Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.9 No.1 March, 2026; pg. 161 – 167; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

VERBAL VIOLENCE AS VIOLATIONS OF POLITENESS STRATEGY IN EGBU HOUSEHOLDS' SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

NGOZI JOVITA N. UMELO, Ph.D
Department Of English Language and Literature
Faculty of Arts
Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education,
Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria
E-MAIL: **ngozi.umelo@alvanikoku.edu.ng** or **ngoziumelo80@gmail.com**
Phone: 08066058199
&
OLUCHI STEPHANIE ONUABUOBI, Ph.D
Department Of English Language and Literature
Faculty of Arts
Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education,
Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria
E-MAIL: oluchi.onuabuobi@alvanikoku.edu.ng
Phone: 08069272330
&
NONYE HENRITTA NNANI
Department Of English Language and Literature
Faculty of Arts
Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education,
Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria
E-MAIL: nonyennanih@gmail.com
Phone: 08033008828

ABSTRACT

This paper examined verbal violence as violations of politeness strategy. The maintenance of face and interpersonal relationship is also discussed. Polite expression encourages and enhances individual's well-being but rude and unpleasant expressions hamper mutual understanding among interactants in household social interactions. This study is anchored on Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) politeness theory. Twenty samples of verbal violence constitute data for analysis. It is revealed that name-calling, insults, rhetorical questions, criticism, mockery, sarcasm, accusation, scorn, embarrassment, rejection, humiliation constitute verbal violence which can degenerate to social rejection, low self-worth, loss of face and emotional devastation. It is also discovered that profane language and dehumanizing utterances disrupts interaction and undermines positive self-value. The study concluded that all instances of verbal violence violates Brown and Levinson (1987) politeness strategies and the verbal violence utterances such as; name-calling, insults, humiliation, criticism, accusation, rejection, rhetorical questions are done baldly on-record without consideration to face-worth of the addressees.

Keywords: Verbal Violence, Violation, Politeness, Strategy, Household, Social interaction.

Introduction

Language is a social phenomenon. Language can be used to encourage, discourage, enhance/ facilitate good or bad relationship, bring about hatred or generate conflict between interlocutors in social interaction. Aside the referential role or functions of language, it performs the social and expressive functions that allow us do things like; "thinking, boasting, insulting, apologizing and promising" that convey to others how we feel about them. We use language to persuade others to our convictions and urge them towards action by crafting text that demonstrate the logic and appeal to those convictions (Fasold and Linton, 2012).

Language is evidently the most versatile means of communication among human beings. Through language, feelings or emotions, ideologies, desires, questions and so on are communicated. Cries, gestures, signs, symbols, pictorials representations, coughing and even sneezing are some of the myriads means of human communication. Language being the most versatile medium **o**f communication among human has its most significant role in the regulation and control in household. Members of the household can only communicate if the verbal and non-verbal messages stored away in individuals' minds are substantially the same. This in part reflects Sapir's definition of language (cited in Finegan, 2012) that "language is purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols". Language is used to create, form, destroy or damage one's well-being. Thus, it can be stated that verbal violence is the foundation of any kind of domestic violence, be it physical or psychological. Studies show that verbal violence can be much more emotionally damaging that physical abuse. This confirms the Chinese adage "sticks and stones may break my bone but words will break my heart". Utterances in interactions and the mode of presenting them in household social interactions are paramount in the sense that utterances and their meanings can bridge conversation based on how the speakers manipulate words during social interactions.

Verbal violence is an aspect of speech act. It is one of the ways language is construed or put to use. Ozarslan (2014) proposes that hate speech should be conceptualized as speech act or discourse and be named "Hate speech". This is based on the fact that hate speech reflects socio-cultural realities of language; as an "act", it is doing something on the victim which sometimes results in violence and psychological trauma. Down and Cowan (2012) observes that hate speech is a dangerous weapon which is capable of terrorizing a person or group of people. In Nigerian context, hate speech is viewed as being capable of inciting war, causing ethnic clashes and territorial disputes or civil war. In 2017, Nigerian government pronounced hate speech as an act of terrorism. It has also been observed that hate speech including its negative consequences are among the indicators of disunity and segregation. Therefore, dehumanizing language creates animosity. The meaning attached to an utterance by the hearer can bring about love and peace; it can also lead to conflict and hatred among interactants. No wonder an lgbo adage: "okwu di mma na-eweta udo na ịhụnanya ma okwu ọjọọ na-ebulite iwe na nkewa".

