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# An Ethno-pragmatic Analysis of Verbal Indirection in Yoruba

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## A B S T R A C T

The Yoruba language is one of the richest languages in the world in terms of how words and expressions can be employed beyond their conventional meanings. One way of achieving unconventional meaning of words and expressions in the language is the deployment of verbal indirection which is a strategic avoidance of speaking directly in order to achieve a communicative goal. As phenomenal as this concept is in the Yoruba language and culture, it has not received adequate attention from scholars, particularly in Nigeria. This study therefore attempts an ethno-pragmatic analysis of verbal indirection in Yoruba, within the purview of Hyme's Ethnography of speaking and Brown and Levinson's Face theory. The study observes, contrary to the existing notion that verbal indirection is a face-saving strategy in language, it can be deployed as a face-threatening strategy in the Yoruba language.

## I. INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted among language scholars that speech is a skilled work. As a skilled work, it demands some usually 'unnoticed' efforts on the part of speakers. In fact, as Oyetade (2000) observes, making a speech as well as its success depends largely on the efforts made by speakers. This explains why conversation is often described as a cooperative activity (Grice, 1975). In the submission of Grice, the principle that serves as the framework for conversation is 'Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the state at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged' (Grice, 1975: 45). Expanding the tenets of this principle, Grice spells out four maxims,

namely quantity (which requires an interlocutor in a conversation make their contribution as informative as is required), quality (that requires them not to say what they believe is not true or that for which they lack adequate information or evidence), relation (which demands that an interlocutor is required to be relevant) and manner (which requires the speaker should avoid vague or ambiguous contribution).

To Grice, these sub-principles serve as the framework for ideal interactive discourses, of which, if any is broken, lack of communication ensues. But of course, this is not necessarily true as there are instances where one or two of the maxims are broken in conversation without resulting in communication breakdown. The excerpt

below as observed in a Yoruba family setting is apt here:

**Jide:** Kí la ma fi jẹ rice wa?

*With what are we going to eat our rice?*

**Ade:** E G G (pronounced as ee g g)

**Jide:** Ok

In the interaction above, Ade's response to the question asked by Jide could be described as violating the maxim of manner, given its rendition. Hence, Jide should not be able to understand it as easily as he does. However, given the response of Jide, the vagueness or indirectness beclouding Ade's response does not impair the understanding of the central message passed across by Ade. A probe into why Ade chose to respond the way she did reveals that it had to be, considering the presence of the baby of the house who was so much in love with egg and would insist on eating egg whenever she heard the word being mentioned around her. So, to keep her in the 'dark', the response was very relevant and apt. Considering the peculiar weakness of Grice's cooperative principles in handling such a situation as presented in the excerpt above, this study attempts an ethno-pragmatic analysis of verbal indirection in Yoruba, particularly within Hyme's *Ethnography of speaking* and Brown and Levinson's notion of face.

Different scholars have examined the phenomenon of verbal indirection and thus have given different definitions of the concept. In the opinion of Oyetade (2000), verbal indirection refers to a strategy of communication in which interlocutors avoid directness so as to prevent crises, so as to achieve 'certain communicative momentary goal. Thus, verbal indirection manifests in such expressions as proverbs, metaphors, subtle or polite insults, euphemisms, circumlocutions, honorifics, among others. Sharing the position of Oyetade, Hope (2015) defines (verbal) indirection as 'a speech form which avoids speaking directly about things or going straight to the point but rather moves around the main purpose of the interactions; still, with the intention of putting the message

across'. It involves 'sounding pleasant' even when the speaker's intention is not pleasant.

Obeng (1994: 42) submits indirection is 'a communicative strategy wherein interactants abstain or keep away from directness so as to prevent crises or in order to communicate 'difficulty' and thus make their utterances consistent with face-saving and politeness'. In line with the submission of Obeng, Agyekum (2002) posits that 'the concept of face in communicative events is a universal one whose application is culture-specific; thus, in communicative interactions, interlocutors need to make recourse to the use of indirection so as to save face, and ensure cooperation. Contrary to these submissions, as shall be shown in the data analysis, in the Yoruba language and culture, it is not in all cases that indirection is employed as a politeness or face-saving strategy. Rather, it could be employed as a face-threatening tool. This forms the crux of this paper.

