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The Use of Common Ground as a Politeness Strategy among Traders of Tudun Wada Super Store, Gusau Local Government Area in Zamfara State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Speech acts and gestures reflect a transaction process interaction between sellers and buyers. Speech events in traditional markets can cause inconveniences such as the expression of anger, pressure, anxiety, or an insult, which can occur during the bargaining process. It is against this background that this study examines how traders in Super Stores of Tudun Wada in Gusau metropolis use common grounds as politeness strategies for business purposes. The theoretical framework of this study is Politeness Theory developed by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson while the methodology adopted is both qualitative and descriptive research. The research data come from traders of Tudun Wada Super Store in Gusau. The data were gathered through observation method which required skilled recording techniques. The researchers transcribed the recorded audio and classified it according to the data card. Matching method was used for data analysis, in which the researchers relate the data to the context of the utterance event. The researchers used Miles and

Huberman's (2009) stages of qualitative analysis to analyze the data. The finding of this study reveals that the socio-cognitive approach eliminates the conflicts between the pragmatic and cognitive approaches to common ground by integrating them into a holistic picture that offers an emergence-through-use view of common ground.The study, therefore, concludes that communication is an intentional action that is usually attended by adequate and sufficient resources on the basis of common socio-cultural background with the aid of common ground.
Keywords: Politeness, Communication, Language, Politeness Strategy, Common Ground

Introduction

Humans use language to express their feelings, opinions, and other aspects of their daily lives. Language is thus regarded as the foundation of meaningful human communication. However, Głuszkowski, (2018); Gong & Ran, (2019) opined that the transmission of meaning is influenced not only by the linguistic knowledge of the speaker and the listener, but also by the context of the utterance, knowledge of the status of those involved, the speaker's inferred intention, and so on. Because meaning is dependent on how, where, and when an utterance is made, Pragmatics explains how language users can overcome apparent ambiguity through one's facial expressions that indicate one's intentions.

Another definition which ensures that the listener feels, understands, or confirms something during a social interaction (Lee, Mason, & Malcomb, 2022) is politeness. Being polite entails trying to save someone else's face. When someone attempts to have a polite conversation, he or she must also consider the listener's feelings. Individuals' unspoken and spoken politeness behaviours are heavily influenced by culture. One of the simplest ways to inadvertently cause offense is to violate a cultural norm or

fail to follow one of society's rules of polite behaviour. Many people believe or assert that courtesy is a universal quality. It means that people from other cultures will appreciate our efforts if we act politely based on our perceptions of politeness. In general, if people from different cultures take the time to learn about different cultural ideas of politeness, this assumption may be correct. One of the most important ways to express politeness is through how people are addressed. Because of Nigeria's linguistic and cultural diversity, there are numerous ways to address people, necessitating caution when addressing a specific person or situation. Pratiwi, Santihastuti, & Sukmaantara (2018) claimed that when people try to be polite, it means they want to show respect for the person they are speaking with while avoiding offending them. As a result, it is critical not only to speak but also to consider the feelings of others. Being polite, to Agboola, (2021), is caused by the content of conversation, that is the nature of communication which may be pleasant or unpleasant to the listener. Every layer of the human community experiences social interaction from time to time. Social interaction is required from a small tribe, village, town, city, civilization, and all the way up to the level of the country.

Also, the politeness strategy is chosen as the study topic because, according to sociolinguistics and conversation analysis, politeness strategies are speech acts that express concern for others in specific social contexts (CA). This includes both sellers and buyers in some super stores. The Gusau people's language politeness in trading activities cannot be viewed as a single reality because their tradition always has a deep philosophical meaning. This postulate is consistent with Issa's (2017) contention that language politeness in trading activities is closely related to sociocultural values. Linguistic markers are used by language users to reflect cultural and societal norms. Thus, viewing the Tudun wada traders' language politeness strategy solely through the lens of various maxims and forms of positive politeness strategies is insufficient.

