FACE THREATENING ACTS AND POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN SELECTED

Introduction
In human communication and interaction, we often conclude that certain behaviours are polite or rude predicated on the verbal behaviour or language use by interlocutors. Politeness, from a linguistic perspective however is not simply etiquette or the social rules of behaviour; its major manifestations are the linguistic structures and language behaviour of participants in the social interaction. Politeness therefore, according to Cutting (2008), refers not to the social rules of behaviour, but a pragmatic phenomenon identifiable, not only by the formal and structural arrangement of the words used in communication, but also by their function and intended social meaning which is a culturally conditioned behaviour.

The Face Theory and Politeness Principle
A major contribution to the study of human interactions is the politeness principle (PP) as discussed in Leech (1983), Brown and Levinson (1987) and Cutting (2008). Leech (1983) defines politeness as forms of behaviour that establish comity; that is, the ability of participants in a social interaction to engage in discourse in an atmosphere of relative harmony. For Brown and Levinson, however, politeness refers to redressive actions taken to counter-balance the disruptive effects of face threatening acts. In their theoretical position, the scholars attempt to give “a description of the principles that lie behind the construction of social behaviour” (p.84). They opine that “language usage is part of the very stuff that social relationships are made of; as such, discovering the principles of language usage may be coincident with discovering the principles out of which social relationships, in their interactional aspects are construed” (p.55). For Leech (1983, p.133 ff.), these are the principles of agreement, modesty, tact, sympathy, generosity and approbation.

In an elaboration of these principles of language usage, Brown and Levinson further identified the concept of ‘face’ as a requisite quality in all social relationships. Originally conceived by Goffman (1967), ‘face’ refers to a speaker’s sense of linguistic and social identity. To negotiate successfully in social interactions, interlocutors must identify and respect one another’s ‘face wants’. When these face wants are not respected, an individual’s ‘face’ is threatened. Such acts (face threatening acts or FTAs) represent a
threat to the individual’s expectations regarding his self-image and they infringe on his/her self esteem. In a bid to maintain politeness however, speakers often attempt to minimize or mitigate such acts through face saving acts (FSAs) and politeness strategies.

In a further elaboration of the concept of ‘face’, Brown and Levinson (op.cit) distinguished between an individual’s ‘negative’ or ‘positive’ face. A person’s negative face is the individual’s need to be independent, his basic claim to territories and his freedom from imposition. A person’s positive face however, is his need to be accepted and liked by others and his need to be treated as a member of the same group. An individual’s face wants may be threatened through acts such as orders, threats, warnings, requests, advice, suggestions, offers, promises, compliments and expressions of strong emotion, envy and admiration. In such instances, the speaker infringes on the addressees’ personal preserves and independence. Acts that threaten positive face wants include expressions of disapproval, criticism, contempt, ridicule, complaints, accusations, insults, challenges, reprimands, disagreement, mention of taboo topics, a blatant non-cooperation and the use of address/familiar terms in initial encounter, all of which infringe on the hearer’s need to be accepted, liked or to be connected.

Of interest in this study are those devices or politeness strategies often adopted by speakers to mitigate the effects of FTAs. These, as identified by Brown and Levinson, are positive politeness strategies (such as in-group identity markers or solidarity strategies) and negative politeness strategies or deference strategies usually seen in the use of expressions of restraint or redressive actions. A deference strategy is said to be at the heart of politeness because “it performs the function of minimizing the particular imposition that the FTA unavoidably effects” (p.129). Two other strategies identified by the scholars are “bald-on-record” and “off-record” strategies. When acts are done “bald-on”, it is clear to participants what communicative intention led the actor to the act. Acts are therefore performed in the most direct, clear and unambiguous way possible. An act done “off record” involves indirect uses of language where it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act, such as use of ironies, metaphors, rhetorical questions, tautologies and implicatures.
Since politeness is a pragmatic phenomenon, it is influenced by contextual and situational factors, some of which are the social distance between the speaker and hearer(s), the relative power or control that speaker has over hearer, that is, the social dimensions of hierarchy and the ranking or size of imposition involved in doing the FTA in a particular culture and situation. The situational context therefore determines that “the greater the imposition, the more indirect the language is.” Moreover, as speaker’s power (physical, material or metaphysical) increases, the weightiness of the FTA diminishes.

