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Verbal Politeness in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

This article focuses on verbal politeness in Things Fall Apart. The paper adds to the available literature on Things Fall Apart, a pragmatic view. The study realizes that most of the utterances encode positive politeness which consolidates solidarity and communal living leading to cohesion in the society. There are instances of impositions which indicate that power and politeness are incompatible.

Introduction

Things Fall Apart (TFA) has continued to enjoy the critical attention of scholars. A front runner of African writers, Achebe creates a masterpiece presenting a local scenario with language that makes one eager to examine

his works. This paper discusses verbal politeness in Achebe's *TFA*. *TFA* is chosen because it treats the cultural beliefs of the Igbo, an ethnic group noted for its egalitarian societal structures summarized in the saying, *Igbo enweeze*. Though the people have no monarchical structure, there is a hierarchy reflected in their cosmology. This study contributes to the on-going discussion on TFA, concentrating on how politeness explains the social realities in the interactions.

Engaging verbal politeness in TFA underscores what Achebe emphasizes in the interview granted to Okey Ndibe, Joyce Ashuntantang, Sowore Omoyele and Oiza Adaba (Daily Sun, 4/4/2008), stressing that graciousness is preferable to a demonstration of power which makes one indiscreet. Ozoemena and Ogbuefi Ndulu eradiate this virtue based on the positive compliment Obierika pays them. Achebe further explains that Okonkwo is sound, except that *he does not recognize graciousness as a building block in the communal life* (emphasis mine). This study is therefore set to examine the impact of politeness on the interactions and survival of the characters. This study specifically concentrates on the social discourses-hospitality, kindred meetings, interpersonal relations and terms of reference in TFA. For instance, when Okoye pays Unoka a visit, Unoka welcomes him with kola nut and Okoye reciprocates by thanking Unoka. Within this discourse, politeness plays a significant role in determining the rules of engagement.

Theoretical Framework

This study benefits from Brown's and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. The theory derives its main concept, "face", from the early works of Goffman (1967). In this theory, face is the public self-image of every human and is divided into positive and negative. Positive face is a desire to be valued while negative face manifests in the need to be unimpeded. In all interactions, face is foregrounded leading to the conclusion that there are certain illocutionary acts that can threaten face needs. Such illocutionary acts include complaint, suggestion, advice, criticism, condemnation etcetera. To engage in a face threatening act (FTA), one needs to weigh the imposition, relationship and the power involved. With consideration given to these variables, one can go bald-on-record or apply off-record strategy. In between these strategies, are acts with redress emphasizing positive or negative face. Bald-on-record often does not threaten face among equals but emphasizes speaker power over the other during an emergency. Positive politeness redress emphasizes solidarity

using nick names, slangs and shared dialects, inclusive *we/let's*. Negative politeness redress pays respect, emphasizes inconvenience, uses apology to minimize imposition. Off-record employs indirect illocutionary speech acts.

Politeness therefore, implicates face needs and is common to all social systems though the conventions and formalities are culture specific. Face need is dependent on other social factors in determining how politeness is applied in interactions. This theory provides the base for relating language use and social factors in highlighting how politeness is conceived in Igbo culture as exemplified in TFA.

Review of Literature

Politeness in verbal interaction offers insights into human behavior (Locher and Watts, 2005). Some scholarly works demonstrate the usefulness of pragmatics in examining the nature of fictional dialogues. Enrique (2000), Elam (1980), Burton (1980), Herman (1995) and Guillen Nieto (1998) utilize pragmatic approach to analyze the nature of fictional dialogue as social interaction within a possible world. Guillen Nieto (1998) perceives that dialogue in plays replicate social interaction and its existence lends a sociolinguistic and linguistic slant to the interactive nature of dramatic dialogues. Enrique (2000) employs Brown's and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework in analyzing Hemingway's *Hills like White Elephants* and claims that literary texts are blank spaces that readers fill using inferences borne out of their worldview.

