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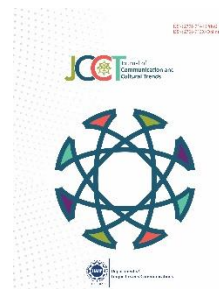
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Politeness or Submissiveness: Forms and Functions of Politeness in Everyday Interactions within the Ndebele Society in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

In the traditional Ndebele society of Zimbabwe, there is a marked asymmetry of knowledge and authority between men, women, and children. It implies a difference in the application of negative and positive politeness by them based on their traditionally assigned gender roles. Hence, this study demonstrates how gender roles and relations within the Ndebele society influence the forms and functions of politeness used in daily interactions. The analysis was conducted by using the politeness theory as the theoretical framework, which proclaims that communication is a way that structures social relations. Personal and participant observations were used as sources of data collection. The research revealed that the forms and functions of politeness used in daily interactions within the Ndebele society are influenced by the formal and socially distant relationships between men, women, and children. In this regard, politeness conventions were determined by analyzing the norms, values, and particular power structures of the Ndebele society. Moreover, it was also found that gender dichotomy is developed from an early age and the “I” holds the power dynamics in relationships. So, it was concluded that the forms and functions of politeness in the Ndebele society are determined by one’s position in it. Furthermore, this position implicitly represents the social and power relations within the society, maintaining a patriarchal social structure and habitus. In this respect, the submissiveness of women towards their husbands shows the set pattern of the patriarchal society and its expectations from a woman.

Keywords: gender roles, patriarchy, negative politeness, politeness, positive politeness, submissiveness

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Introduction

In the current study, there is an interrelationship between language and culture. As the culture of people is reflected in the forms and functions of politeness they use in their behavior and actions. In this way, the culture and the politeness are closely connected to each other. The morals and ideological values of a society are realized through culture and politeness (Moyo, [2005](#)). There are some specific cultural aspects that guide the forms and functions of politeness in the Ndebele society in Zimbabwe. However, politeness is something that is learned or acquired but it is not inborn behavior. Since, one has to socialize in order to acquire it, therefore, different people use different forms of politeness depending on their social and cultural values. In the Ndebele society, politeness is taken as a social norm which is not necessary as a face saving act, as Brown and Levinson ([1978](#)) put it.

This study considers the influence of social relations within the Ndebele society, that is, the relationships based on the forms and the functions of politeness used in their daily interactions. In this case, Pride and Holmes ([1986](#)) argue that it is not only the formal and the structural features of a language that an individual member of a society has to acquire, but they must be socialized in order to understand the social and cultural values of their society. Similarly, they can understand the restrictions which influences their language behavior. Moreover, a member of the Ndebele speech community must use the forms of politeness in their language that are in accordance with the expectations of a society. In this regard, he or she must know the constraints which are imposed on a language use in their particular society.

Therefore, this study seeks to demonstrate a relationship between 'linguistic politeness' and 'submissiveness' within the Ndebele society in Zimbabwe. Furthermore, it unveils the differences in the forms of politeness used by men, women, and children in their day-to-day interactions. The current research also seeks to establish the extent to which cultural norms and values influence the choice of linguistic politeness of people, that is, negative or positive politeness. This is done to answer the following questions including whether there is a relationship between politeness and submissiveness, if men, women, and children use the same forms of speech in their different day-to-day interactions, and to what extent are the forms of politeness influenced by cultural norms and values of the society.

According to the current analysis, studying the forms and the functions of politeness used in the Ndebele society can help in giving a reasonably accurate idea of the values of that society. In addition to it, measure cultural aspects that are either respected or denounced among the Ndebele. It would also help in evaluating the standards of conduct and the social norms, that is, 'attitudes and manners'. Further, Pearce (1990) points out that the ritualization and bureaucratization of the whole interaction procedure may be seen as influencing forms and functions of politeness in any given society. As for Samkange and Samkange (1980) "behavioral signs of good breeding are politeness, civility, and circumlocution." Hence, it is clear that the culture and politeness are intertwined as the social self has been achieved in relating with others through the process of interaction. Therefore, the present study argues that linguistic politeness within the Ndebele society helps to (re)produce and reinforce women's submissiveness and oppression.