These classifications and descriptions are crucial to this study for they provide a framework for examining the social relations between interlocutors in Christian sermonic discourse, the linguistic expression of ‘face’ in that discourse and the politeness strategies employed by preachers to mitigate the effects of face threatening acts in sermon delivery.

**Christian Discourse Analysis: An Exploration**

In a study of motivations for the use of politeness strategies in Christian sermonic discourse, Dzameshie (1992) examined how preachers mitigate face threatening acts with politeness strategies. Dzameshie concluded that ministers use politeness strategies as a means of preserving the face of their hearers in order to achieve their overall discourse goals, one of which is to gain favourable hearing for their message. Dzameshie discovered,

(1) that preachers use more mitigated FTAs than unmitigated ones;
(2) the more FTAs performed, the more the politeness strategies used;
(3) admonitions, a type of FTA were used more frequently than others (such as criticisms, directives or disagreements); and
(4) inclusive pronouns and quotations are the most frequent positive and negative politeness strategies used in the sermons.

In a related study, Daramola (2006) analyzed several Nigerian church choruses for structural and pragmatic features of that discourse. A major finding from that study is the marked shift in thematic preoccupation in modern Pentecostal church choruses from traditional conservative themes to newer and modern themes. Osakwe (1999)’s study of a
radio sermon, though similar in genre to the current study, stylistically examines the influence of the tenor factor on the preacher’s choice and selection of words.

The work of Dzameshie and Osakwe, though focusing on sermonic discourse are distinct from the current one as they examine sermons preached in the first language (L1) environment. Politeness, as has been pointed out however, is a culturally determined phenomenon, shaped and modified by cultural nuances and social-hierarchical paradigms within different cultural contexts. It is possible therefore that sermonic discourse analysis of politeness and pragmatic language use in a second language (L2) environment may yield differing results from the studies cited above.

The Present Study
The present study is intended to contribute to our understanding of the social relations that exist in sermonic discourse in the L2 socio-cultural context and of how meaning is negotiated and interpreted in the light of the politeness principles that undergird human interactions.

Data for this study were collected from ten Christian sermons preached within Lagos and its environs over the last decade (2000 – 2009). The study was restricted to Lagos as the geographical scope for the main reason that Lagos is a potpourri of all peoples, tribes and cultures in Nigeria. It is therefore a microcosm of the larger Nigerian society. As a former political capital city and the present commercial nerve centre of the nation, it is for obvious reasons, the headquarters of many Nigerian church movements.

Method of Data Collection and Analysis
Ten sermons were selected for this analysis. The data were collected from audio tapes of the sermons and these were transcribed into sentences and clauses and then examined for use of the politeness principles. The ten sermons and their preachers are:

- Leaping High in the Leap Year – Dr. D.K. Olukoya.
- Woman! Enter Your Rest – Pst. Bimbo Odukoya.
• Foundation for ever increasing glory – Bishop David Oyedepo.
• Overcoming Your World – Pastor Chris Oyakhilome.
• It is Going to Rain – Pst. E.A. Adeboye.
• Financial Independence – Pastor Lemi Omoyinmi.
• Antidote to Worry and Anxiety – Pastor W.F. Kumuyi.
• The King is not yet dead – Pastor Tunde Bakare.

Though the focus in this study is on the sermons as our primary data, it is pertinent to mention here that selection of the preachers has been done with consideration to factors such as size of congregation of preacher and branch networks and growth rate of the churches. Some of the preachers are pastors of very large congregations, mega churches running into tens and hundreds of thousands of worshippers, both locally and internationally. One of the churches for instance, The Redeemed Christian Church of God, pastored by Pastor E.A. Adeboye was reported by CNN in 1998 to have about 7.32 million people, the largest crowd of people in the world in a single meeting, gathered at its Holy Ghost Congress. While the church is also acclaimed as one of the fastest growing Pentecostal Churches in Africa, with an estimated 42 congregations in 1980 to around 7,000 in 2004, its overseer was also voted by Times Magazine in 2009 as one of the 100 most influential people in the world (Anderson, 2001; Ojo, 2004; Murphy, 2006, Time Magazine 2009). The Living Faith Church, a.k.a. Winners’ Chapel, headed by Bishop David Oyedepo has the largest church in the world, a 50,000 seater auditorium as recorded in the Guinness Book of Records, 2009.

