeness. They are: tact maxim, generosity maxim, approbation maxim, modesty maxim, obligation S to O maxim, obligation O to S, agreement maxim, opinion-reticence maxim, sympathy maxim, and feeling-reticence maxim. Subvertova (2013) notes that Grice's cooperative maxims do not cover all the situations that we may come across in communication. These maxims

do not even consider some specific situations like moral and ethical values. Therefore, even when adhering to all cooperative maxims we may very well be impolite. He adds that Grice's maxims are focused on truth value, adequacy and the content of our contribution in general. Leech provides us with the "politeness Principle" (henceforth, PP), delineated in his book *Pragmatics of Politeness* (2014). The principle of politeness analogous to Grice's CP is a constraint observed in human communicative behaviour, influencing us to avoid communicative discord or offence and maintain communicative concord (Leech, 2014)

Leech builds his outline of pragmatics principle that makes a distinction between two rhetorics: the interpersonal rhetoric that subsumes the CP, the Politeness Principle (PP) and the Irony Principle (IP); and the textual rhetoric which includes the principles of processibility, clarity, economy and expressivity (2014). Leech's (2014) model of politeness is founded on interpersonal rhetoric and views politeness as conflict avoidance. Leech introduces the politeness principle whose function is to maintain social equilibrium and friendly relations which enables us to assume that our interlocutors are being cooperative in the first place (Leech 2014). Leech defines politeness as strategic conflict avoidance, which can be measured in terms of the degree of effort put into the avoidance of a conflict situation and the establishment of maintenance of comity. Hence, the PP has a higher regulative role than the CP whose function is to regulate what we say so that it contributes to some assumed illocutionary or discoursal goals. He distinguishes between what he calls "Absolute Politeness" and "Relative Politeness".

The position of Leech (2014, p.132) is a grand elaboration of Grice's conversational maxim to politeness. Leech adopts the framework initially set out by Grice when he gave some set of maxims and sub-maxims that guide and constrain the conversation of rational people. His concept is based on terms; self and other (Leech 2014, p.133). In a conversation, the self would be identified as the speaker (or anybody or anything associated with the hearer). Leech (2014) names politeness theory (PT) as politeness principles (PP) a finer differentiation within his principles by proposing six interpersonal maxims (2014, p. 132); they are:

Tact Maxim:

- (a) Minimise cost to other;

(b) Maximise benefit to other

Generosity Maxim:

(a) Minimise benefit to self;

(b) Maximise praise of other.

Approbation Maxim

(a) Minimise dispraise of other;

(b) Maximise praise of other.

Modesty Maxim

(a) Minimise praise of self;

(b) Maximise dispraise of self.

Agreement Maxim

(a) Minimise disagreement between self and other;

(b) Maximise agreement between self and other.

Sympathy Maxim

(a) Minimise antipathy between self and other;

(b) Maximise sympathy between self and other.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative approach to analyse some dialogues/conversations between characters in the drama text entitled *The Trials of Afonja*. It is qualitative because this approach enables a detailed and nuanced examination of language use in its contextual environment. Dialogues in literary works often reflect complex interpersonal dynamics and social norms, necessitating a focus on meaning and context. It analyses the data descriptively using Leech's maxims of politeness. What constitute data for this study are twelve purposively selected extracts from the text. The data were purposively sampled because the method ensures that only the

relevant dialogues to this study are analyzed, allowing for a focus and in-depth exploration in textual interpretation.

Data presentation and analysis

Generosity maxim

Datum 1:

Alaafin: Did you send men to Akesan?

Lafianu: Yes, Kabiyesi.

Alaafin: See to it that this man gets his wares back. As compensation for his loss, let you and your men to have my share of today's market duties... (The Trials of Afonja, P.56)

Lafianu is in charge of collecting tax from traders at the market. Alaja-Eta, a citizen of Borgu complains to the king that his wares have been taken away by some Esos. Alaafin wants no dispute with the Sultan of Borgu, thus, he commands Lafianu to return his wares. Alaafin prioritizes the welfare of Alaja-Eta. He orders Lafianu to ensure that the man's wares are returned and further compensates the man by instructing Lafianu and his men to forgo the Alaafin's share of the market. This minimizes the man's loss while providing him with additional benefits. The Alaafin adheres to the generosity maxim by sacrificing his share of the day's market to compensate Alaja-Eta. This action reflects his willingness to bear a personal loss for the benefit of another, thereby demonstrating generosity "let you and your men have my share of today's market".

Datum 2:

Afonja: Go ahead! Share them, share them into equal parts!

Eso: Equal parts! My Lord! The share of the Aare-Ona-Kakanfo exceeds that of any general. It is the custom.

Afonja: Share them into equal parts! (The Trials of Afonja, p.29)

Afonja in the above excerpt minimises benefit to himself. After every war, the spoils of the war are divided and the generalissimo takes the biggest share. After the first fight with the Bambaras, Afonja insists that the spoils of war be equally shared between himself and the other generals. In

other for **S (Speaker)** to appear polite and considerate, he employs a **FSA (Face Saving Act)** by asking **H (Hearer)** to divide the spoils of the war equally. Giving consideration to others' needs is a politeness strategy employed to win others' loyalty.