This study is an eclectic approach to the study of verbal indirection in Yoruba. In particular, it draws inputs from two different but related theories- *Ethnography of Speaking* and *Face*.

*Ethnography of speaking*, later modified as *ethnography of communication*, was proposed by Dell Hymes as a tool to study, describe and explain how people talk, particularly in specific contexts. As submitted by Hymes (1974), the starting point of the analysis of any discursive interaction (in any community) is the ethnographic understanding of the communication conduct of the community. He goes further to describe communication conduct as what people do when they communicate with each other.

One major phenomenon Hyme's *ethnography of speaking* emphasises is the notion of *communicative competence*. To him, *communicative competence*, an offshoot of *cultural competence*, implies knowledge of the structure of the language as well as how, when, who, and with whom to apply it. *Communicative competence* thus subsumes

linguistic competence. Therefore, for anyone to be regarded as a member of a speech community, they must demonstrate knowledge, both linguistic and non linguistic (including knowledge of important aspects of their culture as it relates to language use) of speech situation, speech event, communicative act, communicative style, and ways of speaking (Hymes, 1974). He then proposes the acronym SPEAKING as variables or factors affecting speech. These are spelt out thus: Setting, Participants, Ends, Acts, Key, Instrumentality, Norms and Genre.

The notion of face is credited to Goffman (1955, 1967) who defines face as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself. Accordingly, within the framework of face, it is maintained that all adult speakers of a language 'are aware of the need for speakers to make concessions to those they address' (Oyetade, 2000: 17). Expanding the scope of face, Brown and Levinson (1987) conceive face as the pride of self-image inherent in every adult speaker of a language. It is the public image that every member wants to claim for himself (Goffman, 1967). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), face is of two types, namely positive face and negative face. Positive face has to do with the desire to be approved of, liked, appreciated, or the need to have a positive image accepted by others. Negative face, on the other hand, refers to the desire to be unimpeded, imposed upon, and/or the need to be free from obligation in one's action. Any action, whether linguistic or non linguistic that contravenes these principles (of positive and negative faces) will be tantamount to face-threats, which are often counterbalanced by elements of politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

While Hyme's ethnography of speaking handles a contextual discussion of verbal indirect expressions in our data, Brown and Levinson's face theory accounts for the communicative goal and intention of such expressions. In other words, certain expressions which would appear 'polite'

(treated as verbal indirect expressions and terms in this paper) within Brown and Levinson's face work framework, are deconstructed within Hyme's ethnography of speaking for the proper understanding of their illocutionary goal.

## II. METHODS

This data for this study were elicited ethnographically, following Labov's (1972) data elicitation technique which requires that data which comprise the natural conversations of interlocutors or interactants are gathered without their knowledge. With the use of this technique, the participants and their language behaviour were observed unobtrusively, hence the reliability of the data gathered. As a native speaker of the Yoruba language, my retrospective and intuitive knowledge is also helpful in the data elicitation and analysis. In all, six interactions have been purposively presented for analysis in this study. Data are subjected to ethno-pragmatic analysis within the purview of Hyme's ethnography of speaking and Brown and Levinson's face theory.

## III. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

### Ex. 1

**Son** (sneaks in to the sitting room where the mother appears to be sleeping, having left home long without the permission of the parents):

**Mother** (wakes up with a jolt)

Bòdá, ẹ káàbò o. Ibo lẹ ti ò bọ?

*Brother, you are welcome. Where are you coming from?*

**Son** (now shaking and stammering):

mo ... em em, mo lọ gba ìwé lódọ Francis ni

*I ..em em.. I went to collect a book from Francis*

**Mother:**

Ó dáa, ẹ pẹlé, ẹ káàbò sir

*Okay, take care, you are welcome sir*

**Son:** (now shedding tears)...

**Ex. 2**

**Brother** (Had earlier seen his sister with a young man he believes must have been her boyfriend):

Auntie, ibo lo lo?