Finally, though the data were gathered from audio recorded sermons, the appropriation of media technology for local as well as international cable networks by some of the preachers has also made their churches highly visible.

Discussion
In the ten sermons examined, the politeness principle and maxims are not strictly adhered to as preachers frequently use face threatening acts (FTAs). These take the form of direct imperatives, orders, requests, admonitions and criticisms, all of which threaten the negative and positive face wants of the addressees. There are however attempts by
speakers to mitigate these acts through the use of strategies or face saving acts such as solidarity forms, rhetorical questions, politeness markers, inclusive pronouns, as well as code switching and Nigerian English expressions, both of which perform pragmatic functions in the discourse. These acts as well as the politeness strategies are examined closely below.

**Face Threatening Acts**

The use of direct imperatives and admonitions by preachers in these sermons most display and assert the power structure and social distance between clergy and laity in religious discourse. Preachers, by virtue of their institutional powers, are assumed to be in a position of superiority to their congregations. This social distance manifests in sermon delivery through language use and other linguistic structures such as commands and direct imperatives. Examples from the data, as spoken by the preachers are provided below:

1. Come on, Shout Hallelujah.
2. Give Jesus a big, big hand.
3. Church, speak to me now. Say “Yes” or “No.”
5. Everyone, one, two read.
6. Silence, now.
7. Sing it to me one more time, for the last time.
8. Lift up those hands and take these blessings.

These imperatives are used by the preachers to get the congregation to perform verbal or non-verbal actions. The utterances are “bald-on”, because they are done in the most direct, clear and unambiguous way possible. In this instance, it is clear to participants in the discourse what communicative intentions led to these verbal acts.

Admonitions are also used freely in the sermons, as preachers often reprove, advise and exhort hearers to take steps or actions which are thought to be right and proper and to refrain from behaviour ethically or biblically wrong. Admonitions are peculiar to
religious discourse where exhortation to righteous living is at the heart of every sermon. Admonitions are however considered face threatening because they infringe on hearers’ ability and right to choose what they want to do. Examples are:

9. You need to remove the veil from your face tonight.
10. Don’t be mediocre. Become excellent by the power of the Holy Spirit.
11. Never be carried away by the prosperity of the wicked.
12. We need to set ourselves free from prejudice and biases.
13. You’ve got to overcome your world because of who you are.

Politeness Strategies in the Discourse
In a bid to mitigate the effects of these face threatening acts in discourse, preachers often use politeness strategies such as solidarity forms and politeness markers.

Solidarity Forms
Since human life is social, people usually seek for ways to claim membership in or identity with groups. These are ways of expressing solidarity with identified social groups. Solidarity in this discourse is demonstrated through in-group identity markers such as inclusive pronouns, dialects, code switching, Nigerian English expressions, jokes and slang. These are politeness strategies that put emphasis on the decoder, as they imply sympathy for, and identification with the addressees. These discursive practices identify members of the religious community while distinguishing strangers; they also display “how we talk around here, how we do things around here.”

Inclusive Pronouns
Inclusive pronouns are speaker-audience identification strategies. They are also used to draw attention to common goals and to show solidarity. Examples are:

14. I want you to pay attention ... to what we have to share tonight.
15. We want to be concluding now. Our time is up.
16. We want to bless the name of the Lord for bringing us here tonight.
17. It doesn’t excite us. We are talking about your character.
18. I like for **us** to rise to **our** feet.
19. Believe me honestly, **our** daddy is wealthy.
20. All right, **let’s** just have a word of prayer.