Politeness effectively provides strategies individuals employ in text analysis. Cherry (1998) investigates politeness in letters written by academics at diverse ranks in support of a colleague deprived of a promotion and tenure at a major university in the U.S. Sell (1992) examines politeness in literary texts stressing its diachronic facets, the differences between politeness of the text (expectations at the time of publication) and what readers experienced while reading. Maier (1992) compares business letters written by non-native and native English speakers. Maier detects that the non-native speakers are less formal and direct while native speakers use mitigated apologies more, express thanks more often and are pessimistic. Analyzing scientific texts Myers (1989) uses Brown's and Levinson's framework to treat molecular biology thus demonstrating that structures can be interpreted in terms of politeness. Wilamová (2005) examining negative politeness in fictional discourse summarizes that negatively verbal communication occurs due to

the interplay of complementarily interrelated linguistic, non-linguistic and paralinguistic variables. She emphasizes the relationship between participants regulated by power, status, relative distance, the circumstances, social norms plus the values of that particular society. This study adds to the growing use of politeness in analyzing fictional dialogue accentuating how politeness is conceived among the Igbo using TFA.

Politeness co-works with gender, age, economic and social statuses in achieving interactional goals. Language use reflects variations and no language lacks this social indexing (Kasper, 1990). These variations are observed in women using more of positive politeness and mitigating strategies to avoid face threat (Holmes, 1995). However, gender is being judged on equal basis due to the converging of roles and expectations (Lakoff, 2005) with politeness dependent on the prevailing circumstances.

Age as a cultural resource indexes and influences politeness expressions across cultures and explains linguistic variations (Bell, 2003). Age identity implicates a series of actions tied to rights, responsibilities, expectations and norms (Poulios, 2003). Ugorji (2009) asserts that the address form *deede* (honorific appellation) implicates politeness and age and not power or status in negotiating relationship in Igbo. Among the Yoruba, age, sex and occupation affect interaction except in boss/ subordinate relationship where an elder can initiate greetings. In the Greek context, politeness and age significantly affect offering and refusing of invitation (Spyridoula, 2009). Observation from these studies implicates politeness in establishing and maintaining social relationships and humans work together more when these basic conventions linked to politeness are observed in interaction.

The Content of Text

Things fall apart (TFA) describes an Igbo society before and after the coming of the colonial administration and Christianity. Before these alien cultures, TFA presents Okonkwo, an industrious man who rose to become a powerful, courageous leader in his land having gained a prominent position. Due to his position, Okonkwo is elated to be the guardian of Ikemefuna, a boy used as a peace settlement to appease Umuofia for killing their daughter. Ikemefuna lives and grows to be fond of Okonkwo and his family. Eventually, the Oracle pronounces his fate. Ezeudu, the eldest man in Umuofia, warns Okonkwo against taking part in killing the boy. Rather than being seen as a weakling, Okonkwo participates and delivers the death blow.

The demise of Ikemefuna initiates changes for Okonkwo. He inadvertently kills Ezeudu's son resulting into being exiled for seven years to appease the gods. While away, Umuofia experiences changes in religion and administration. On his return, Okonkwo observes these changes. He and his tribal leaders try to reclaim their influence but their effort is rewarded with imprisonment and a request for ransom which further humiliates and insults them. After their release at the meeting held to determine the next step, Okonkwo kills the white man's messenger, later commits suicide and ruins his reputation and status.

Data and Methodology

The data are purposively selected verbal exchanges between the characters. These exchanges are categorized and discussed under the following social events: interpersonal relationship, greeting, hospitality, terms of reference, conduct during kindred meetings and betrothal ceremony. Under each of these categories, a point is made in relation to politeness. Polite markers within the interaction are highlighted establishing their function and Achebe's concerns in the text. Some words are translated for easy understanding of their implications. It is noteworthy that sometimes politeness can be achieved over a longer stretch of utterances in TFA.

Analysis of Text

Politeness and Interpersonal Relationship

In TFA, there are the loud (the Okonkwos) and the silent (the Obierikas, Uchendus, Ogbuefi Ezeudu and the women) following Anyadike's (2011) categorization. Those with greater power emphasize using force and imposition does not necessarily demand greater politeness still they achieve cooperation. Power supported by patriarchy aids Okonkwo's imposition on his first wife when asked to care for Ikemefuna. Consequently, in many occasions he is brusque in speech as exemplified in this interaction:

'He belongs to the clan,' he told her. 'So look after him.'