Agreement maxim

Datum 3:

Akilapa: Let us divide the spoils of war.

Afonja: No! No! ... I say we wait until we get back home.

Ekerin: I say we divide the spoils here and now.

Afonja: Hide your weapons... We shall divide the spoils. I'll not have our blood give more nourishment to this scorched soil of Bambaras. (The Trials of Afonja, pp. 24-28)

After the war against the Bambara, the other six generals with Afonja decided that the spoils of war be divided immediately. Afonja feels sharing the war spoils before getting home (Oyo) will cause distraction to the men. Afonja's response would have been taken as a **FTA (Face Threaten Act)** without redress if he doesn't consent to their decision, although it causes them their lives. **H** upholds the maxim of agreement which says that one should minimise disagreement between oneself and others. Therefore, agreement is a politeness strategy that seeks to save the face of the interactants in the conversation.

Datum 4:

Young Witch: Yeye, what you're about to do will not bring doom to Afonja alone. It will give wound to the whole of Oyo.

Iya Mode (Yeye Eleye): I don't care!

Young Witch: But think...think, yeye, Oyo yet finds no replacement for its Aare-Ona-Kakanfo. Who shall stand for us against our enemies?...Think of your children. Do not drag down the grindstone.

Iya Mode (Yeye Eleye): I...I...I buy your wisdom... Leave (The Trials of Afonja, p. 92-94)

Interlocutors can avert **X (Face threaten Act)** by adhering to the agreement maxim. Here, Iya Mode, a member of the Oyomesi is also the leader of the witches determines to end Afonja's life because he defiles her by sending her out of the palace when he wants to inform Alaaafin Aole that Oyo loses to the Bambaras. The **H** saves the face of **S** by agreeing to what the **S** said in order not to threaten the face of **S**. Iya Mode finally sees a reason not to kill Afonja, Hence, She maximises the maxim of agreement which is a politeness strategy to avoid Oyo's destruction.

Approbation maxim

Datum 5:

Alaaafin: Let everyone's lips be pressed together.

Afonja: ...but I think Kabiyesi should hear my...

Alaaafin: ... Afonja! I say "let everyone's lips be pressed together"... I will tell you when to speak...maybe Afonja knows something...let him speak.

Afonja: No one dares caress your sword with his bare hands, it will cut him! Alaaafin! You're the little stump of wood that is infested with soldier ants.. you're the marshy spot in the river... you're the easy-going elephant that the strongest wrestler must lift without breaking his back...

(The Trials of Afonja, p.17)

The conversation is between the **S** who is a King (superior) and the **H**; his subordinate. The redress utterance of the **H** which he uses in the form of praise for the **S** is a politeness strategy he employs to abate the **S's** anger. In other words, **H** maximises the praise of **S**. Eulogising the king is a politeness strategy common among the Yorubas to entreat the king's favour. Thus, rather than to **X**, the **H** employs a **FSA** to save the face of **S** who is a king in public.

Datum 6:

Baale Gbogun: Afonja

Afonja: Baale Gbogun...

Baale gbogun: Afonja! The one who has the heart of a grindstone. Afonja Iji (storm)... You crash into your enemies like a sudden storm...one moment they see you; then the next, they die changing to empty space... (The Trials of Afonja, p.31)

Praises and eulogies are politeness strategies that interlocutors in a communicative act use as **FSA**. Here, the **S** praises the **H** to make the **H** feel loved and accepted. After the war, Afonja wants the spoils of war to be shared back home so that there will be no distractions. The other generals with him are anxious to quench their lust with the women of Bambaras; therefore, they disagree and go into their tents with those women. Baale Gbogun, a loyal friend of Afonja, seeing that Afonja is angry with his generals, maximises praise of Afonja. He praises Afonja to calm him and reassures him that there are still some who are forever loyal to him (Afonja) and ready to do his bidding.

Modesty maxim

Datum 7:

Afonja: Go ahead! Share them (spoils of war) share them in equal parts.

Labata: As you wish, my Lord. Okay, Aare, take your share.

Afonja: No! I take no share before anyone of you, my generals (The Trails of Afonja, p.29)

For a **S** not to threaten the face of the **H**, it is usually polite not to have an overly high opinion of oneself and one's position or ability. As the generalissimo of Oyo, and as custom demands, the share of Afonja exceeds that of any general. Nevertheless, he instructs his servant to share the spoils of war in equal parts. Also, as expected, being the leader of the army, he should pick his share first, but he insists on taking the last share. This is a politeness strategy, a **FSA** that Afonja uses to minimise praise of himself.

Datum 8:

Alimi: Who are you?

Afonja: I am Afonja, Aare-Ona-Kakanfo commander-in-chief pf Oyo's army. (Alimi and all the Fulani men tremble visible fear and retreat). Be of ease. I do not come to you as the commander of Oyo's Army. What is your name?

Alimi: I am Alimi.

