

Rachel Akusika Thompson and Jemima Asabea Anderson*

Perception of politeness: some perspectives from Ghana

<https://doi.org/10.1515/pr-2014-0008>

Submitted October 1, 2014; Accepted July 6, 2017

Abstract: This study gives an account of what Ghanaians perceive as politeness in their daily interactions by gathering data from interviews granted by residents of Accra, Kumasi and Ho. The residents selected as respondents are people whose ages are above fifty years and who have lived in any of the communities for at least twenty years. The study shows that among Ghanaians, politeness is the use of any communicative behaviour that expresses respect or deference. Some of such communicative behaviours identified are greetings, the use of titles and honorifics, the use of “please” and “thank you”, the use of “a soft voice” and being silent as and when necessary. Although the communicative behaviours that manifest politeness usually involve speech, politeness can also be achieved by employing paralinguistic and extralinguistic features like *soft voice* and *silence*. This confirms Culpeper’s (2005) assertion that the communicative resources for politeness or impoliteness extend well beyond grammar and lexicon.

Keywords: politeness, face, social norms, respect, Ghana

1 Introduction

Every community has some established norms or conventions regarding actions or reactions that are desirable in a specific context (Eelen 2001). In view of this, an individual is considered polite when his actions or reactions are in consonance with these social norms or conventions. Fraser (1990: 220) refers to this phenomenon as “the social norm view of politeness” and avers that it is measured along some historically established rules of behaviour. The social norm view of politeness originates and is integrated in the life experience of the members of a community such that they often have a subjective process of introspection. These members are able to analyze and evaluate their own behaviour in light of

*Corresponding author: Rachel Akusika Thompson, Griffith University, Department of Languages and Linguistics, Queensland, Australia, E-Mail: rachel.thompson2@griffithuni.edu.au
Jemima Asabea Anderson, University of Ghana, Department of English, Accra, Ghana, E-Mail: janderson@ug.edu.gh

the behavioural norms which are expected to be shared by all in the community (Eelen 2001: 32–43). Individuals who are regarded as polite usually have a positive value, whereas those who are regarded as impolite are usually treated with repugnance in their communities.

Ghana, which is located in West Africa, also has conventions and norms that are acceptable to the members of the different ethnolinguistic groups found in the country. The 2012 Population and Housing Census in Ghana shows that the current population of Ghana is about 25 million. Nearly 49.10 % of this population belongs to the Akan ethnolinguistic family who live in the southern part of the country. This is the biggest ethnolinguistic group in the country. About 16.50 % of the population fall under the Mole Dagbani ethnolinguistic family who occupy the northern part of the country while 12.70 % are Ewes. The Ewes are also found in the southern part of Ghana. The speakers of Ga-Adangbe who inhabit the Accra plains constitute about 8.0 % of the entire population while the Guans make up about 4.40 %. All the other ethnic groups make about 9.30 % of the total population. Figure 1 shows the ethnolinguistic distribution in Ghana according to the 2012 Population and Housing census.

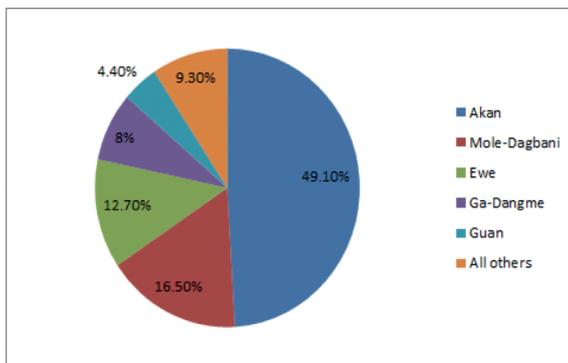


Figure 1. Ethnolinguistic distribution in Ghana

Source: Ghana Statistical Service: 2012 Population and Housing Census Report

In all, there are about 75–83 languages that are spoken in Ghana (see Batibo 2005; Lewis 2009; Owu-Ewie 2013). As a result of the diversity in cultural values and orientation, every ethno-linguistic group in Ghana has its own established norms regarding the utterances and actions of its members that are considered polite and impolite. In spite of these different ethnolinguistic perceptions of (im)politeness, one still finds some similarities in the way these different cultures perceive (im) politeness. Thus, in some cases what is considered (im)polite among the Akans will not be entirely different from what is considered (im)polite among the Ewes

or the Gas. This study seeks to show some similarities and differences regarding perceptions of politeness among people living in Accra, Kumasi and Ho.

2 Related studies

Brown and Levinson (1987: 1) argue that politeness is a way of reducing any form of aggressiveness between participants in a speech event to ensure effective communication. Brown and Levinson (1987: 61) draw on Goffman's (1967) notion of face, and explain that everybody has a "face" that they deem necessary to maintain. They add that everybody has "a positive face want" which means "the want to be liked and appreciated by others" and "a negative face want" which means "the want to remain independent". Face, in relation to politeness, may be considered as the public self-image or self-esteem that every individual has which must be necessarily respected and maintained in public or private situations by others (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61–62).