'Is he staying long with us?' she asked.

'Do what you are told, *woman* (emphasis mine)' Okonkwo thundered and stammered. 'When did you become one of the ndichie of Umuofia' (pp. 10-11).

Using directives to address his first wife thus is very dismissive and questioning her right to know something that concerns her is indiscreet. While the wife employs tag question which encodes elements of doubt and solidarity, Okonkwo conveys power which threatens his wife's face needs. The wife's tag question implicitly softens the bluntness of the query and protects the participants' positive face (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Okonkwo's swords give no options and do not enhance the wife's self-esteem, the very reason she decides to surrender. Thus, respect that boosts reciprocal communicative face work is lacking. Okonkwo emphasizes only masculinity shown by his disapproval of Ogbuefi Ndulue who is said to be intimate with his wife, Ozoemena. To him, bravery/power and politeness are incompatible as conveyed in this conversation:

'It was always said that Ndulue and Ozoemena had one mind,' said Obierika.

'I remember ... He could not do anything without telling her.'

'I did not know that,' said Okonkwo. 'I thought he was a strong man in his youth' (pp.47-48).

Again, while preparing seed-yams for planting with Ikemefuna and Nwoye, Okonkwo threatens Nwoye with 'Do you think you are cutting up yams for cooking?' ... If you split another yam of this size, I shall break your jaw...' and to Ikemefuna he asks 'do you not grow yam where you come from?' (p.23). Though he realizes that they are still young, he intimidates them. Further, when Ezinma takes ill and Okonkwo tries to prepare a local herb for her, he instructs Ekwefi to add water into the pot shouting:

'A little more ... I said a little. Are you deaf?' Okonkwo ... (pp. 60).

These instances underscore the observation that the closer the relationship, the lesser the attention to face sensitivities culminating in less expression of politeness (Holtsgraves, 2005) and using close answer-question intensifies the threat to face.

To show that power is antithetical to politeness is further illustrated when Chielo, the priestess visits Ezinma, Okonkwo in his usual impolitic manner tries to dissuade her. Chielo thunders and warns:

'Beware, Okonkwo!'... 'Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks? Beware' (pp.71)

Here, Chielo is under the influence of Agbala and Ala (Ala, as the highest in the hierarchical structure of the gods shows the nature of our beingness because at death, we go back to Ala) displays lack of respect and affect to Okonkwo. Here, Okonkwo lost the power to control others and Chielo under the influence of Agbala possesses this power. This power impels Chielo to go on-record using *beware* to warn Okonkwo and her words must have dented Okonkwo's self-mage.

There are two instances where Okonkwo displays positive politeness. One is in his interaction with Maduka, complimenting his wrestling style:

‘Come and shake hands with me’...

‘Your wrestling ... gave me much happiness.’ ...

‘He will do great things,’ ... (pp. 45-46).

These utterances enhance Maduka's face needs and establish cordial interpersonal relationship with the young man. Two is when Ekwefi follows Chielo, the priestess to the cave of Agbala. Close to the mouth of the cave, Ekwefi senses the presence of someone. Before she could scream, Okonkwo jokes saying ‘Don't be foolish... I thought you were going into the shrine with Chielo,’ (p. 76). This reveals covertly Okonkwo's feelings of concern and relief for the safety of his family. Okonkwo's attitude on these occasions indicates that face is context dependent (Locher and Watts, 2005).

In contrast to the loud, among the wives/women, politeness is conveyed through a gracious show of interest, assertion and intensification of the other's wants/needs/interests. These help in maintaining cohesion in the family and society at large. Showing consideration does not indicate lack of power, but their display of politeness is a significant manifestation of their worldview. First is when the other wives are leaving for Obierika's house for the bridal ceremony. Realizing that Ekwefi must be tired after the night's ordeal, Nwoye's mother remarks:

‘You need some sleep yourself ... you look very tired.’

‘We... I will tell Obierika's wife that you are coming later’ (pp.78).