This linguistic reality must be connected to ideology and sociocultural values as well (Simatupang & Naibaho, 2021).
Therefore, in the context of interaction, politeness is frequently used to achieve specific goals. To reach an agreement on a desired purchase-sale transaction, buyers and sellers frequently use politeness as a communication strategy. A buying-selling transaction takes place when a seller and a buyer agree on a price for a product or service. Bargaining over the price of goods or services is a common method of reaching an agreement, particularly in direct buying-selling transactions. In today's world, people buy and sell not only in person, but also via email, social media, and telephone.

The definitions of pragmatics and politeness, therefore, explain that language and context cannot be separated in discussing meaning interpretation. The context which is related to participants, time, place, and the situation in which the utterances occur plays a crucial role in constructing the meaning of utterances. Thus, it can be concluded that pragmatics is a part of linguistics study that focuses on the meaning of utterances in which the meaning gets influence from the context. It means that the relationship between the context and the language is the main study in pragmatics. This means that context plays an important role in spoken or written language. Therefore, pragmatics is a linguistic subfield that investigates how context influences meaning which includes concepts such as speech act theory, talk in interaction, and conversational implicature. Pragmatic language skills are required for building relationships in communicating with a wide range of people in a variety of situations. Unfortunately, when having conversation, some traders ignore context which is vital in understanding the meaning of an utterance. It is against this background that this study examines how traders in Super Stores of Tudun Wada in Gusau metropolis use common grounds as politeness strategies for business purposes.

Politeness Strategy

Politeness as a communication phenomenon has attracted much attention of researchers (e.g. Brown & Levinson, 2014; Scollon and Scollon, 2001) in analyzing many theoretical and practical issues which are relevant to the politeness itself. Using Grice's Cooperative Principles and Speech Act Theory as its background (Watts, 2003), politeness theory has been a milestone by which acceptable and correct behaviour can be analyzed. Because of its importance in identifying the elements related to the politeness behaviour and discourse, some studies have been conducted (e.g. Hardin, 2001; Pishghadam, 2011) in the area related to theory of politeness in Pragmatic Linguistics which revealed and introduced researchers with the politeness strategies in various cultures. Therefore, politeness strategies emphasize friendliness to avoid offense. Contrasting criticism with compliments is one of these strategies, as is establishing common ground and using jokes, nicknames, honorifics, tag questions, special discourse markers, and in-group jargon and slang. Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory also defines four basic politeness strategies: baldness on record, negative politeness, positive politeness, and not being noted. When facial actions are desired, these strategies are used to express messages to save the listener's face.

Meanwhile, language features, such as length of speech, speed of expression, loudness, and so on, can be used to analyse verbal communication. For example, "Where are you going?" can be expressed differently depending on who is speaking, to whom they are speaking, the occasion of the utterance, and so on (Mujiyanto, 2017). Another example is when parents tell their children to be quiet in certain situations, such as when they say, "Be Quiet!" However, if the children were telling their parents to be quiet, this word would be considered impolite. The face, strength, status, age, gender, social distance, kinship, participant role, and discussion in the talk community can also be calculated from a socio-cultural perspective. In everyday interaction, people exchange various

politeness strategies among them to maintain effective communication. Johnstone (2008), for example, observes that people in every culture can hire politeness marker to interpret language appropriate to a given situation. The important point in every interaction can be recognized through the kinds and numbers of politeness strategies being used by a speaker and listeners to enable them establish an appropriate interpersonal relationship (Woods, 2006).

However, politeness no longer only refers to the strategy employed by the speaker and the listener. It was revised to include exchange studies in certain circumstances. As a result, Leech (2005) proposes his new theory, the Grand Strategy of Politeness to discuss politeness strategies and social factors that can influence their use in every act of communication in cultures other than the West. As a result, research on the interaction between buyers and sellers in markets reveals an intriguing finding. According to Leech, (2005), markets are one of the places where verbal abuse is common. There is evidence that women predominate in traditional markets involving two parties, namely sellers and buyers. Speech acts and gestures reflect a transaction process interaction between sellers and buyers. Speech events in traditional markets can cause inconveniences such as the expression of anger, pressure, anxiety, or an insult, which can occur during the bargaining process.