Literature Review

Literature review is related to the linguistic politeness and the politeness theory which perceives communication as a way of encoding social relationships. Along with it, interactants are expected to focus on face threatening acts and face serving strategies. This study is informed by the politeness theory which is a field of study that is concerned with a number of assumptions and claims given by Brown and Levinson (1987). One of their main assumptions is that different cultures are internally homogeneous and agreed to a point 'what politeness is'. The current study adopts the theory of politeness in order to gain insight into social relations within the practices and institutional domains of the Ndebele society. Hence, it will help in analyzing the forms and functions of politeness within the Ndebele society in Zimbabwe by considering all the cultural influences based on the choice of forms of speech one should adopt with the reason.

Mills (2003) posits that, "politeness theory is a theory that accounts for the redressing of the affronts to face posed by face threatening acts to addresses". Therefore, politeness has to do with saving face. Face in this theory is used to describe the politeness in its broad sense. Face is the positive social value that a person can effectively claims for him or herself (Goffman, 1967). It is a common feature found in all human beings and is closely linked to their self-esteem. In this case, Goffman (1999) explains that whenever people are engaged in a conversation they consider certain

variables on individual basis. Whether consciously or subconsciously that assist them in determining the form of speech which they adopt temporarily for the duration of the conversation. Brown and Levinson (1978) view politeness as a basic way which leads to the production of social order and a precondition of human cooperation as well as a foundation of human life. Mapara and Thebe (2015) argue that "... in social life people are categorized into social structures. These structures assign them to specific social duties and roles." Therefore, politeness places people in society in very different and unequal positions of power as shown in this study. Each society has a different set up and the distribution of power is different in it. Hence, the forms and functions of politeness are not universal but are cultural bound.

The term 'face' in the politeness theory consists of two varieties including negative face and positive face. Out of which, Positive Face is an individual's wish to be liked, desired, or approved by others, that is, the significant other, or the positive consistent self-image, or personality claimed by the interactants (Fairclough, 1992). On the other hand, Negative Face is an individual's wish not to be impinged upon or impeded by others, that is, rights to non-distraction, freedom of action, and freedom of imposition. Therefore, it is so clear that a language use is shaped by the intentions of the individuals. "When interacting, our utterances may be oriented to the positive or to the negative face of those we interact with", as argued by Brown and Levinson (1987, p.63) and Fasold (1990:161). Hence, the social system of a particular group determines that who uses the positive or negative forms of politeness in their daily interactions in relation to such factors as power, distance, and rank variables. Thus, social level, closeness between the speaker and the hearer, and cultural ranking counts in the selection of form of speech in day-to-day interactions.

Whereas, the socio-cultural rules and the norms of Ndebele society specifies that what it takes to use positive or negative forms of politeness. However, politeness is a means of social indexing where it is taken as a socially appropriate behavior and what is deemed socially rests on the hearer (Bloor & Bloor, 2007). In the current study, the choice of a politeness strategy is highly influenced by the social context in which the interaction occurs. Also, it is influenced by the social relationship between the speaker and receiver, and the topic under discussion affects it too. Furthermore, the politeness theory would help people to study the forms and functions of

politeness which are used in daily interactions within the Ndebele society. Besides, it would help them to reveal all the social and power relations which are already embedded within their interactions. “Given the fact that language is not only a tool for communication, but also central to culture, these gendered practices of linguistic exclusion leave women exposed to a regime of linguistic ‘dis-citizenship’ or semi-‘citizenship’” (Makoni, [2014](#)).

Although, the traditional position of a woman in the Ndebele culture is that of a child who is placed in the lower rank in the politeness system of that particular society together with children (Pearce, [1990](#)). The men could even raise their hands and their voices on their wives depending upon the situation which was highly acceptable according to their culture. As argued by Pearce ([1990](#)), authoritarian features that are produced in various ways in father-child and husband-wife interactions are the results of politeness or impoliteness as shown within the Ndebele circles. Hence, the politeness system places women in submissive positions under the control of men as demonstrated in their day-to-day interactions.