Politeness transfuses these utterances and is overtly indicated in the use of inclusive *we*, an in-group polite marker. Second is when Nwoye's mother requests Ezinma to bring live coals to build fire for her cooking. Nwoye's

mother acknowledges with ‘Thank you Nma’ (beauty). Ezinma offers to make the fire and the woman appreciates her saying ‘Thank you, Ezigbo’ (good one) (p.30). These expressions appeal to the addressee’s positive face and are little supportive rituals associated with good behaviour (Hewitt, 2002). Third, Nwoye’s mother maintains this cohesion when she tactfully lies to Okonkwo to minimize Ojiugo’s thoughtlessness in not making provision for her kids and Okonkwo before leaving to plait her hair:

‘Where are her children? Did she take them?’ he asked ...

‘They are here,’ answered Nwoye’s mother ...

‘Did she ask you to feed them before she went?’

‘Yes,’ she lied ... (pp.21).

The use of tact here shows politeness dependent on awareness and consideration of the face needs of Okonkwo and Ojiugo (Rash, 2004).

Okonkwo relates cordially with Obierika. After the death of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo experiences the flaying of spirit and decides to visit Obierika. The discussion between them shows maturity conveying respect and politeness. In their discussion, they disagree at some point:

‘I cannot understand why you refused ... to kill the boy,’ he asked Obierika.

‘Because I did not want to,’ Obierika replied sharply...

‘You sound as if you question the authority and the decision of the Oracle’

‘I do not, why should I? But the Oracle did not ask me to carry out its decision.’

‘But someone had to do it. If we were all afraid of blood ...?’

‘You know very well, Okonkwo that I am not afraid of blood ... If I were you I would have stayed at home. What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families.’

‘The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger,’ Okonkwo said.

‘That is true,’ Obierika agreed. ‘But if the Oracle said that my son should be killed, I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it’ (pp.46-47).

Each criticizes and condemns the other for involvement and non-involvement in killing Ikemefuna. Obierika’s argument and Ogbuefi Ezeudu’s earlier advice indicate that Okonkwo should use discrimination and discretion; however, Okonkwo feels that their views are immaterial as far as the verdict of the gods is concerned. Both Obierika and Okonkwo engage in FTAs, imposing personal views on the other and denying each freedom to act independently. Later, Obierika invites Okonkwo to his daughter’s engagement, a gesture that neutralizes their disagreement.

Greeting

Greeting regularizes and stabilizes relationship among members of a group (Akindele, 1990). It implicates positive politeness through displaying interest and eagerness to relate with in addition to acknowledging the existence of another. Greetings sometimes contain pleasantries, good wishes and other forms of information unlike what obtains within the English society. This conversation exemplifies expanded greeting:

‘I did not know it was you,’ Ekwefi said to the woman ...

‘I do not blame you,’ said the woman. I have never seen ... crowd of people. Is it true that Okonkwo nearly killed you ...?

‘It is true ..., my dear friend. I cannot yet find mouth ... which to tell ...

‘Your chi is ... awake, my friend. And how is my daughter, Ezinma?’

‘She has been very well ... now. Perhaps she has come to stay.’

‘I think she has. How old is she now? (pp.34)

The first utterance of the participants is both a greeting and an indication that the other has been noticed. The first utterance conveys an apology and the second implies forgiveness for the oversight, giving reason for the lack of awareness. The use of *endearments* is indicative of interest. The utterances convey the status of the relationship between the interlocutors (Coppock,

2005). This is replicated in the conversation between Okonkwo and Obierika after the death of Ikemefuna:

‘I was coming over to see you ...’

‘Is it well?’ Okonkwo asked (pp.45).

The greeting style between Ekwefi and Chielo includes an update of what nearly happened and the state of affairs with regard to Ezinma. Obierika uses an indirect apology signifying intention while the other pair is a question eliciting the reason for the intension. These are implied positive politeness conveying interest which attends to the positive face of the participants.