*Aunty, where did you go?*

**Sister** (with a tone of unease):

Mi ò lọ ibi kankan

*I did not go anywhere*

**Brother:** (Laughs and keeps a period of silence)

**Sister** (Looking more worried now)

Mi ò lọ ibi kankan sé

*I did not go anywhere, really*

**Brother:**

Sé o rò pé mi ò rí iwọ àti Tope...?

*Did you think I did not see you and Tope...?*

**Sister:** (Silence)

**Brother:** (Slaps the sister)

Applying Hyme's ethnography of speaking, it is obvious the interaction in Example 1 takes place within the home setting, with a mother and her son as the participants. The subject, that is, topic of discourse is the whereabouts of the son who had left home without taking permission from either of her parents. While the tone of the mother is temperate, that of the son is shaky and fear-soaked. One then begins to wonder why the son's voice or tone demonstrates fear, worry and apprehension. Another question that comes to mind is, why is the son shedding tears? After all, following Brown and Levinson's face theory, the mother could be said to appeal to the positive face want of the son, particularly with the use of politeness terms such as *Bòdá*, *ẹ káàbò o*, *ẹ pẹlé* and *sir*.

A glimpse into the Yoruba language and culture shows the pattern of the interaction has violated the norm of interpersonal interaction between a mother and her son, an understanding of which puts the son in the

state observed in the interaction above. To start with, in a normal circumstance, the mother is not expected to address her son with the politeness term *Bòdá* (brother). In the Yoruba language and culture, it is expected that the term can only be used to refer to a superior participant in an interaction. Thus, the mother, who is the superior interlocutor here should not have been heard use such term to address her son.

However, the mother deliberately employs the use of this term as a way of indirectly sending a danger signal to the son that 'woe betides him for leaving home without permission'. The boy gets the message, hence his getting jittery and stammering. As if this is not enough, to further threaten the face of the son, the mother resorts to the use of greetings such as *ẹ káàbò o* 'welcome', *ẹ pẹlé* 'take care' and *sir*. Greeting is fundamentally essential in the Yoruba socio-cultural system (Author, in press). According to Odebunmi (2015), 'greetings constitute an integral cultural practice among the Yoruba'. It is one way of showing politeness in the language. However, in the Yoruba cultural practices, it is expected that the younger is the one to initiate greetings in interpersonal interactions.

However, in the excerpt above, the mother deliberately violates this norm by initiating the greeting in order to achieve a communicative intention. Prefacing these greetings is 'ẹ' an honorific pronoun in Yoruba which is used by a participant lesser in age and status in reference to a superior interlocutor. But, as done earlier, the mother deliberately chooses to deploy this term against the convention in the language to indirectly tell the son he is done for.

Given the circumstance in which the boy had left the house, he is not meant to be greeted by the mother, let alone being addressed as *sir*. The boy, who knows what all these connote, could not help bursting into tears, even when the mother has not directly made any threatening statement or one that suggests the boy has done anything that would warrant

beating. The mother has successfully employed these politeness terms to convey an indirect message of disapproval and rebuke to the son, even without having expressly or directly done so.

In Example 2, the unconventional reference to his sister by the brother as ‘auntie’ is a face-threatening ‘politeness’ strategy that indirectly suggests to her that there is danger. The sister gets the message, bringing to bare her knowledge of norms of social interaction which make it unconventional for her brother, one that is superior to her in age and status, to refer to her in that manner; hence the unease and anxiety noticed in her voice in her response. To further compound the situation, the brother resorts to laughter and silence to further indirectly express his subtle vituperation. Here again, the sister further gets the message and repeats the initial response to exonerate herself, but this time with more evidence of apprehension.