Common Ground as a Politeness Strategy

A super-strategy that includes a number of other strategies, asserting common ground with the addressee is a positive politeness tactic. In contrast to negative politeness strategies, which are more prevalent in formal contexts, positive politeness strategies are significantly more common in informal, or less formal, settings (Alabdali, 2019). On the other hand, the speaker may employ particular techniques to create a sense of familiarity and intimacy with the addressee in order to justify certain actions that she or he is accountable for. As an illustration, claiming

common ground implies that the speaker and the addressee share particular aspirations, such as goals and values. According to Brown and Levinson, there are three ways to make the claim: (a) the speaker emphasizes that she/he and the addressee belong to the same group; (b) the speaker emphasizes that she/he and the addressee have similar perspectives; and (c) the speaker asserts a shared perspective with the addressee. The addressee's inclusive or exclusive reference on various levels of explicitness is a critical component of claiming common ground. According to Brown and Levinson (2014: 199), the use of plurality may indicate inclusivity, "arising from the treatment of the individual as a member of a corporate group," whereas the use of singular forms may indicate exclusivity. Assertive speech acts serve a variety of functions in discourse, the speaker's frequent use of assertion, such as proximation and common ground strategies; can be interpreted as a legitimation-driven strategy. These may express ideological principles that are consistent with the addressee's psychological, social, political, or religious predispositions, this category of speech acts is given some truth value (Agustina, 2021). Speakers, on average, believe what they assert to be true, and this belief is usually part of the reason.

However, we cannot conclude that a speaker's having this goal is required for her utterance to be assertoric, because lies are assertions just as much as honest utterances. Assertions frequently communicate factual information that cannot be challenged or denied and is widely accepted as true (Marsili, 2021). As a result, the speaker is capable of instilling credibility in the addressee, which is a natural prerequisite for successful legitimization. However, assertive does not have to be true, even if their purpose is to attest to the speaker's own truthfulness in legitimizing his actions or to provide factual information. To him even when the speaker believes what is asserted, assertion can be insincere. This can happen if the speaker deliberately tries to lead the addressee astray. Nonetheless, if a speaker is regarded as credible, she or he

is better able to legitimize even controversial statements made later in the discussion. Because the addressee is psychologically determined to be consistent in their beliefs, they tend to accept the statements in light of the veracity of the previous assertions and the speaker. If a novel message is widely accepted after it is communicated for the first time, its credibility tends to grow over time. As a result, the addressee may believe in the speaker's predictive, deductive, and explicative capacity and regard the speaker as authoritative. The use of assertive on a regular basis helps the speaker present a positive image of themselves as knowledgeable, capable, trustworthy, powerful (Marsili, 2019).

In this pattern, if a speaker is successful in legitimizing their actions, or actions for which they bear responsibility, through extensive use of assertive speech acts that increase the aura of veracity of the presented information as well as the speaker's own credibility, the speaker's position is advantageous enough to postulate a more contentious claim or to make a request to the addressee. Large discourse segments may be used in the process of imposing a novel message that includes a contentious claim or directive, one with the illocutionary force of a speech event rather than a single speech act. This is frequently the case when the speaker's macro function is difficult or complex to carry out and necessitates ongoing, methodical planning of the ultimate goal announcement (Alabdali, 2019). Directives generally express future events and are addressee-oriented because the addressee is the intended agent accountable for future events. Furthermore, directives necessitate collaboration in order to be effective as coercive and manipulative tools. Because of the aura of veracity that has been added to the preceding assertive, a new message is more likely to be accepted by the addressee.

Current pragmatic theories emphasize the importance of intention, cooperation, common ground, mutual knowledge, relevance, and commitment in executing communicative acts. Cooperation and

common ground are considered particularly important for successful communication. The dominant view (Stalnaker 2002) considers common ground a category of specialized mental representations that exists in the mind *a priori* to the actual communication process. Another approach to common ground has emerged as a result of recent research in cognitive psychology, linguistic pragmatics, and intercultural communication. Investigating how the mind works in the process of communication, cognitive researchers (Barr 2004; Barr and Keysar 2005; Colston and Katz 2005) revealed that *a priori* mental representation of common knowledge is not as significantly involved in the process of communication as pragmatic theories have claimed; instead, they formed a more dynamic, emergence-through-use view of common ground which conceptualizes it as an emergent property of ordinary memory processes (Arnseth and Solheim 2002). This dynamism is also emphasized in other studies (Arundale, 2008) which report that real everyday communication is not conducted as a relatively static practice of recipient design and intention recognition, which current pragmatic theories tend to claim. In fact, communication is more like a trial-and-error; try-again process that is co-constructed by the participants. It appears to be a non-summative and emergent interactional achievement (Arundale, 2008).