During communal gatherings for either settlement of disputes or when the council of Ndi Ichie (elders) wants to address the crowd, the orator first greets the crowd and the audience responds. In giving the information that brought Ikemefuna to Umuofia, Ogbuefi Ezeugo greets the crowd with ‘Umuofia kwenu’ and the crowd responds ‘Yaa!’(p.8). This shows the importance of greeting as it initiates interaction, guarantees good listenership before conveying information. In settling quarrels, the Egwugwu leader follows the same procedure. This acknowledges the importance of the crowd, a sign of respect and the response of the crowd is equally indicative of respect and acceptance of the leadership of the Egwugwu. This is exemplified thus:

‘Uzowulu’s body I salute you,’ he said. Uzowulu bent down and touched the ground... as a sign of submission.

‘The body of Odukwe, I greet you’ (pp. 64).

These greetings clarify and fix the roles of the participants as well as committing them to their roles. Again, politeness is accorded through the way the Egwugwu leader identifies each by name, thereby guaranteeing each a fair hearing. This style of greeting portrays the Egwugwu as being humane.

Betrothal or Engagement Ceremony

Social gatherings are avenues for consolidating team spirit, harmony and cohesion among group members within the community. An example is when Akueke’s dowry was being decided. Obierika invites friends, relations and neighbours. A clansman at the gathering said:

'I hope our in-laws will bring many pots of wine. Although they come from a village that is known for being close-fisted, they ought to know that Akueke is the bride for a king.'

'They dare not bring fewer than thirty pots,' said Okonkwo.

'I shall tell them my mind if they do' (pp.81).

The use of *our* is supportive and conveys solidarity emphasizing communal spirit. There is a consensus regarding what will be expected from the in-laws (indicating a claim to common ground) however, the clansman's description of the in-laws is derogatory and face-threatening amounting to gossip. The same utterance compliments and enhances Akueke's self-image though in absence ... *the bride for a king* (p.81).

Again, during the cooking activity in preparation for the wedding of Akueke, immediately the caterers realize that a cow was missing, the women moved to arrest the situation because it falls within their jurisdiction. Chielo calls their attention to the fact that someone has to tend the cooking:

'We cannot all rush out like that, leaving what we are cooking...'shouted Chielo, ...

'Three or four of us should stay behind.'

'It is true,' said another woman. 'We will allow three or four ... behind' (pp.80).

Chielo's appeal seeks cooperation by using the inclusive *we* and *us* which minimize the imposition on the women. The use of *It is true...* demonstrates solidarity and cooperation and simultaneously ensures harmony.

During the ceremony, kola nut is blessed by the elders while the crowd acquiesces with *Ee-ee* indicating agreement. The eldest in-laws pray among other things that:

'This is not the first time my people have come to marry your daughter... And it will not be the last, becauseyou are a great family' (pp.82).

These polite expressions convey acceptance, respect and consolidate the relationship between the two families.... *you are a great family* is a compliment that enhances the positive face of Obierika's family.

Hospitality

With regard to hospitality, politeness is accorded through offering of kola nut, an indication of welcome and acceptance of the visitor. The visitor on the other hand, reciprocates by thanking the host. An illustration is when Okoye pays a visit to Unoka as indicated earlier in this essay. Deciding who to break the kola nut is a good natured participation conveying reciprocal respect, appealing to the positive face of both and serving as a compliment matching the way each participant wishes to be addressed. This is illustrated thus:

‘I have kola,’ he announced ...

‘Thank you. He who brings kola brings life. But I think you ought to break it,’ replied Okoye ...

‘No, it is for you, I think,’ ... (pp.5).

These expressions are formalities according each the right to break the kola nut. Before stating the reason for the call, Okoye once more expresses his gratitude thus:

‘Thank you for the kola (p.5).

When Obierika visited Okonkwo in exile, after entertaining him and his companions, he presents Okonkwo with the money from the sales of his yams. Okonkwo expresses his gratitude saying:

‘...I do not know how to thank you.’

‘I can tell you,’ said Obierika. ‘Kill one of your sons for me.’

‘That will not be enough,’ said Okonkwo.

‘Then kill yourself,’ said Obierika.