### Ex. 3

Father (driving back from work sees his son who is a teenager with a female friend)

Son: (Having sighted the father’s car tries to dodge)

#### Father:

O kààre o  
*Well done*

#### Son:

Daddy, kì ñ ɕe bée  
*Daddy, it is not like that*

#### Father:

Don’t worry. À á pàdé nílé  
*.....we shall meet at home*

#### Son:

Rára sir...àbí irú wàhàlà wo leléyì  
*No sir, what kind of problem is this*

**Father** (drives off)

The interaction presented in Example 3 is structurally very much like Examples 1 and 2

with little differences, particularly with respect to the setting. The setting of this interaction is apparently the road side, while the participants are the father, the son and the young lady who assumes the role of a passive participant in the interaction. The tone of the father in the interaction does not depict any sense of condemnation or scolding. However, a critical appraisal of the boy’s response shows that the father has indirectly said much, particularly with the complimentary greeting *O kààre o* ‘You have done well or kudos to you’.

Given the polite nature of this expression, according to the principles of face work by Brown and Levinson, one wonders what necessitates the feeling of worry, apprehension and disturbance that overwhelms the boy. The answer lies in its context of use. The boy in question is still a teenager who is not expected to have a girlfriend. All that will be expected from him at this stage is to concentrate on his studies, and not have any amorous affairs that could result in an unwanted pregnancy, a development that would portend a terrible blow on his academic career and future, as the case maybe.

Against this background, he knows he has erred and as such his action should not have generated any form of applause from his father, hence his attempt to explain his position to his father. His statement of apprehension and lamentation at the concluding part of the excerpt also points to his deciphering of the father’s ‘complimentary greeting’ as indirectly meaning ‘you are in trouble’, which is an unmitigated threat to his positive face.

Another instance of the use of the expression *O kààre o* to achieve a particular communicative goal is presented in Example 4 below:

**Ex. 4**

**Son** (drumming with a plastic bucket, generating a deafening noise)

**Mother:**

O káàre o, sé o gbó

*Well done, did you hear*

**Son** (stops drumming)

The interaction between a mother and son presented above, if taken at the face value, the mother's statement *O káàre o* which literally denotes well done or bravo could be interpreted as complimentary, appreciating the drumming skill of the son. If that is the interpretation, following Brown and Levinson's face-work theory, the mother would be appealing to the positive face of the boy. However, given the situation in which the statement is made, being one that does not only demonstrate just linguistic competence but also communicative competence in the language, the boy understands the message as his mother indirectly ordering him to stop the drumming activity, and failure to comply would mean serious punitive measure from the mother. Hence, he immediately stops drumming even when the mother has not expressly or directly ordered him to do so. This is a threat to the boy's negative face rather than an attempt to save his positive face.

**Ex. 5**

**A:** Femoo, how far now?

*Femoo (For Femi), how are things?*

**B:** Omo, I dey o

*I am fine*

**C:** Báwo ni

**A:** Mo wà pa jàrè

*I am ok*

**B:** Ó fine

*It is fine/good*

**B:** Èyin guys, mo şèşè ra okó tuntun kan

*Guys, I just bought a new car*

**C:** Yeeeh, won tun de o !

*Yeeh, they have come again*

**A:** (Bursts into laughter)

**B:** (hisses) Şé mo wá ñ paró ni...?

*Am I now telling lies?*

The interaction above takes place in a drinking spot where the three friends usually meet to cool off every evening. The tenure of the interaction is casual, such that would be expected between or among peers. Of particular interest to this study is the response of Speaker C to the announcement made by Speaker B that he has just got a new car. Following the Cooperative Principles of Grice, one would be compelled to classify C's response as violating the maxim of relation as his response, superficially, has no bearing on B's statement. The use of the third person plural pronoun *wón* in C's response does not have any direct referent in the conversation, for instance. And one wonders what calls for A's laughter in reaction to C's exclamatory statement. B's response in the last line of the excerpt provides a clue to this puzzle. Speaker C, talking from his experience with B (perhaps as one who tells lies pathologically), indirectly refutes the claim by him (B), to have just acquired a new car. Pragmatically, *Yeeeh, wón tún dé ò!*, as expressed by C implies 'C has come with another lie'. The message is clear to A who bursts into laughter, waiting for the response and reaction of B.