Research Methods

The current research follows a qualitative approach which allows description of the real world from the perspective of participants (Corbin & Strauss, [2008](#)). As pointed out by Kumar ([2011](#)), this approach enables the interpretation of attitudes from concerned people towards a phenomenon within the given context. Moreover, personal observation and participant observation were used to collect data as supported by Price ([2010](#)). In this case, observations were mostly made at family gatherings and in household settings after having their family supper. Furthermore, these situations were preferred because they provided the both public and private environments to conduct interaction between husbands, wives, children, and other members of the extended family. Thus, audio recordings and notes were made during the process of observations. The current approach allowed direct involvement of the researcher in order to obtain first-hand information.

The data is based on 50 families who were observed and purposively sampled including married women of different social status. These are politicians, employed, educated, and uneducated housewives. However, observation was done to obtain information from a population of varying experiences. This sample enabled a comparison of different forms of

linguistic politeness which were used in different circumstances depending on the woman's status in the family, community, and country, in general. This paper analyses the relationship between politeness and submissiveness which are focusing on the forms and functions of linguistic politeness used in day-to-day interactions within the Ndebele society. Therefore, these features are closely considering the influence of cultural norms and the values of one's status, power, rank, and distance.

Data Presentation and Analysis

In the Ndebele society in Zimbabwe 'politeness' matters a lot. However, how it has been applied in the current research differs according to the relations among people of this society. Although, politeness goes beyond what is expected or what it is merely called for, targeting reproduction of a compliant closely integrated society (Pearce, [1990](#)). This makes use and functions of politeness very crucial in the day-to-day interactions of the Ndebele society. Nevertheless, politeness conventions within the Ndebele society are governed and constituted by the rules and norms which have the features of social fact. These rules and norms are followed by everyone according to his or her power, distance, and rank in the society or family (Brown & Levinson, [1978](#)). The traditional positions of men, women, and children are respected during interactions to maintain social relations and social structure. Amongst the Ndebele society, there is a marked asymmetry of knowledge and authority between men and women/children which implies the differences in their relations and creates negative politeness. Therefore, the relationship between father and child/wife is a formal and socially distanced one, which is inimical to positive politeness (Fairclough, [1992](#)).

The following table shows the category of women who were the part of sample size made up of the families' observation.

Table 1
Categorization of Participants

Category	Number	Percentage
Politicians	3	6
Other Employment	10	20
Educated-unemployed	10	20
Uneducated-Self employed	12	24
Educated and uneducated housewives	15	30

The women who made up the sample used for this study were of different social classes as shown in the table given above. However, their religious traits also influenced the way they address their male counterparts, especially their husbands as presented in this section. Mansoor (2018) observes that most of what we say during interactions is influenced by our social relationships. Further, most wives are distanced from their husbands within the Ndebele society, even though, they are their love partners. Besides, they address their husbands by using different titles of respect and even with the titles used by children to address their fathers. For example: Mrs Ndiweni (not real name) addressed her husband as ‘baba’ which means father. This is the form of address which is used by all the women under the sample of observation especially, when they are in public and before their children. Along with it, some women called ‘daddy’ to their husbands by softening this word into English. This is because society believes that a man is the head of a family and is the father of both his wife and children. This form of speech is part of the norms and values of their society. It does not show any politeness for the place of women in the family and even society in general. It creates a gap, distance, and inequality between husbands and wives.

The Ndebele society is a patriarchal society which looks down upon women and children. Especially, this is shown through their language use which reveals these social relations and social stratification (Moyo, 2005). In this case, some forms of politeness were used in the Ndebele Society in Zimbabwe reflecting their moral and ideological values as well as the cultural views of their society. Kunene and Mulder (1992, p.336) stated, “siSwati cultural views about women are reflected throughout the language of siSwati grammar, lexical items and phrases used in everyday speech.” This is also true in case of the Ndebele, Zimbabwe as their daily interactions carry many forms of politeness that help them in upholding the suppressive position of women in their society by placing them at the same level as children. These forms of politeness indicate men’s sexist/chauvinist attitudes towards their women. Thus, their language use especially when referring to women and addressing them, tends to reflect this attitude.

