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Exploration of Impoliteness and Violation of Politeness Maxims among Undergraduates of Madonna University, Nigeria

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Abstract: It is not uncommon for people to take offence over what is said and how it is said. These actions often cause conflict and clash of interest in language use in society. Besides, scholars have decried the paucity of research on impoliteness. The paper therefore seeks to fill the gap in knowledge by conducting a research on impoliteness and maxim violations among undergraduates of Madonna University Nigeria, Okija campus. The study employed the obstructive observation method to observe instances of maxim violations and impoliteness among the students for a period of four months from November 2020 to February2021. Data for the study were collected through recorded language use of the students, which were done as not to deter the students in their conversations. The recorded texts were later transcribed and analysed. Being a qualitative research, data for the study were analyzed using a textual method. The analysis was done using Leechian politeness maxims. The paper concludes that studies on politeness and conversational maxim observance should be part of students' curriculum in order to understand clearly how to avoid conflicts in language use in the university system.

Keywords: impoliteness, power relations, face-threatening acts, impoliteness strategies, conflict

1. Introduction

The word impoliteness is mostly taken to mean behaviour or language of offence. Many scholars may not find interest in investigating such an area of study. According to Locher and Bousfield, 'it is the long-neglected poor cousin of politeness' (2). They further submit that there are over one thousand books, papers and articles published on the concept of politeness, but little had been written or researched on impoliteness (1). Obviously, it shows that not much has been done on researches on impoliteness phenomenon. In addition, Schnurr et al. posit that the area of study has by contrast received relatively little attention from researchers and has only recently been identified as an area of interest (212). Locher and Bousfield summarize the position in these words: 'however, a little more than a dozen articles on the phenomenon cannot hope to compete with the embarrassment of research riches which the concept of politeness enjoys. The lack of research into impoliteness is telling'(2). This statement, of course, is one of the reasons that informed the choice of the topic to fill the gap in research on impoliteness.

Conversely, Culpeper, 'Impoliteness Question and Answer' suggests that there are several strong reasons why researches on impoliteness are crucial. According to him, impoliteness is socially

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important, highly salient in public life more than politeness and can be highly damaging to personal lives (2-3). Again, Culpeper, *Impoliteness* holds that the study on impoliteness is a multidisciplinary field of study which can be approached from different angles although with different terminologies. He goes further to say that it can be approached from social psychology (especially verbal aggression), sociology especially the resolution of verbal conflict, literary studies and many more (3). He however notes that the main home for impoliteness studies is most notably, communication studies and interactional sociolinguistics because it involves the study of particular communication behaviour in social interaction (5).

Most researches on undergraduates' discourse have looked at their language use in terms of use of slangy expressions, use of pidgin on campus and error analysis in their oral or written discourse. The paucity of work on impoliteness and maxim violation as it affects undergraduates' language use necessitated this research. The present study explores impoliteness and violation of politeness maxims among undergraduates of Madonna University in order to fill the gap in knowledge. The objectives of the study therefore are to examine instances of violation of politeness maxims by the undergraduates of Madonna University, Okija Campus and to show how the violation of maxims bridges communication among the students. The study is significant as it will help the undergraduate students to understand the import of language use and how the maxims are observed and flouted in real language use.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. The Concept of Impoliteness

Different scholars have defined impoliteness from different points of view. Culpeper et al. define impoliteness as 'communicative strategies designed to attack face and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony' (1546). In other words, any use of language or behaviour that is geared towards attacking the face of the addressee is viewed as grossly impolite. Such use of language can cause social conflict and disharmony. In addition, Tracy and Tracy view impoliteness or face attacks as communicative acts perceived by members of a social community (and often intended by speakers) to be purposefully offensive (227). This definition is also in line with Goffman who relates such face-threat to situations where the offending person acts maliciously and spitefully with the intention of causing open insult (14). From this, it shows that impoliteness is viewed when a speaker speaks purposely and intentionally to spite the hearer thereby causing offence.

On their part, Holmes et al. state that verbal impoliteness is linguistic behaviour assessed by the hearer as threatening his or her face or social identity and infringing the norms of appropriate behaviour that prevail in particular contexts (196). Toeing the same line of argument, Lakoff remarks that impoliteness is rude behaviour which does not utilize politeness strategies where they would be expected, in such a way that the utterance can only almost plausibly be interpreted as intentionally and negatively confrontational (103). So, when a speaker refuses to use politeness strategies and intentionally confronts the face of the hearer, the speaker is said to be impolite.