In actual fact, when inclusive pronouns are used, it is apparent from the situational and social contexts that some occurrences of the pronouns actually refer to the speaker alone, but are used nevertheless as politeness strategies to mitigate the preacher’s commands or admonition to the congregation. This is so in (15), (16), (18) and (20) above. For instance, in (18) where the preacher says, “I’ll like for us to rise to our feet”, he actually intends the congregation to perform this action, for, evidently the speaker is already on his feet. The subject of these pronouns therefore is – speaker + addressees.

At other times, for example, in (14), (15), (16) and (17), ‘we’ and ‘us’ actually refer to the preacher as the actor, that is, the subject here is + speaker – addressees. These usages of inclusive pronouns (excluding addressees) is common to Nigerian socio-pragmatic language use, where speakers, to avoid being thought cocksure and proud, and to break down the social distance between participants in discourse prefer to use inclusive pronouns rather than the independent ‘I’ or ‘me’ which linguistically fits the context of usage.

**Politeness Markers**

Politeness markers are also sometimes used by the preachers to minimize the imposition of their requests on the hearers. This includes the use of ‘please’, as in:

21. **Please** lay your hand on your forehead.
22. **Please** pick up your Bibles.
23. Turn with me **please** in your Bibles to the gospel ....

or the use of indirect questions, as in:

24. Can I hear your loud amen?
25. Choir, would you sing that song seated?
26. Church, can you please stand with me this morning?
or other indirect commands/requests:

27. I want you to shake hands with one or two people.
28. Now, I like for you to focus on me this morning.
29. I like for us to rise to our feet.

Shared dialects, Nigerian English expressions and code switching/mixing, folk style are also used in these sermons as solidarity strategies. These expressions function pragmatically in discourse to demonstrate speakers’ solidarity with hearers and to break down power structures and barriers existing in this discourse.

**Nigerian English Expression**

Nigerian English (NE) expressions function in these sermons both sociologically and pragmatically. Not only do they indicate the domesticated variety of English in Nigeria with its distinct, socio-linguistic and cultural features, these expressions also reveal speakers’ competence in English, while also performing other pragmatic functions in discourse. NE expressions are a positive politeness strategy that helps to counter the negative effects of FTAs. When speakers use ‘Nigerianisms’, they are attempting to fraternize with hearers. It is within this pragmatic framework that these expressions are considered here. Examples are provided with the NE expressions highlighted and the correct forms given in brackets.

30. Is the blackboard here? I will **round up** with that blackboard (round off).
31. No matter how **small** that income may be…. (little)
32. ... you are eating four, five **lumps** of meat (pieces).
33. You drive on the road, **okada** will abuse you (commercial motorcyclist).
34. Give us your answer, which **one you dey**? (pidgin - on which side are you?).
35. Are you **hearing me**? Am I making sense (can you hear me?).

**Code Switching/Code Mixing as Politeness Strategies**

When speakers code switch/mix from English to their indigenous languages, they are sending a signal to their hearers, “I am with you, we are together, I am one of you.” This implies that code switching (or mixing – we shall use these terms interchangeably here) is
a solidarity strategy or a speaker-audience identification strategy in a discourse that could otherwise be directive and formal. Preachers switch to their indigenous languages freely to identify with their hearers for solidarity, support and sympathy. This also closes the social distance between the participants in the discourse.

The following extracts serve as examples. Translations of the expressions follow in brackets:

36. You know, students are hypocritical ... They say, “Bobo yen, ma ma da a lohun.o”. (That fellow, don’t pay any attention to him).

37. Those of us who are millionaires already ... Ah, won a gba pe mo ti de. (They will conclude that I have “arrived” – literally, I have made it).

38. Somebody will say, “O bo si lucky e ni”. (He is just lucky).

39. You drive on the road, okada will abuse you ... “o lo gba driver, oju igo” (Go and employ a driver, bespectacled fellow).