‘Forgive me,’ said Okonkwo, smiling. ‘I shall not talk about thanking you any more’ (pp.100)

Thanking conveys appreciation of Unoka/Obierika appropriately though Obierika demurely plays down the gesture emphasizing demeanour politeness (Haugh, 2007). Thanking enhances face, conveys generosity and sincerity on the part of the addressee, attends to hearer’s want and further strengthens relationships.

The contrary is when Okonkwo breaks the week of peace. Ezeani, the chief priest pays him a visit and Okonkwo welcomes him with a kola nut. Ezeani rejects the kola saying:

‘Take away your kola nut. I shall not eat ...who has no respect for our gods and ancestors’ (pp.21).

In this instance, Okonkwo’s face is threatened and damaged due to the enormity of his action.

Another instance is the case of wife battering relating to Uzowulu. This behaviour runs counter to the expectation of the community and introduces a schism. This indicates why the Egwugwu leader advises Uzowulu to “Go to your in-laws with a pot of wine and beg your wife to return to you. It is not bravery when a man fights with a woman” (pp.66) and to Odukwe, the Egwugwu pleads with him to accept Uzowulu when he comes saying, ‘If your in-law brings wine to you, let your sister go with him. I salute you’ (pp. 66). The judgment of the Egwugwu underscores the fact that in Igbo when conflict is encountered, the first impulse is not to apportion blame but to restore harmony. This way, the face needs of the individuals involved are attended to and respect accorded.

At Mbanta, when Okonkwo refuses to brighten up, Uchendu gathers his children to speak to Okonkwo in particular. Uchendu asks his audience ‘Mother is supreme’. Why is that? (pp.94). His audience feels reluctant to answer as a mark of respect probably with the understanding that the question is part of cultural rhetoric which does not expect any reply but implicates politeness. Aside from this, the name, *Nneka*, acknowledges the politeness extended to Okonkwo and appreciation of his mother’s kinsmen.

Address Forms

The expression *Nnaayi* used during Uzowulu/Odukwe case below conveys deference and the status of the addressee. Politeness socially indexes individuals’ social status-age, titles and economic achievement. In Igbo, ‘Nnaayi’ functions similarly as ‘deede’ which Ugorji (2009) observes is a kinship and honorific appellation used to express deference.

In settling the quarrel between Uzowulu and his in-laws, the Egwugwu leader addresses both thus:

‘Uzowulu’s body I salute you,’ he said.

‘Our father ...’ he said.

‘Uzowulu’s body do you know me?’ asked the spirit.

‘How can I know you, father?...beyond our knowledge’ (pp. 64).

The leader of the Egwugwu employs... *body* to address both participants to the dispute. This foreshadows fairness and guarantees that participants’ face needs and interest will be taken care of. The Egwugwu humbly addresses both thus emphasizing that humility is a worthy virtue. Uzowulu’s and Odukwe’s replies indicate that lower perceived power increases the speaker’s level of politeness. Each group is then allowed to state their case, the Egwugwu then pronounces judgment. Both “body” and “our father” are communicative behaviours (Van Ginkel, 2004) that recognize and accommodate the face needs of the participants (Callahan, 2005) and set the mood for hearing the case.

During the hearing of the case, Uzowulu interrupts Odukwe while making certain allegations that threaten his face. The Evil Forest uses the same address form to bring order/silence. At the end, the Egwugwu tactfully advises Uzowulu to appropriately beg for forgiveness as indicated earlier.

The same “our father” is employed by Okonkwo when he approached Nwakibie for help with regard to lending him some seed yams:

“Nnaayi”, he said. I have brought you this little kola. As our people say, a man who pays respect to the great ... for his own greatness. I have come to pay you my respects and also to ask for a favor (pp.14).

Nnaayi conveys the expected linguistic behaviour from individuals to higher authority. Using such expressions conveys the status difference and consolidates the power both the Egwugwu and Nwakibie have over their interlocutors respectively.

Addressing someone by name functions to encode either power or relationship in the text. Usually, the elder calls the younger one by name and not the reverse. With reference to the elder/younger divide, calling by name implicates power as illustrated when Nwoye’s mother calls Ekwefi for help:

Ekwefi! A voice called from one ... other huts. It was Nwoye’s mother ... (pp.29).