With this dynamic revision of common ground, the role of cooperation has also been challenged. Several researchers (Barr and Keysar 2005; Giora 2003) have indicated that speakers and hearers are egocentric to a surprising degree, and individual, egocentric endeavors of interlocutors play a much more decisive role in the initial stages of production and comprehension than current pragmatic theories envision. Their egocentric behavior is rooted in the speakers' or hearers' more reliance on their own knowledge instead of mutual knowledge. Kecskes (2007) argued that especially in the first phase of the communicative process, instead of looking for common ground, which is absent to a great

extent, lingua franca speakers articulated their own thoughts with linguistic means that they could easily use.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study is Politeness Theory developed by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson in the 1970s. The theory draws heavily upon concept of face theory and has advanced this concept with a particular focus on how and why we are polite to others. Watts (2003: 85) states that the first theory of linguistic politeness made by Brown and Levinson appeared in 1978 and is referred to as the 'face-saving' theory of politeness. This is posited to rely on two faces: the positive face represents the need to be approved, valued and desired, whereas the negative face represents the need to be free and independent. Social interaction involves behaviour that threatens the integrity of our public image, and therefore people often resort to face-management strategies to preserve good relationships. Face-management strategies harness conversational means to alleviate potential damage to the positive and the negative faces of the conversational partners (i.e., speakers and hearers). Saeed (2009) asserts that face, in many verbal interaction, may be threatened. Threatening negative face, which represents damaging participant's autonomy, involves orders, requests, suggestions and advice. Threatening positive face, that decreases an individual's self and social discretion, involves expressions of disapproval, disagreements, accusations and interruptions. Thus, by using expressions of apologies and confessions, speakers may threaten their own face. Yule (2010: 135) clarifies that a face-saving act emphasizing person's negative face reflects concern about imposition (I am sorry to bother you..; I know you are busy, but...). A face-saving act emphasizing a person's positive face reflects solidarity and shows a common goal (Let's do this together…; you and I have the same problem, so…). Eelen (2001) confirms that although the pragmatic and the sociolinguistic perspectives are different from one another, they unify the field of politeness theory, in that politeness seems to be a

phenomenon that is associated with the relationship between language and social reality.

Methodology

This study is both descriptive and qualitative. The researchers closely examine the use of assertive common ground as a politeness strategy adopted by buyers and sellers in Tudun Wada super store, Gusau Local Government. As a continuation of the strategy modelling, a critical approach is used to identify the presence of ideology and sociocultural values in their utterances. The research data come from traders of Tudun Wada Super Store in Gusau. The data were gathered through the observation method, which required skilled recording techniques. The researchers transcribed the recorded audio and classified it according to the data card and they used Miles and Huberman's (2009) stages of qualitative analysis to analyse the data. To achieve this, matching method in which the researcher relates the data to the context of the utterance event was used for data analysis.

Analytical Procedure

Content analysis is adopted for the analytical procedure of this study in analysing the data obtained against the background of the framework of analysis for the research. For the purpose of this study, references were made to the use of some common grounds as politeness strategies by traders in Tudun Wada Super Store, Gusau Local Government.

Data Presentation

Excerpt A:

SELLER: Welcome, good evening.
BUYER: How are you?
SELLER: Fine
BUYER: I am looking for shirts, not so yellow colors.
SELLER: I have many color choices; Yellow, blue, white, red, gray, light blue.