Verbal violence which is the use of abusive or insulting language aimed at causing emotional pain or distress on another in household social interactions is on the increase. It is an act of hate speech, insults, swearing, curses, coercion and teasing of a person who is in control of the other (Lepper, 1973). Verbal violence leaves no visible scars but causes emotional damage on the victim. According to the United Nations Standard (cited in Kembe, 2008), an abuse is a

condition of causing or permitting to occur of any form of offensive or harmful contact on the body of a person. Such a contact incorporates any form of interaction, exchange of communication that brings shame, embarrassment, fear or disgrace to the person. Hence the common saying: "the tongue is like a sharp knife. It kills without drawing blood". The act of verbal violence puts the face at risk because social interaction involves face-to-face communication.

Statement of the Problem

Polite expressions in household social interaction enhance face-worth and social relationship among interlocutors. Politeness strategies are principles created to mitigate affronts caused by face-threatening acts in interactional situation but speakers of verbal violence violate the strategies in household. Interlocutors in household are common in language use, are ignorant of politeness strategies thereby violating the principles and adopting verbal violence as normal language. Again, scholars research more on domestic violence, sexual violence and physical violence but just few studies in verbal violence which is more prevalent and destructive in household social interactions. This study therefore, tends to expose and enlighten interlocutors in household to apply politeness strategies in interactions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to highlight politeness strategies, expose the dangers and implications of verbal violence among interlocutors, examine the violations of politeness strategies in verbal violence and assess the adoption of politeness strategies as useful linguistic tokens of mitigation to affronts caused by verbal violence.

Research Questions

This research is guided by the following research questions:

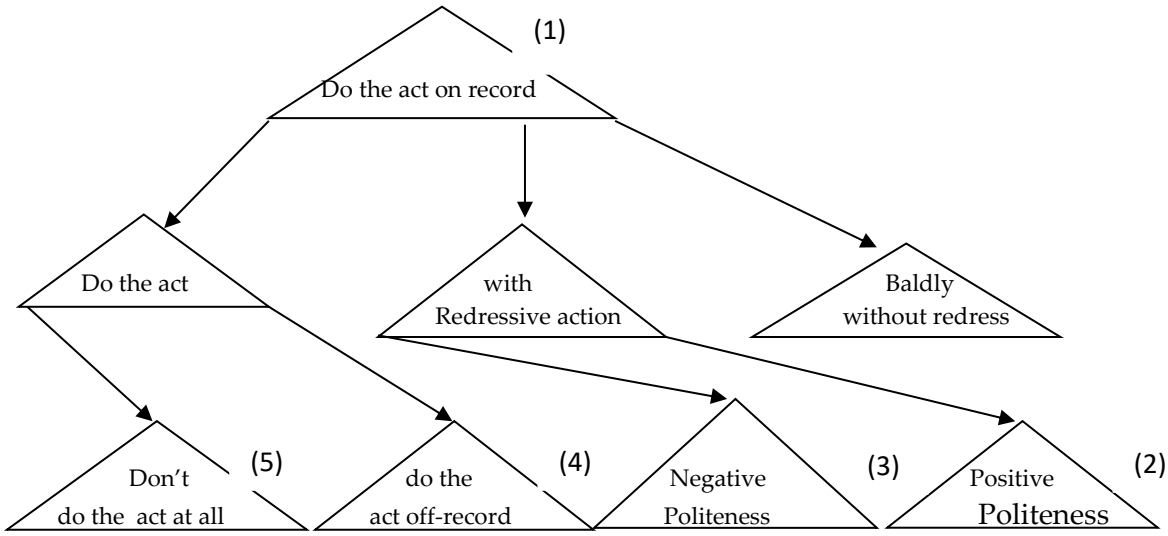
- What are the dangers and implications of verbal violence on addressees?
- What are the strategies of politeness in social interactions?
- How can politeness strategies affect face-worth of interlocutors in household social interactions?