In addition, Culpeper 'Impoliteness Questions and Answers' comments that impoliteness comes about when (1) the speaker communicates face attack intentionally or (2) the hearer perceives and/or constructs behaviour as intentionally face-attacking or a combination of 1 and 2 (4).

The key point here is that impoliteness is constructed in the interaction between speaker and hearer. Then, the instance of impoliteness is perceived when the speaker communicates face attack intentionally and the hearer perceives/constructs it as such. For example, in a situation where a hearer

openly interrupts a speaker without an apology, or a speaker openly insults, swears, abuses verbally, calls names threatens or shouts at the hearer and the hearer perceives it as such, then, it is taken that the speaker has acted impolitely. The hearer may react to such impolite behaviour through overt protests, ignoring, facial expression or a raised voice in order to show perception of the impolite act. To this end, it would be said that for impoliteness to be considered *successfully conveyed*, the intention of the speaker (or author) to offend, threaten or damage face must be clearly understood by the receivers such that there will not be a mismatch between the perspectives of the speaker and hearer.

Moreover, Locher and Bousfield define impoliteness as behaviour that is face-aggravating in a particular context' (3). Again, Terkourafi holds that impoliteness occurs when the expression used is not conventionalized or related to the context of occurrence which threatens the addressee's face (70). In other words, when one uses an expression that is out of context such as *taboo words* or matters relating to *sex* in an offensive way, such a person is taken to be impolite.

Similarly, Leech in *The Pragmatics of Politeness,* observes that impoliteness often manifests in the way interactants treat one another in the management of dialogue (227). According to him, asking certain personal questions such as hearer's age, how many children they have or how much they earn unless they are close acquaintance is often felt to be a trespass on private territory: in terms of *conversational etiquette*. It is an infringement of the tact maxim (227-28).

Furthermore, Culpeper in 'Reflections on Impoliteness' maintains as follows: 'impoliteness as I would define it, involves communicative behaviour intending to cause the 'face loss' of a target or perceived by the target to be so. A face loss in the context of impoliteness involves a conflict and clash of interest (36). In all, Culpeper, *Impoliteness* summarizes the argument on the concept of impoliteness in these words:

> Impoliteness is a negative attitude towards specific behaviours occurring in specific contexts. It is sustained by expectations, desires and/or beliefs about social organization, including, in particular, how one person's or a group's identities are mediated by others in interaction. Situated behaviours are viewed negatively - considered 'impolite' when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be. Such behaviours always have or are presumed to have emotional consequences for at least one participant, that is, they cause or are presumed to cause offence. Various factors can exacerbate how offensive an impolite behaviour is taken to be, including for example whether one understands a behaviour to be strongly intentional or not. (23)

In sum, it would be said therefore that impoliteness is the use of language either in speech or in writing to explicitly and unambiguously attack the face of the hearer or reader which is clear to both the speaker and the hearer in the context of use.

2.2. What Impoliteness is Not

Since the paper has explained what impoliteness is, it is also pertinent to explain what impoliteness is not. Culpeper, 'Impoliteness and Entertainment' proposes four things which impoliteness is not.

First, he holds that impoliteness is not an incidental face threat (36). In other words, it does not happen by chance. Similarly, Goffman agrees that there are incidental offences which arise as an unplanned but sometimes anticipated by-product of action action the offender performs in spite of

its offensive consequences (14). Obviously, such an action is not done to spite or undermine the hearer. For example, lecturers regularly give critical comments to students which may have potentially offensive consequences, but is done as a way of helping the students to improve. Such should not be labelled impoliteness.

Second, he maintains that impoliteness is not unintentional (37). This is also in line with Goffman's position that the offending person may appear to have acted innocently, and his offence seems to be unintended and unwitting (14). For example, a master of ceremony who addresses a guest as Mr. Obi instead of Prof. Obi may not be considered as being impolite since he acted innocently by not using the designated and appropriate title as may be desired by Prof. Obi.

Third, he maintains that impoliteness is not banter (37). He goes further to distinguish between 'mock impoliteness' from 'genuine impoliteness'. According to him, banter or mock impoliteness remains on the surface because it is understood in particular contexts not to be true. For example, a colleague who calls a slender colleague fatty or says: things such as: *here comes trouble* when another colleague walks in, especially in a joking or friendly manner cannot be said to be impolite. Leech, *Principles of Pragmatics* expresses that such banter is used in order to show solidarity with hearer, by saying something which is obviously untrue and obviously impolite to hearer (144).