BUYER: Can I see that of light blue?
SELLER: Ok, let me bring it to you now.
BUYER: This one is ok, how much?
SELLER: Three thousand naira only.
BUYER: Ok, have your money.
SELLER: Thank you so much. Bye

The excerpt above is a conversation between a seller and a buyer. The analysis of this study centres on the use of some common grounds as politeness strategies by traders in Tudun Wada Super Store, Gusau Local Government**.** In commercial/business situations, assertive common ground is a politeness strategy adopted by sellers to convince the buyers on the need to buy their product. This postulate is consistent with Issa's (2017) contention that language politeness in trading activities is closely related to sociocultural values. Assuming the listener is knowledgeable, the seller positions himself as having the same level of knowledge as the buyer. The practical intent of the utterance is to persuade customers to examine and select products.

Excerpt B:
SELLER: Sir, how may I help you?
BUYER: I need a pair of shoes.
SELLER: what type, Sir?
BUYER: Leather shoes
SELLER: What size do you wear, Sir?
BUYER: Forty-two.
SELLER: This section has beautiful leather shoes in different sizes. (The buyer first glances through the leather shoes)
BUYER: I'll prefer new arrivals.
SELLER: Most of the shoes here are new arrivals made of good qualities.
BUYER: Oh, I see
SELLER: Why don't you try these ones?
BUYER: Just hope I'll look more formal in them.
SELLER: Sure, Sir

BUYER: I like this one. Let me try it.
(The buyer puts on the pair and walks few yards.)
SELLER: Is this ok, Sir?
BUYER: Yeah, it fits well. I'll take this one in black.
SELLER: Would you like to see socks?
BUYER: Yes, please.
(The buyer then walks to the shelves, next to the billing counter, which held shoe accessories.)
SELLER: Take a look at these, they are beautiful..
BUYER: OK. I'll take these two pairs.
SELLER: Anything else, sir?
BUYER: No
SELLER: We appreciate your patronage
BUYER: It's my pleasure
SELLER: Thank you, sir. Have a nice day, and please visit us again.
BUYER: Ok, I'll

The traders in Excerpt B demonstrate common ground which shows a buyer's and seller's friendship and their interest with each other. This is achieved through the use of small talk. Lack of 'common ground' (e.g. shared experiences, shared assumptions and expectations) in commercial or business contexts is often seen as one of the major contributors to miscommunication. It has been argued that the more common ground we share with another person, the less effort and time we need in conveying and interpreting information, or in Enfield's (2008: 223) terms, 'economy of expression.' Although it encompasses shared knowledge, the term common ground as deployed by the buyer and the seller in Excerpt B does not refer to just *any* information that our research participants share. It refers to mutual knowledge as a result of interaction between participants as shown in the excerpt. Interpreted in the broadest possible sense, common ground has been used as a cognitive construct to refer to the 'sum of all the information that people assume they share' (Clark 2009: 116)

which may include world views, shared values, beliefs, and situational descriptions (Fant 2001: 79).

However, the results of the two excerpts above (A and B) correlate with that of Aston (1988; 1993) who provides a useful scaffold to explore how the research participants go about building common ground as affective convergence, using the language of solidarity and support. More concretely, he explores the interactional strategies used by non-native speakers of English (NNS) to establish positive rapport and enhance friendly relations. It is claimed that friendly relations can be enhanced through the use of conversational strategies that display solidarity and/or support. Solidarity refers to the expression of similar concerns about aspects of reality (weather, recent events) or experiences that are common to both speakers; support means showing support towards the addressee's state or experience which has not been experienced by the speaker. In other words, solidarity is 'feeling as' towards a common experience and support is 'feeling for' an unshared experience. According to Aston (1988; 1993), there are different linguistic strategies that individuals can use to demonstrate solidarity: finding a common experience and related sentiments attached to a particular experience, agreeing with the addressees or repeating part of their utterance (which can show acceptance and approval of the previous utterance), topic shifting (which can be reflective of interlocutors' desire to identify shared concerns) and expressing sympathy. Negotiation of support may include strategies such as showing appreciation of the other speaker's contribution to the discourse (e.g. laughing at a joke, and showing appropriate emotions to anecdotes), giving compliments and making apologies.