Conceptual Clarifications

Generally, there is no explicit agreement among scholars of what actually constitute verbal violence in household social interactions. Obinauju (2004) as cited in Kembe (2008) reveals "that society contributes to perpetuating the acts of verbal violence by not taking it seriously enough and by treating it as expected, normal or deserved". For example, if a mother verbally insults her daughter or rebukes her excessive clumsy behaviour, is this verbal violence? This act has become an epidemic in our society that threatens the hearers in household. Although, it is not physical in nature, does not leave visible bruises, but it is damaging and can leave the addressee with emotional scars after social interaction for life. The threats can be mitigated through politeness strategies.

Politeness strategies are strategies used to mitigate face-threats. These strategies are deployed when face-threatening acts are inevitable or desired such as the case of verbal violence in household social interactions. Positive politeness is a strategy used when the speaker is familiar with the audience and do not want to impinge. For example, you can do better on that; why not give it a trial. Negative politeness implies that the speaker is aware of impinging

on a person and wants to save face. For example, encroaching on a person's space and you wants to show respect. Brown and Levinson (1987) explain five strategies of politeness available when there is a face-threatening act to perform. The strategies for effecting face-threatening acts are shown in a diagram as thus;



In household social interactions, management of verbal violence is in tandem with the above politeness strategies of Brown and Levinson (1987). During interaction, a speaker may not perform the face-threatening act at all and face-threatening can be performed 'on record' or 'off record'. Doing the 'on record' is performing an act explicitly while 'off-record' is when the act is done implicitly. Therefore, this study assumes that verbal violence can be managed through politeness strategies especially with **don't do the act at all**.

Social interaction is an exchange between two or more individuals communicating face-to-face and acting or reacting in relation to other people. The study therefore posits that social interaction is the way people talk and act with others in various structures in the society. Bardis (2014) asserts that social interaction is the way in which personalities, groups or social systems act toward and mutually influence one another. Erving Goffman as cited in Bardis (2014) opines that there are two main types of interaction:

1. Focused interaction is interaction in a group of persons that have a common goal. These persons may have been familiar with one another in the past or they may become familiar for the first time during their focused interaction. An example of this is a group of students studying together for a final examination.
2. Unfocused interaction includes neither a common goal nor such familiarity even during the process of interaction. In fact, the interacting persons may be unaware of their interaction. Goffman gave an example of the interaction between pedestrians who avoid disastrous collisions by following traffic etiquette and regulations. By interacting with one another, people design rules, institutions and systems within which they seek to live. Social interaction is structured around status, roles and norms. The structure of social interactions can be in this form (Bardis, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) politeness theory for data analysis.

Brown and Levison (1987) Politeness theory: It is the theory that accounts for the redressing of the affronts to face posed by face-threatening act to addressee. It is based on the concept that people have a social self-image that they consciously project and try to protect. Brown and Levinson (61) construct their politeness theory on the premise that many speech acts are threatening in that they do not support the face wants of the speaker and or those of the addressee. They propose that a face threat directly affects the perceived relationship between the speaker and the hearer. For example, intrinsic face threat specified by this theory include: disapproval, disagreement, challenge and non-co-operation. Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) categorized face into two; positive face and negative face. They define positive in two ways: "as the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some other executors" or alternatively, "the positive consistent self-image or personality (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants". It can also mean when others like, respect and approve of us. Brown and Levinson posit negative face "as the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others or "the basic claim of territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction that is freedom of action and freedom from imposition. Negative face implies when we feel that others cannot constrain us in any way.

Methodology

The research design is a descriptive type of study which aims at obtaining data through oral interview. The interview is conducted in ten (10) households from the five (5) villages (Mpama,Ishiuzo, Umuofo, Ofeuzo, and Umuayalu) that make up Egbu autonomous community in Owerri North LGA Imo State are randomly selected to obtain data for analysis.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Verbal Violence as Violation of Politeness Strategies