Brown and Levinson (1987) assert that politeness strategies help avoid an immediate breakdown of communication and consequently, the relationship between interlocutors. They thus introduce the politeness strategies: "Bald on Record", "Negative Politeness", "Positive Politeness", "Off-Record" and "Withhold the FTA" (see Brown and Levinson 1987:69–72 for details). Brown and Levinson's (1987) model is one of the politeness models that attempts to explicitly show the manner in which speech participants express politeness by concentrating on the strategies involved. Nevertheless, scholars such as Ide (1989), Matsumoto (1989), Gu (1990), and Mao (1994) question the acclaimed universality of Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of face. They argue that, not only is Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of face Western-biased, individualistic and egalitarian, it is also in sharp contrast to the group-centered, hierarchy-based culture of Eastern societies such as China and Japan.

Similarly, Nwoye (1992) questions the validity of Brown and Levinson's concept of face in societies such as West Africa, where the appropriateness of an individual's action is usually judged on the basis of his social status in a particular society (see also Agyekum 2004a on face). Nwoye (1992: 311) claims that, in Brown and Levinson's notion of politeness, "social interaction becomes an activity of continuous mutual monitoring of potential threats to the faces of the interactants". In his view, if social interaction will always be such an activity, then all the "elements of pleasure" in it will be lost (Nwoye 1992: 311).

Yankah (1991) and Obeng (1994) (cited in Obeng [1996]) dispute Brown and Levinson's assertion that interactants from diverse cultural backgrounds per-

ceive politeness the same way, but they only choose different forms of politeness because they perceive the weightiness of a situation differently. They assert that among the Akans of Ghana for instance, “face threatening acts (FTAs) may be eliminated or ‘weakened’ by routing one’s speech through proxies or by suffusing one’s utterances with polite terminal addressives or deference honorifics” like *Nana* ‘elder’ or *Me Wura* ‘My Lord’ (Obeng 1996: 526).

Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1996) opines that Brown and Levinson’s model of politeness is too restrictive. This is because they only consider acts that potentially threaten the addressees’ faces, and ignore the acts that enhance these faces, like wishes, thanks or compliments. Watts (2003) adds that Brown and Levinson’s (1987) model does not consider the knowledge of the social situation the two speakers have, and their knowledge of what is polite in that particular discourse. This is because an utterance that is not considered to be polite by the Brown and Levinson (1987) model can still be considered to be polite in certain speech situations.

Eelen (2001: 109) maintains that the concept of politeness, generally, involves evaluation. He notes that “in everyday practice, (im)politeness occurs not so much when the speaker produces behaviour but rather when the hearer evaluates that behaviour”. He further states that being polite is always acting appropriately – in a way that meets the expectations of the hearer. Haugh (2007: 14) adds that “politeness is an evaluation of behaviour, not a behaviour in and of itself. These evaluations rest on expectations that are interactionally achieved through communication, which in turn are perceptions of broader norms of appropriate behaviour”.

In a similar vein, Locher and Watts (2008) assert that the notion of politeness is dependent on judgments. They further explain that generally, these judgments are based on and constructed through an individual’s history of interactions within his or her society. This suggests that the more one has lived in a community, the better his or her history of interaction for appropriate judgment.

Holmes (2013: 290–296) examines politeness in relation to social dimensions such as formality and status among speech participants. In her view, politeness generally involves contributing to social harmony and avoiding social conflict. Linguistic politeness, specifically, involves discourse strategies that are perceived and evaluated by others as linguistic devices that are used to maintain harmonious relationships. She mentions that the sociolinguistic norms regarding the appropriate ways of speaking differ, and speech forms perform different functions in different communities. Therefore, interpreting politeness often involves one’s ability to adapt sensitively to the evolving social relationship along the dimension of social distance, solidarity, or relative power (status), and how they are manifested in a particular community. Speech participants

must consider their relationship to one another in order to make appropriate linguistic choices.

3 Methods

The study focuses on respondents drawn from Accra, Kumasi and Ho. These three locations, apart from being regional capitals in Ghana, were chosen because:

- Accra is a highly cosmopolitan city, which attracts migrants from all parts of the country. As a result, the inhabitants speak a wide range of languages. Although the indigenous language is Ga, Akan is the most widely used language. The language situation in Accra in the 2012 Population and Housing census is presented in the table below:

Table 1: Language situation in Accra

Speakers	Language
1, 528, 722	Akan
1, 056, 158	Ga
775, 332	Ewe
200, 735	Mole Dagbani
73, 409	Guan
62, 435	Gurma
48, 822	Grusi
28, 656	Mande
75, 568	Other languages

Source: Ghana Statistical Service: 2012 Population and Housing Census Report

- The indigenous language of Kumasi is Akan, which is most widely spoken both as a native language and as a lingua franca for many non-native speakers in the country.
- In Ho, Ewe, which has the third largest number of speakers in Ghana as shown in figure 1, is the indigenous language.