Discussion

In the context of utterances in the trading world, sellers are expected to understand the desires of the buyers as shown in the above conversation. In this situation, the assertive common ground

language becomes more polite. The seller positions himself as having the same knowledge as the buyer (assuming the listener's knowledge). The utterance's pragmatic goal is to entice buyers to view and select merchandise. The buyer declares that he is selling the merchandise that the buyer desires, and then invites the buyer to view and select the merchandise that he prefers. From a politeness standpoint, this utterance keeps the buyer feeling because the seller meets the buyer's expectations. However, in terms of intent, the utterance benefits sellers who intend to sell their goods. This correlates with the view of Pratiwi, Santihastuti, & Sukmaantara (2018) who claimed that when people try to be polite, it means they want to show respect for the person they are speaking with while avoiding offending them. As a result, it is critical not only to speak but also to consider the feelings of others. Being polite, according to Agboola (2021), is caused by the content of conversation, that is the nature of communication which may be pleasant or unpleasant to the listener.

The use of common grounds as politeness strategies among Tudun wada market sellers and buyers is a visible and empirically observable performance. This phenomenon arose as a result of the long-standing existence of a social paradigm and mindset. These may express ideological principles that are consistent with the addressee's psychological, social, political, or religious predispositions, this category of speech acts is given some truth value (Agustina, 2021). The traders in Tudun wada super store recognize the principle of "flow and fairness" when communicating which guides them to speak correctly and sensibly. This correlates with current pragmatic theories that emphasize the importance of intention, cooperation, common ground, mutual knowledge, relevance, and commitment in executing communicative acts. The dominant view (Stalnaker, 2002) considers common ground a category of specialized mental representations that exists in the mind *a priori* to the actual communication process. These processes as presented above shape the character of polite

communication and protect the other person's feelings. Tudun wada super store sellers make it as easy as possible for buyers to communicate with them. The use of assertive on a regular basis helps the speaker presents a positive image of themselves as knowledgeable, capable, trustworthy, powerful (Marsili, 2021).

Lee (2001: 41) whose concept of common ground has cognitive underpinnings offers some useful terms in our discussion of common ground as a form of knowledge.

1. *Established* common ground
2. *Assumed* common ground
3. *As though* common ground

Established common ground involves the beliefs/knowledge that have been established in people's previous interaction; *assumed* common ground is not established in talk but is believed to be a component of the *assumed* background information by virtue of membership of a similar community and other evidence not necessarily as a result of the interaction; *as though* common ground refers to new information – beliefs and knowledge - that speakers invoke *as though* it is already part of common ground (Lee 2001). Thus, to have common ground as used in Excerpts A and B above, involves not only having shared knowledge arising from shared history, it also entails other interconnected and overlapping dimensions: relational identity and in-group membership, and shared feelings and attitudes.

Therefore, if a speaker is successful in legitimizing their actions, or actions for which they bear responsibility, through extensive use of assertive speech acts that increase the aura of veracity of the presented information as well as the speaker's own credibility, the speaker's position is advantageous enough to postulate a more contentious claim or to make a request to the addressee. The politeness strategy in language becomes a diplomatic tool used within the society's boundaries. As a result, any agreement between sellers and buyers is always based on the

principle of consensuality.

Finding

The finding of this study reveals that the socio-cognitive approach eliminates the conflicts between the pragmatic and cognitive approaches to common ground by integrating them into a holistic picture that offers an emergence-through-use view of common ground. This means that the variation of politeness strategies used by Tudun wada super store traders cannot be separated from the objectives of the utterance and the trading context they live in.

Conclusion

Communication is an intentional action that is usually attended by adequate and sufficient attentional resources on the basis of common socio-cultural background with the aid of common ground, a cooperatively constructed mental abstraction. It is assumed by interlocutors in a sense that none will know for sure that it exists. This attempt is made by applying a socio-cognitive view to common ground within the framework of Dynamic Model of Meaning (DMM) presented in Kecskes (2007). The socio-cognitive view on assumed common ground within the confines of the DMM offers a more transparent description of sources and components of common ground, and the specific manners in which they join to influence the process of communication. In the dynamic creation and constant updating of common ground, speakers are considered as "complete" individuals with different possible cognitive status, evaluating the emerging communication through their own perspective. Constructing common ground occurs within the interplay of intention and attention, and in turn the interplay of the two concepts is enacted on the sociocultural background constructed by common ground. In this sense common ground plays not only a regulative but also a constitutive role in communication.

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