Finally, he holds that impoliteness is not bald on record politeness (37). According to Brown and Levinson, bald on record politeness occurs in specific contexts such as emergency situations when the face threat is minimal (69). For example, a secretary who addresses his boss in a direct, clear, concise and unambiguous manner as in: *Sir*, *run!* would not be seen as giving a command to his boss or being impolite because he did that probably to prevent his boss from missing his flight.

3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is Leechian politeness principle hence forth (PP) which is derived from the Gricean Communicative Principle (CP). Leech's PP postulates six super maxims which interlocutors should abide by in order to maintain cooperation, social equilibrium, harmony and friendly relations. Although the maxims account for politeness, Leech (*the pragmatics of politeness)* believes that the best way to start theorizing about impoliteness is to build on the theory of politeness which can then be measured along the maxim axis. (219). Since these maxims account for politeness, the reversal and violation of the maxims equal account for impoliteness and face attack in language use. The violation of these maxims which represents impoliteness has been classified by Leech (*the pragmatics of politeness)* as General Strategy of Impoliteness (GSP) (221). In explicating how violations of the Politeness Principle (PP) maxims amount to impoliteness, Leech (*the pragmatics of politeness)* puts the argument poignantly in these words:

Impoliteness can be recognized as a violation of the maxims of the PP, both those of neg-politeness and those of pos-politeness. In general, impoliteness involves taking value from the other person and giving value to oneself. But it is important to bear in mind that these violations are scalar, like the maxims themselves: that is, just as there are various degrees of observance of the maxims, so there are various degrees of violations. My argument will be that violations of the GSP account for the majority of cases of impoliteness but there are other manifestations of verbal attack such as using emotionally charged and taboo language which have no counterpart in the GSP (223).

The flouting of these maxims is adjudged as impoliteness. Although the maxims are presented in an imperative mood, it does not mean they are prescriptive. Rather, they are claimed to be descriptive of what happens in communication. The maxims are as follows:

1. Tact Maxim: minimize cost to other; maximize benefit to other. The first part is in line with negative politeness, which stipulates the need to avoid imposition; The second part upholds the tenets of positive politeness, which puts the hearer's interest at the fore front.
2. Generosity maxim: minimize benefit to self: maximize cost to self. In this, it is expected that one should consider the needs of others first.
3. Approbation maxim: minimize dispraise of other, maximize praise of other. It holds that one should be less critical of others.
4. Modesty maxim; minimize praise of self, maximize dispraise of self. It expects that one should praise others more and minimize praising oneself.
5. Agreement maxim: minimize disagreement between self and other and maximize agreement This implies that in every communication encounter, one should minimize disagreement and seek agreement more.
6. Sympathy maxim: minimize antipathy between self and other and maximize sympathy between self and other.

4. Methodology

The researcher employed the obstructive observation method to observe instances of maxim violations and impoliteness among undergraduates of Madonna University, Okija Anamabra State for a period of four months from November 2020 to February 2021. The study purposively considered twenty instances that were relevant to the thematic focus of the study. However, after a careful examination of the instances, six instances representative of the features observed across the twenty instances were randomly selected for analysis. In collecting the data, the researcher recorded the language use of the students which were done as not to deter the students in their conversations. The consents of the students were sought to the use of data. The students agreed on the basis that their names will not appear in the research and which the researcher complied with. The recorded texts were later transcribed and analysed. The parameters for analysis were based on the age differences, social relationship of the students, cultural expectation of the Igbo people where the University is located as well as the institutional expectation of proper language use among the students. Since the study is a qualitative research, data for the study were analysed using a textual method. The excerpts were viewed through the lens of Leechian politeness maxims in order to show instances of non-observance and flouting of the politeness maxims which amounts to impoliteness given the context. The paper paid strict attention to the context of usage which is line with the position of Ezeifeka and Nnuta who posit that every utterance occurs in a particular spatiotemporal situation which includes the speaker and the hearer, the action they are performing at the time and the various external objects and events (8). The contexts of the utterances were also taken into consideration in the process of textual analysis.

5. Data Presentation and Analysis of Maxim Violations

The discourse presented below shows the maxim violations and impoliteness strategies among undergraduate students of Madonna University, Okija Campus.