Afonja: Alimi. I like you. Will you be my friend? (The Trials of Afonja, p.67)

Not bragging or boasting about one's achievements, titles or abilities is polite and a **FSA (face saving act)**. Afonja minimises praise of himself in the above excerpt. Alimi and his men are mere shepherds, they are nomads who do not have a home in particular; nevertheless, Afonja is polite to them. Even when they are scared because he introduces himself as the commander of Oyo's army which might appear as **X** without redress, Afonja insists that they should not be afraid. He extends the hand of friendship to these wanderers and invites them to his home in Ilorin. Modesty is a politeness principle; a **FSA** makes others feel accepted and loved.

Sympathy maxim

Datum 9:

Afonja: You divide the spoils into five parts? ... But we are seven!

Labata: Two of your generals- Otun Balogun and Ekerin just fell by your sword, my lord.

Afonja: (Grieves). Ah! Oh! Well... Divide the spoils into seven parts nevertheless. Back in Oyo, we will give their parts to their wives and children... (The Trials of Afonja, p.29)

After the war with the Bambaras, Afonja suggests the spoils of the war be shared when they get back home. Otun Balogun and Ekerin see this as **X (Face threatening act)** and insist they share it immediately. Afonja accepts their proposition but commands them not to touch any of the spoils until they get home. This makes some generals challenge Afonja to a fight. Afonja fights them in a fast-and-furious battle and kills them. Although they are disloyal and disobedient, Afonja minimises the antipathy between himself and the generals by insisting that their share of the war spoils be given to their wives and children, thereby maximising sympathy maxim.

Datum 10:

Afonja: He is dead.

Alimi: What will I tell his daughter? She has no one but him. (The Trials of Afonja, p.80)

Sympathy is a politeness strategy used by participants in any discourse. Hafiz, the elder brother of Alimi and the father of Halimat goes to war with Afonja to fight against Alaafin Aole. Aole captures Hafiz and asks for Afonja's hideout but he (Hafiz) refuses to betray Afonja and makes Alaafin kill Hafiz. Hafiz's death is very painful to Afonja and Alimi. Alimi sympathises with Halimat who is the only surviving child of Hafiz.

Tact maxim

Datum 11:

Alimi: I have no home in Ilorin or anywhere. We are nomads, we move from place to place.

Afonja: You shall be my guest. If you wish, you may bring all your people with you. I have land that you may live on and use to graze and raise your cattle. (The Trials of Afonja, p.67)

Alimi and his family have no home according to him, they are 'nomads'. The **H** maximises benefits to **S** and his family by offering them a home and land to raise their cattle in Ilorin, the former's paternal land. All these benefits will cost Alimi nothing but it will cost Afonja a lot. Thus, as a **FSA**, Afonja maximises the benefit to others which is a politeness strategy used by him to make Alimi to be more comfortable around him.

Datum 12:

Afonja: What have you done to offend Aole that he seeks your destruction with that of your people...?

Apomu: ...I come forward and offer you my head to appease Alaafin. You need not kill my people... let him have my head... you must not kill my people... (The Trials of Afonja, p.74)

Alaafin Aole orders Afonja to kill Baale Apomu and his people because Apomu had him flogged when he (Aole) was a youth because he sold an Oyo man into slavery, a crime which attracts the heavier penalty of death. Apomu maximises the benefit to his people by accepting Alaafin's death penalty on the condition that his people be spared.

Findings

This paper has been able to analyse Abiodun's text using the six politeness maxims of Leech. In the text; generosity as a politeness principle is used to give consideration to others and reduce threat to the hearer's face; it makes hearers feel accepted and acknowledged. Maxim of agreement is primarily a conflict avoidance strategy as illustrated in the analysis. It helps to avert disagreements which could lead to destruction and conflict as seen in the analysis.

Approbation as a principle of politeness is important in the Yoruba community. Approbation is a sign of commendation and approval of others as portrayed in the analysis. In the text, praise and eulogies are the major tools used to abate anger among the participants in the conversations analysed. The modesty maxim is also an important politeness strategy; it portrays humility and promotes solidarity and loyalty as shown in the analysis above. Being humble and not boasting of one's achievement is a major attribute portrayed by the characters in the text which makes others feel loved and accepted

To live cordially with others in our environment, one needs to show sympathy to others when they are in a disadvantaged position. Sympathy enhances the mutual relationship between people in society and it helps to assure the hearer of the speaker's support as portrayed in the analysis. Tact Maxim, which is an important politeness principle, helps to show careful consideration to the face of the hearer. Participants put others into consideration at the detriment of themselves as a way of showing politeness to them.

Conclusion

This work deals with the politeness strategies used in Toyin Abiodun's *The Trials of Afonja*. This work presents a theoretical background of linguistic politeness and politeness strategies used in maintaining successful communication between speakers and hearers. The study thus opens the field for inquiries into politeness in texts where extremely little work yet exists. Communication with other members of society is an inevitable activity; it is not only for the exchange of information but also for the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Thus, to achieve conflict-free communication among characters in the text and to maintain harmonious and smooth social relations, they must consciously and carefully consider their public self-image.

This study recommends that dramatists intentionally integrate diverse politeness strategies into character interactions to mirror real-life communication, foster conflict resolution and inspire audiences to embrace empathy and respect in their everyday interaction.

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