The implicated power comes from being the first wife in the family and probably older. Ezinma on the other hand, calls her mother by her name which is quite unusual. This highlights the understanding and closeness between them.

Linguistic Behaviour during Kindred Meetings

In the novel, kinsmen are expected to accord both respect and politeness to each other. Regardless of one's status, the communicative norm is geared toward respecting the other's face needs foregrounded in all social interactions (Held, 2001) and no one is expected to humiliate his kinsman. Failure to do so is seen as an intrusion into another's personal space culminating in an FTA (Lüger 2001). Face determines where one's freedom ends and another's starts.

However, Okonkwo breaches this norm at a kindred meeting when he brusquely makes a kinsman, Osugo, who contradicted him to feel less dignified by saying "this meeting is for men" (pp.19) because Osugo had no titles. The negative effect of the FTA is reduced by an elder who sternly rebukes Okonkwo and requests that he engages in a corrective "face work", through apologizing to mitigate the insult.

Small Talk

Small talk occurs during gatherings and courtesy calls. Small talk is an interactional token embedded within transactional talks. For instance, when Okonkwo approaches Nwakibie to rent seed yams, small polite talks that relate to Obiako's sudden abandonment of palm-wine tapping pervade briefly. Ogbuefi Idigo initiates the talk thus:

'There must be something behind it,' he said ... 'there must be a reason for it ...'

'Some people say the Oracle warned him that he should fall ...' said Akukalia

'Obiako has always been a strange one,' said Nawkibie.

I have heard that ... gone to consult the Oracle. The Oracle said to him "Your dead father wants you to sacrifice a goat to him."

'Do you know what he said ... Ask my dead father if he ever had a fowl when he was alive' (pp.15)

This small talk produces interconnectedness within the group as well as creating a conducive atmosphere before initiating the reason for the visit. It consolidates the existing protocol that Okonkwo crests to request and achieve his goal. It covertly reduces the imposition and the distance between him and Nwakibie. The small talk implicates solidarity asserting both Okonkwo's and Nwakibie's want with the supporters as witnesses to the transaction. Small talk in this interaction regulates the activities leading to the realization of goals.

Again, before finalizing Akueke's dowry, the conversation centres on Maduka, Obierika's son:

'I sometimes think he is too sharp,' said Obierika ...

'He hardly walks. He is always in a hurry...'

'You were very much like that yourself,' said his eldest brother,

'As our people say, 'when the mother-cow is chewing grass its young ones watch its mouth.' Maduka has been watching your mouth' (pp.49).

Choice of small talk indicates the interactional context, its formality and existing relationship with the addressee. Asan 'extra' to transactional talk (Candlin, 2000; McCarthy, 2003), it provides time interval needed to establish interactional style (Bickmore & Cassel, 2005) and unity before the negotiation of the dowry begins. This talk compliments Maduka and indirectly includes Obierika for excellent acculturation of values in the boy.

Small talk also features during Obierika's first visit to Okonkwo in exile. During entertainment small talks flow centring on when the visitors set out for their journey. This is where Nweke's change of status was politely mentioned:

'We had meant to set out ... before cockcrow,' said Obierika.

'But Nweke did not appear until ... Never make an early morning appointment with a man who has just married ...' (pp.99)

Conclusion

Most of the utterances indicate solidarity illustrating how the Igbo belief in communal living is achieved and politeness demonstrating solidarity is one

factor that helps maintain cohesion. Apart from maintaining cohesion, politeness encodes age, status and defines the characters. Small talk lends unspoken but implied solidarity in gatherings. This way, Achebe indicates its effectiveness in social politics. This attitude of solidarity in Igbo has made other groups in Nigeria to describe them as being tribalistic. Furthermore, imposition is equated with less politeness probably due to the patriarchal system which emphasizes masculinity, still cooperation is achieved. This confirms that higher speaker power relates to less politeness and that the closer the relationship, the lesser the attention to face sensitivities. Also, distance affects the selection of linguistic items that encode (im)politeness.

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