Table 2 summarizes the ‘forms of speech’, which women commonly used who belonged to different social status when addressing their male counterparts.

Table 2*Use of Hedging and Questioning by Women during Interactions*

Category	Hedging	Questioning	Direct
Politicians	0	2	1
Other employment	2	5	3
Educated- unemployed	3	5	2
Self-employed	3	6	3
Uneducated housewives	6	8	1

Only 20% of the Ndebele women sometimes used the ‘direct speech acts’ while interacting with their husbands in public. For this reason, mostly women used to make an effort to serve on their husbands’ face by avoiding their use of face threatening acts and expressions. In the current study, 28 % of the women often use hedging, and it was noted that it tends to become more like a mannerism of their speech. The majority tend to rely on questioning, 52% use questioning to show disagreement during an interaction or to change the topic when they are not interested in the discussion. For example: Mrs Dlodlo(not her real name) said, “Is this grocery going to be enough to see Zenzo through the whole term as there are no exit-weekends these days?” This was her way of suggesting to her husband that the grocery was not sufficient. Where she had to be polite and show some respect towards her husband. Pleased with the approach, Mr Dlodlo agreed that they should add more grocery items. Since, observations also showed that the women knew exactly that what to say and which form of politeness to adopt depending on the moods of their partners and the situation at hand. Thus, mostly hedging and questioning were used to soften the expressions and the receiver’s mood in order to get a positive response.

Discussion and Interpretation

In the Ndebele society, women in comparison to men are usually presented under an unfavorable light (Moyo, [2005](#)). Also, this is demonstrated through the use of positive and negative forms of politeness in their daily interactions. However, when women use tag questions, this is interpreted as a way of seeking approval through politeness. While increase in intonation is taken as destroying women’s contributions and weakening their power positions in more vital contexts (Litosseliti, [2006](#)). Ndebele women are presented through a patriarchal window as they are socialized to be men’s subjects within the family structures as in their homes and in the society, in general. This is why Brown ([2015](#)) views politeness as social rules, it is

society that determines the forms of politeness which one should adopt depending on the purpose, topic, and relationship between the interactants. Moreover, women use polite speech and avoid strong statements as compared to men and boys of that particular society. Cameron and Coates (1989) argue that women can use politeness skillfully to change their power relations and women's alleged weaknesses in relation to men.

The current study reveals that a few, among the educated Ndebele women have become bold and brutal in their speech after using statements that are low in politeness. Whereas, sometimes applying both negative and positive politeness signals their social identity as they have gained power and status in society through education, politics, occupation, and religion. They can now use a voice of control just like men while the majority of women use the voice of submission. However within the home, women are still forced by societal values to use language of respect towards their husbands. They can be indirect to their subordinates at work but when they are in their homesteads and social gatherings, they are more adhere to social rules and laws. Most Ndebele men refer to their wives as their children and they place them in the same class. Besides, they can use unmitigated comments against women, as using both positive and negative politeness is commonly accepted for men, but women and children maintain negative politeness most of the time when addressing men.

Some Ndebele men have nowadays created informality and social closeness with their wives and children. Even though, this is viewed as a sign of weakness by some conservatives within the society. However, most modern men favor mutual positive politeness by treating their wives and children as human beings but not as objects. In this case, Brown and Levinson's framework failed to accommodate some cultural particular manifestations of linguistic politeness (Gu, 1990; Ide, 1989; Nwoye, 1992). As shown in the Ndebele society, forms of linguistic politeness used in daily interactions are influenced by the power relations, sex differences, as well as sociocultural considerations, which fail the universality of the theory. Thus, members of the same linguistic community use different speech variations depending upon a list of factors such as their sex, age, rank, power, and distance.