Text 1: **Violation of Generosity Maxim**

Generosity Maxim (in impositives and commissives)

(a) Minimize benefit to self

(b) Maximize cost to self

Generosity maxim focuses more on the speaker than the hearer. The maxim involves minimizing benefit to self and maximizing cost to self. So, in any situation where a speaker maximizes benefit to self, the speaker is said to be impolite.

(Two male course representatives aged between 20 and 22 from two different Departments: Accountancy and Business Administration after their joint lecture on business policy)

Student A: 'Why did you tell us that the photocopied material was Eight Hundred Naira instead of Seven Hundred Naira?'

Student B: 'You are an idiot, and I will make sure you don't get other materials that I photocopied.'

Leech, *The Pragmatics of Politeness* observes that the violation of the generosity maxim can take the form of threats and curses, where the speaker expresses the will to bring harm (rather than benefit) to the other person (225). By increasing the cost of the photocopied material, the second student has maximized benefit to self, thereby, violating the maxim of generosity. Leech, *The Pragmatics of Politeness* further holds that curses and threats are illocutions specialized to impolite use, just as compliments and invitations are specialized to polite use (225). By using the word, 'idiot' and threat that the other students will not get the different materials he copied, Student B's language use is adjudged impolite.

Text 2: **Violation of Tact Maxim**

Tact Maxim (in directives and commissives)

(Two female students in the Department of Economics and in this case, students A and B. Student B is aged 26, married and older than student A who is 19 years of age. student A is aware that student A is a married woman)

(a) Minimize cost to other

(b) Maximize benefit to other

According to Leech, in *The Principles of Pragmatics*, the tact maxim applies to Searle's directive and commissive which is only applicable in illocutionary functions classified as impositives such as ordering, requesting, commanding, advising, recommending and commissives such as promoting, vowing, offering and others (107).

Student A: 'Go and check if the lecturer is in the office.'

Student B: 'What did you say?'

Student A: 'I said go and check if the lecturer is in the office or are you deaf?'

Here, student B is surprised that student A orders her to check if the lecturer was in the office. Student's A bald-on-record command is contrary to student B's expectation given the fact that she was older than student A. In Igbo land, where the institution is situated, such language use given the context is seen as impolite. Furthermore, student's A impoliteness is further aggravated by her final question, which explains that it is only deafness that could explain student's B failure to obey her without questioning. So, by violating the tact maxim, student A is taken to be impolite. However, both interlocutors were course mates and may not pay detailed attention to politeness markers in the use of language. However, the gap in terms of age and marital status of student B makes it expedient for student A to employ tact in her language use in order to mitigate the weight of the imposition. In turn, student B response, 'what did you say'? explicates that she perceived the language use as

impolite. Deploying the tact maxim would have been a way to minimize cost to student B and also to maximize benefit to her which in turn will make their interaction harmonious.

Text: 3 **Violation of Approbation Maxim**

Approbation maxim (in expressives and assertives)

(a) Minimize dispraise of other

(b) Maximize praise of other

The Approbation maxim states that the speaker should minimize dispraise of others and maximize praise for them. The basic idea here is to minimize the idea of being critical of others.

A female student (Student A aged 18 years), a male student (Student B aged 19 years) and the canteen attendant (aged 27) at the canteen at the back of Pavilion D)

Canteen Attendant: 'Your food is 450.'

Student A: 'Why didn't you tell me when I came?'

Canteen Attendant: 'Why did you not ask me?'

Student B: (to Student A) 'Is anything wrong with the food?'

Student A: 'Their food is tasteless; in fact, it is horrible. Their food is always bad. They don't know how to cook at all, and I don't like coming here to eat. I even cook better than them.'

Violation of the approbation maxim occurs when an interlocutor takes value or praise from the other interlocutor and gives value to himself/herself. Flouting of approbation maxim is also observed in derogatory remarks like insults, criticisms and complaints. By using the words: *horrible, tasteless and bad* to complain about the food, student A has maximized dispraise of others; therefore, the language use is said to be impolite given the intensity of the adjectives used. The position is in line with Leech's position ('*The Pragmatics of Politeness*') that impoliteness can be recognized as a violation of the maxims of the PP both those of neg-politeness and those of pos-politeness (223). In addition, by giving value to herself dispraising the hearer: 'I even cook better than them', student A's expression is directed towards discord and face attack irrespective of the age distance between her and the canteen attendant which the student has failed to observe. Leech (*'Principles of Pragmatics'*) takes such dispraise of hearer as impoliteness and further avers that speakers should deploy 'various strategies of impoliteness in order to mitigate the effect of the criticisms (135).