40. O ni, oba adakedajo. (She said, God the silent judge).

Folk Style
Solidarity is further maintained in the discourse through what has been identified as people or folk style (Gumperz, 1982a). Preachers start out with expository or didactic styles, teaching, explaining and expounding on biblical truths. However, as a pragmatic strategy, to fraternise with their congregations, they switch to a folk or informal style with familiar address forms, dialogic patterns and informal expressions e.g.

41. Preacher: Look at the way you are looking. Hello. Did you, did you sleep last night?

42. Preacher: Now, let me put it this way, Sister Lolade, come, tell me, what is your purpose?

Sister Lolade: To be an encourager.

Preacher: Will you be an encourager?

Sister Lolade: Yes.
This dialogic pattern gives the discourse an interactive and conversational style, an offshoot of the pragmatic purposes to which language is put in these sermons. Another preacher says:

43. _Now, how many people know Naira and kobo very well? That sounds embarrassing. If you know Naira and kobo very well, lift up your hand because I want to give you simple Mathematics to do. Give us your answer now, which one you dey?_

All these expressions – familiar terms, pidgin, personal questions and greetings are attempts by preachers to get the congregation more involved in the sermon delivery process.

**Rhetorical Questions as a Politeness Strategy**

Rhetorical Questions (RQs) are a logical reasoning or argument by which speakers in a subtle manner, convince and persuade their hearers. RQs are used in the sermons examined as a negative politeness or deference strategy, as they help to minimize the imposition that the preachers make on the congregation. In order to avoid committing FTAs by stating the obvious, rhetorical questions are often used to imply the obvious and through this, addresses are helped to arrive at logical conclusions, on their own. For this reason, questions and other deference strategies such as apologies and honorifics are at the heart of respect behaviour. Examples from the data are:

44. If a person is created for something and that person, for one reason or the other, does not fulfil that for which he was created …what do you think the manufacturer will say to him?
45. How many books have you written now that you are free?
46. Have you ever seen a white brain before? Have you ever seen a black brain before? What differentiates Clinton’s brain from your own?
47. Is it not better to be slow and sure than to be fast and fail?
48. Which of you, by worry and anxiety, by taking thought can add one cubit unto your stature?
Used in this way, the questions do not demand that the congregation do anything but there is a subtle implication of what the logical conclusion should be, and hearers are helped to arrive at this.

**Conclusion**

This study has explored the social and situational contexts of language use as well as the participant roles and relationships in Christian sermonic discourse. The functionalist paradigm within which this study was conducted assumes that language is a system integrated with the world and participant relationships in discourse greatly affect how the discourse develops.

The study revealed how social behaviour is constructed in human interactions. It also established that the level of politeness in sermonic discourse is determined by other intervening variables, one of which is the social relationships between interlocutors. In the light of the asymmetrical relationships that exist in religious discourse, politeness is not often observed though there are mitigating devices that help to maintain addressees’ face-wants by minimizing the impositions made on them. Where preachers use politeness strategies, this is often done to achieve other socio communicative functions such as closing the social hierarchical distance between the interactants and to draw attention to common discoursal goals. There is also, for the preacher, a need to balance politeness with the power and authority structures existing in the discourse. The preacher is therefore caught in an intricate web. While he exercises his institutional authority through face-threatening acts and impositions on his hearers, there is a tacit recognition of and obedience to the politeness principles which in actual fact, underlie every human relationship. The preacher therefore seeks to maintain his religious authority while at the same time attempting to carry his congregation along by deferring to them. The effectiveness of the preacher’s delivery is to a great extent dependent on the socio linguistic balance he maintains between these two sometimes conflicting tensions and how efficiently he is able to negotiate power.

Though linguistic in description, politeness, as ascertained by this study is also a culturally shaped phenomenon. Correct interpretation of politeness is culturally
influenced, for indeed, all language use is culture bound. As a result of this, cross-cultural pragmatic studies have become necessary to determine speaker intentions and speaker meanings in communicative interactions.

As demonstrated in this study, it is possible for pragmatic failure to occur in language use, and meaning often breaks down for pragma-linguistic or socio-pragmatic reasons, since address forms, deference, hierarchy and indeed the concept of politeness differ dramatically across culture groups.
References