However, with the influence of modernization and feminism some members of this particular society no longer respect these boundaries. Since, there are some women who still use gendered forms of language

especially when addressing men. They use a language that discriminates men and women from each other and place men in control over women. As observed in one incident that one of the women who addressed her husband as her father and when they had a misunderstanding, the husband went on to beat her with his belt. When she was being beaten she was constantly calling him with his praise names, pleading for forgiveness, and apologizing. Surprisingly, she continued being polite even when she was being abused. Thus, she was showing high levels of submission. In this way, women's positions in the moral system of the society are not certain, they may even be flogged by their husbands like children depending upon the circumstances (Pearce, [1990](#)) However, such incidences are now very rare due to the awareness campaigns which are conducted on 'gender based violence' and other factors mentioned above.

The whole concept of linguistic politeness is culture-specific. Tannen ([1994](#)), as an interactional sociolinguist and a critique of the politeness theory, argues that the use of direct and indirect politeness in speech is determined by their respective cultural perspectives. On one hand, within the Ndebele society men are expected to be direct, bald, and on record. While on the other hand, women and children have to be indirect. As argued by Tracy ([1990](#)), politeness strategies are fully depended on social roles as well as rules within a given context. Whereas, forms and functions of politeness differ from each other by depending on the context and society's expectations. In this case, when interacting with men, women always try to avoid face threatening acts, especially, when they are interacting with their husbands. Besides, women are not free to challenge an opinion or an assertion by their husbands, or even interrupt or change the subject during an interaction. Such acts are viewed by Bloor and Bloor ([2007](#)) as face threatening acts. "Given the fact that language is not only a tool for communication but also central to culture, these gendered practices of linguistic exclusion leave women exposed to a regime of linguistic 'dis-citizenship' or semi-citizenship" (Makoni, [2014](#)). Women in such societies as the Ndebele in Zimbabwe are marginalized and are not provided with equal respect and rights as men are given in this particular society.

Women's traditional position in this society places them under the control of men. Although, at times, women use excessively negative politeness by being sarcastic in their speech, thus threatening their husbands' face. This is often followed by fake apologies from women as it

is another way of trying to conceal their face threatening expressions. Men, who are husbands and fathers usually have all control of their interactions with women and children and they regulate all their conversations. In the current study, impoliteness is intertwined with power. Moreover, this has been practiced in the Ndebele society as men are the ones who were mostly placed in the positions of power including family and community leadership. They tend to exercise impoliteness over those who are relatively placed in lower positions of power including women and children. This is why, women end up over using politeness as they are not left with any other option. The situation becomes crucial where men even control turn-taking and women are not free to talk while their husbands are talking. Women cannot even interrupt if they have something urgent to say. Nevertheless, men are always free to use positive and negative linguistic politeness where at times, they use features of both types of politeness combined, if needed.

However, adherence to the use of socially accepted forms of politeness depends on woman's level of submission towards her husband, the family's norms, and values. Therefore, households differ in use and treatment of the forms and functions of politeness within the Ndebele society in Zimbabwe. Now, women use different forms of speech depending upon the distance or closeness between their husbands and them. Furthermore, it is influenced by the woman's status, religious background, and society's expectations. The current study revealed that the forms of politeness used within the Ndebele society somehow created a social gap between men and women, as well as husbands and wives. Especially, the social gap was created in those conservative families who are still closely following and practicing the cultural norms and values.

Yule (2010) believes that indirect politeness is required in many societies. Since, the requests which are presented in an indirect way appear more polite than direct speech. As much as this can be true that the practice is rather one sided within the Ndebele society. In this society, men are usually direct in using politeness as they make commands over requests rather they tend to use declarative statements. Bloor and Bloor (2007,) say that men can be "blunt or forthright..." without mitigating face threatening acts. At times, when women try to overuse these indirect speech acts, men think of it as women's way of manipulating them (Mansoor, 2018). In an instance, overuse of politeness resulted in the husband saying to his wife that "go ahead and tell me what you want this time." The husband, who

seemed to know his wife better was right, before the end of the conversation a polite request was made by the wife. Thus, over-use of negative politeness was meant to soften the husband and gain a favorable response which unfortunately she did not get.