S/N	DATA	SOURCES	VIOLATED POLITENESS STRATEGY
Text 1	Shameless fool!	Wife to unfaithful husband	Negative politeness
Text 2	Destructive idiot!	Madam to house help/maid	Badly on-record
Text 3	Worthless thing!	Madam to house help/maid	Badly on-record
Text 4	Dunce!	Sibling to sibling	Negative politeness
Text 5	Useless thing!	Husband to wife	Negative politeness
Text 6	Sluggish thigh!	Madam to house help/maid	Badly on-record
Text 7	Spoilt brat!	House help to children	Negative politeness
Text 8	Wicked man!	Wife to husband	Badly on-record
Text 9	Lazy glutton!	Mother to children	Negative politeness
Text 10	Good for nothing!	Mother to children	Negative politeness
Text 11	Hopeless imbecile!	Madam to house help/maid	Badly on-record
Text 12	Living corpse!	Wife to husband	Badly on-record
Text 13	Coward idiot!	Father to son	Negative politeness
Text 14	Chronic liar!	Madam to house help/maid	Negative politeness

Text 15	Disgusting thing!	Between co-wives	Badly on-record
Text 16	Prostitute!	Husband to wife	Negative politeness
Text 17	Shapeless amoeba!	Sister to sister	Badly on-record
Text 18	Mad dog!	Between co-wives	Badly on-record
Text 19	Dirty thing!	Madam to house help/maid	Negative politeness
Text 20	Church rat!	Husband to wife, madam to maid	Badly on-record

Results and Discussion

The above unmitigated utterances are expressive of the empathic deixis depicting the speaker's emotion. The verbal violence utterances are face-threatening attacks delivered badly on-record without redress. The derogatory tags are employed to hurt the addressee in failing on assigned duties and used as weapons of intimidation and control. By disapproving the inadequacies and incompetence of the addressee, the speaker's utterances cost the addressee's **face-value, self-confidence and positive self-perception.** The linguistic device in verbal violence can make an addressee to lose face thereby becoming unproductive and lack the ability to maximize his/her potentials. The ratio of cost is relatively high. A wife regularly tagged 'useless thing' is defaced and being of no value. A house help/maid tagged 'worthless' and 'destructive thing' end up unproductive as addressee believes much in what is said about him/her. The lexeme 'living corpse' has a destructive effect owing to the high cost of face-threatening capacity and can make the husband kill or divorce the wife to prove the tag wrong. Such tag depicts the husband as; **unproductive, useless, unreasonable and impoverished**. The tag reflects humiliation and the perlocutionary effect is most times conflict.

Conclusion

Verbal violence utterances are face-threatening acts designed to humiliate, intimidate, offend and hurt. Interlocutors manipulate verbal violence as weapons of hurt, expression of disaffection and disappointment. All samples of face-threatening acts in consonance with Brown and Levinson (1987) politeness strategies are delivered baldly on-record without mitigation. No instance of off-record politeness strategy is recorded in the entire investigation as all face-threatening acts are done bald on-record without consideration to face-worth of the addressee.

Recommendations

The study recommended that interlocutors be mindful of language used in household social interactions. Teachers of English as a second language should teach learners appropriate linguistic tokens for free flow of interactions, solidarity, love and enhancement of positive self-perception. Also, researchers should investigate control and management of verbal violence in household social interactions.

REFERENCES

Bardis, P. (2014). *Social interaction and social processes.* http://www.jstor.org

Brown, P. and Levinson, S.C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____.(1978). Universals in language usage: politeness phenomena. In E.N. Goody, (ed.), *Questions and politeness.* (Pp. 56-289). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Downs, D.M. and Cowan, G. (2012). Predicting the importance of freedom of speech and the perceived harm of hate speech. *Journal of Applied Societal Psychology.* Vol.42(6), 1353-1375.

Fasold, R. W. and Linton, J.C. (2012). *An introduction to language and linguistic.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Finegan, E. (2012). *Language: Its Structure and Use.* International Edition California: Wardsworth.

Goffman, E. (1967). Face and Face Work. Oxford: University Press.

Kembe, E.M. (2008). Causes and Effects on Adolescent Personality. *Journal of family development* Vol.3.

Lepper, M.R. (1973). Dissonance, self-perception and honesty in chilfren. *Journal of personality and social psychology.* Vol. 2.

Ozarslan, Z. (2014). *Introducing two new terms into the literature of hate speech: "Hate discourse" and "Hate speech act" application of "Speech Acts Theory" into hate speech studies in the era of web.*