Text 4: **Violation of Modesty Maxim**

Modesty Maxim (in expressive and assertive

(a) Minimize praise of self

(b) Maximize dispraise of self

The modesty maxim involves minimizing the expression of praise of self. The maxim is the idea behind being modest in speaking and avoiding arrogating praise to one's efforts.

(Two 400 level female students at the Department of English (student B aged 18 and student A aged 19.

Student A: 'I like your dress; it is beautiful. I know it was made by your tailor.'

Student B: 'Hmm! This is not beautiful compared to the one I wore yesterday.'

In the text, student B has maximized the praise of oneself, thereby violating the maxim of modesty. The conceited statement: 'This is not beautiful compared to the one I wore yesterday' shows a violation of the first submaxim and commission of the social transgression of boasting. More so, In Igbo land, where the university is sited, it is customarily more polite to accept a compliment graciously by thanking the speaker or by avoiding direct acceptance of the praise. Such exaggeration of a compliment as shown in student B's remark, is adjudged as flouting the maxim of modesty.

Text 5: Violation of Agreement Maxim

Agreement Maxim (in assertives)

(A male course representative (student A) with other five male students in the Department of Political Science)

(a) Minimize disagreement between self and other

(b) Maximize agreement between self and other

Student A: 'Go back to the lecturer for the assignment.'

Student B: (One of the male students) 'No! Let's wait until tomorrow. If you want to go, go alone. We don't want to go with you.'

By using 'No! 'If you want to go, go alone. We don't want to go with you'. Student B has violated the maxim of the Agreement. Interactants observe agreement maxim when there is subtle disagreement than complete or outright disagreement. Interlocutors can seek ways of mitigating disagreements through expressing regrets or partial agreement with the speaker. In conversations, speakers are expected to be sensitive to the existing relationship between them and their hearers and the nature of the interaction. With this at the back of their minds, interlocutors are in a better position to show agreement rather than disagreement. In the text, student B's language use: 'No! Let's wait until tomorrow. If you want to go, go alone. We don't want to go with you' is therefore viewed as impolite given the fact that student B maximized disagreement between himself and student A by not mitigating disagreement.

Text 6: **Violation of Sympathy Maxim**

Sympathy maxim (in assertives)

(a) Minimize antipathy between self and other

(b) Maximize sympathy between self and other

(Two female students in the Department of Sociology (Student A aged 18 and Student B aged 20)

Student A: Do you know that Dr. Ozoigbondu lost his mother?

Student B: Eeeh! Please, that is his business.

Expression of commiserations alludes to unfortunate situations that depict polite belief and empathy with the hearer in the culture where the University is located. By simple refusal to express sympathy by student B, she has violated the maxim of sympathy. The social distance between the student and lecturer explains the reason why the expression of sympathy by the student is courteous. Mey presents the point clearly when he expresses that one of the functions of politeness is to create or show the social-hierarchical distance between interlocutors through the use of language (81).

6. Discussion of Findings and Conclusion

Violations of politeness maxims and impoliteness, as conceived in this paper, is the deliberate use of words to attack the face of the hearer to cause social conflict and harmony. The paper points out how the undergraduate students of Madonna University, Okija Campus have violated Leechian politeness maxims, which results in impoliteness. Among the instances observed, findings from the paper reveal that the approbation and tact maxims were the most violated. Approbation maxim violations reflect more in instances like insults, criticisms and complaints among the students, while the violation of the tact maxims is mainly expressed through students' use of direct, unambiguous and unmitigated expressions amongst them. In addition, the paper also established that the ages of the students have no role in their observance or flouting of the maxims. Besides, the social relationship where the students see themselves as equals without distance accounts for the reason why the maxims are not observed among the students. Again, being a university campus and an enclosed system, the students do not have much contact with the indigenous people. Hence, the cultural expectation of the people has no role in the observance or flouting of the maxims. The paper concludes that studies on politeness and should be part of the students' curriculum. In other words, the students should be taught how to use the principles of politeness so that even if a student *must* use language to offend, at least there should be some observance of principles of politeness. Leech 'principle of politeness' captures the position clearly in these words: 'if you must cause offence, at least do so in a way which doesn't overtly conflict with the principle of politeness, but allows the hearer to arrive at the offensive point of your remark indirectly by way of implicature (82).

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