Most Ndebele women are the victims of Patriarchy, Christian Religion, and African Tradition. Their interpretation of these three aspects influences the forms of politeness they adopt during their day to day interactions. Moreover, one then wonders if the forms of politeness commonly used are ways of being polite or being submissive. Yule (2010) points out that women use deferential politeness, whereby, cultural beliefs determine what is said and what is meant by some statements in a conversation. However, some use the distance politeness which shows equality between participants. Within the Ndebele society, the majority of families are Christians who also respect cultural norms and values that sustain a patriarchal system. Observations have showed that in Christian families, the wives addressed their husbands with respect in adherence to Christian living as commanded in Ephesians chapter 5; verses 22-24.

As Christian families used to follow the Christian doctrine, opting for negative politeness in their interaction as a face saving act. Women of that society were always being careful to please their husbands in their speech. However, use of the forms of speech helped in establishing the imbalances of power in marriage. The women use respect and deference to show awareness of their husbands' face when they are present among other people and use distance politeness when in private. There are instances when women use direct speech acts when they are conversing with their husbands in private, sharing jokes, and using both positive and negative politeness. Hence, women seem to use indirect speech acts in order to be socially accepted and to avoid reviling the word of God.

The forms of speech used by women in the Ndebele society (re)create and maintain a patriarchal system that sees men as superior and places women under oppression. Nonetheless, cultural norms and values, combined with the Christian living beliefs, places women under the authority of men, especially their husbands. Moreover, women are always careful about what to say and how to say in relation to society's expectations. There are different selected couples, some have different interpretations of the Biblical command such as those who are willing on being submissive and those who have adjusted themselves to the cultural

diversity. These both use positive and negative politeness; especially them men with their women freely and women are willingly respecting their husbands out of love. However, these women still respect society's expectations by being indirect when addressing their husbands in public as was shown at family gatherings.

Future Research

This particular study paves way for further studies regarding the forms of speech acts used by Ndebele women, while they are in leadership positions at work. Especially, this study can be conducted in order to find out the extent to which traditional and Christian beliefs influence forms of speech of the Ndebele women at work place. Also, it would observe how these forms of speech compromises their authority over their male subordinates. The forms of speech commonly used in the Ndebele society revealed that there is still a long way to go to achieve equality between men and women, especially between husbands and wives yet they belong to close relationship. Hence, the forms of speech used by women of the Ndebele society highly influence the relationship between submissiveness and politeness in case of following traditional and Christian beliefs which results in creating power imbalance between every common man and woman of that society.

Conclusion

The current research discussed the forms and functions of politeness used in the daily interactions of the individuals in the Ndebele society in Zimbabwe. The use of positive and negative politeness reflected their social relations and the social structure of the Ndebele society. The forms and functions of politeness, in their daily interactions were used to maintain the patriarchal or male dominated society. The patriarchal society keeps women in subordinate positions by placing them at the same level as children are positioned in the family hierarchy. In their basic conversations, taboo subjects or sensitive issues are normally referred to indirectly or euphemistically showing some politeness. However, when the participants find no occasion for it, they can directly show their anger or attitude towards someone. The selection of politeness strategies is influenced by absolute ranking as identified by Brown and Levinson. In Ndebele society, women and children are viewed as people of low status with less dominant roles who use more indirect and negative politeness in their language. On the

other hand, men are viewed as people of high rank who possess dominant roles in their society. The politeness conventions reflect the culture of the Ndebele people as there is an interrelationship between culture and language. No matter what social, political, economic, or religious positions a woman holds in the society, still, in their family, they are treated as inferior and not equal to men as shown through the way they are addressed in daily interactions. The basic social role of politeness in the Ndebele society is to maintain the social equilibrium and family relations. Politeness is viewed as a social norm but not taken necessarily as a face saving act. One can easily perceive it as submissiveness but not as politeness after considering the position of women in the Ndebele society. Further studies on speech acts adopted by women who are already leading in positions of authority at their workplace need to be carried out. Now, as only a few women are in state of power in comparison to men, here, it would explicate, if patriarchy and the cultural and Christian beliefs affect their work relations with subordinate men as well.

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