In reaction to C's exclamation, B expresses his displeasure at being indirectly called a liar, a proposition that threatens his positive face. Yet again, one wonders how A and B decode C's statement as calling B a liar when there is nothing in his (B) words that directly establishes this proposition. Do we then argue that the use of this verbal indirection strategy by C to debunk the claim B to have acquired a new car is so as to save his positive face? In our opinion, the answer is no. As a matter of fact, C's intention is to threaten the positive face of B, not minding the indirectness

involved in the rendition of this face-threatening statement.

#### Ex. 6

##### Presenter:

...\*she finally find out that the statement was not true

##### Listener A:

**Ahhh, ó bà mí lórí !**

*Ahhhh, it hit me in the head*

##### Listener B:

**Mo yè é !**

*I dodged it*

**Presenter :** (Looks unhappy but continues with her presentation ) No one is infallible

The interaction presented in the excerpt above takes place in a classroom setting during a paper presentation for a course. In the course of her presentation, the presenter apparently makes a grammatical error which triggers off negative reactions from other class members, that is, other participants present. Just like we observed in C's response to B in Example 5 earlier presented, the responses of Listeners A and B to the grammatical blunder made by the presenter violates the maxim of relation, going by Grice's (1975) argument. They are comments which will literally be taken to be irrelevant to the situation at hand.

However, considering the shared social practice among Nigerian students (including the participants in this situation) to make such subtle derogatory comments when an individual demonstrates linguistic incompetence in English, especially in spoken discourses, the presenter understands the message inherent in such exclamatory sentences, hence her unhappy look and comment 'no one is infallible'. The expression *Ahhh, ó bà mí lórí!* indirectly presents the blunder made by the presenter as a bullet coming out of a gun and hitting him in the head. Listener B's *Mo yè é !* describes her as dodging the bullet coming from the gun (the presenter). These expressions are subtle

insults Listeners A and B indirectly directed at the presenter to make mockery of the perceived presenter's deficient mastery of English.

Having had her positive face threatened unmitigatedly by these comments, the presenter cannot but express her dissatisfaction and displeasure with a remark that anybody can make a mistake. In this excerpt, very much like Example 5, no direct attack has been done to the face of the presenter by A and B, yet, the illocutionary import and effect of the indirect insults was pointedly felt by the target, the presenter. Do will then opine that this indirectness is an attempt to save the face of the presenter? In our opinion, the answer is no, as the comments, although indirect, are devoid of any face-saving strategy, whatsoever.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This study has attempted an ethno-pragmatic analysis of verbal indirection in Yoruba, within the purview of Hyme's ethnography of speaking and Brown and Levinson's notion of face. Among its objectives is to subject certain expressions which would literally be considered politeness terms, following the principles of maintaining positive and negative faces spelt out by Brown and Levinson to ethnographic contextual analysis.

This is with a view to ascertaining whether these so-called politeness expressions are really face-saving strategies in their contexts of use or not. As has been shown in this study, rather than these expressions functioning as face-saving devices, they are actually deliberately employed by interlocutor as face-threatening strategies. What this thus suggests is the fact that, as argued by scholars such as Arundale (2009), Brown and Levinson's face theory does not take into consideration the concept of context, as what is linguistically polite may not be contextually so.

As shown in this study, if we had limited our analysis to face work, all the instances of the use of face-threatening 'politeness

expressions' as an indirect attack on interlocutors' faces in our data would be considered face-saving, even when that is not their communicative function in the contexts of use. Similarly, this study has been able to establish the fact that, contrary to the submissions of scholars such as Obeng (1994)

and Oyetade (2000), for instance, that indirection is means of saving face in interactions, it is not always the case, especially in the Yoruba language and culture where a particular expression can convey more than the actual meaning.

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