Interviews were conducted in these communities to basically tease out respondents' views on their perception of politeness. The respondents answered four questions: two on politeness and two on impoliteness. All the respondents answered the same number of questions. For the purposes of this paper, only the first two questions on politeness were analyzed (see Appendix for questions). The

responses varied in length but approximately, each interview lasted between four and ten minutes.

One hundred and fifty people were selected as respondents for the interview. Fifty respondents were selected from each of the communities. They had Akan, Ga or Ewe as their first language. Informants were encouraged to share their views in any language they were comfortable with. Thus, the majority of respondents who had Ga or Ewe as their first language provided their responses in either English or Akan. All the responses were translated into English for the analysis.

The respondents were people who have lived in the communities investigated for not less than twenty years and are fifty years of age or above. Respondents in this age range were chosen because the elderly in many African contexts are regarded as “the custodians of culture”, “the symbol of wisdom” and “society’s memory databank” (Agyekum 2004b: 137). According to Rababa’h and Malkawi (2012: 26), “old people have more experience and broader communicative competence than young people”. The respondents are between fifty years and seventy years. These respondents were contacted and selected for inclusion through “friend-of-a-friend” basis or snowball sampling (respondents recommend other potential candidates for the study) and personal networks (see Marshall 1996: 523).

Since the study dwells primarily on the judgments of utterances by respondents, the formal (Western) educational background of respondents was not considered. This is because one’s ability to make wise judgments on traditional or cultural issues has very little, or nothing at all, to do with his or her level of formal education. It is rather how well a person is versed in the culture and tradition of a particular community (see Agyekum 2004b). Therefore, a person with only traditional education is more recognized and respected and rated higher than one with only formal education.

4 Findings

The findings we present here are generated from the data we gathered from 150 selected informants and holds true for older adults living in the southern parts of Ghana. These results therefore may not apply to all Ghanaians. They are views that were expressed by some elderly persons in Accra, Kumasi and Ho, which are in the southern part of Ghana. The responses of younger people, residents in the northern part of Ghana, or even older inhabitants in rural areas may differ from what we present here.

The following are examples of responses to the question: “What is politeness?”

Table 2: Selected definitions of politeness

ACCRA	KUMASI	HO
Showing respect to someone older than you	Giving respect to everybody in society	Showing some level of respect and courtesy to any person
Speaking to other people respectfully	Being respectful towards people	Showing respect to all
Showing respect and regard for an adult	<i>Wohu obi a ɔkyen wo a wobeka kasapa akyere no, kasa a obuo wom</i> 'when you see someone who is above you, you speak well, you speak with respect'	Being respectful towards our leaders and elders
<i>Wobekasa kasapa akyere obiara a ɔkyen wo</i> 'speaking respectfully to someone above you'	<i>Se wobebu ɔpanyin mu</i> 'respecting the elderly'	Talking to people and answering the elderly in a respectful manner
<i>Se wobebu wompanyinfoɔ</i> 'showing respect to your leaders/elders'	<i>Se ɔkasa kyere ɔpanyin a ɔde obuo bamu</i> 'talking to an elder with respect'	Showing respect when you are among people higher than you

From the responses gathered, we observed that the general notion of politeness across the communities studied is similar. Among the informants, politeness means being respectful or showing respect to people, especially those higher than a person in terms of social status or age.

Consider the following examples, which are responses to the question: "What are some of the communicative behaviours that signal politeness in this community?"

- ACCRA
- Speaking to people calmly and gently; greeting the elderly
 - Acknowledging people by greeting; addressing elders with sir, mama, papa
 - Being silent, even when provoked
- KUMASI
- Kasa tesɛ mepa wo kyew, medaase*
Talk like 1SG.DOFF 2SG.POSS hat, 1SG.sleep.
'Using please and thank you in your speech.'
 - Wo ne obi kasa in a low tone.*
2SG and someone talk in a low tone
'Speaking to someone with a low tone'
 - ɔpanyin ne wokasa na wo n-yiyi ano.*
elder and 2SG.talk for 2SG NEG-remove mouth
'To avoid exchanging words with the elderly'
(To be silent when you are reprimanded by an elder)

- HO
- g. Greeting others; using please and thank you regularly
 - h. Calling people master, chief, boss to honour them
 - i. Greeting, or saying thank you when someone does you a favour

Based on responses such as the ones listed above, we note that across the communities studied, the communicative behaviours that express politeness include: (1) greetings (as seen in examples a, b, g and i); (2) the use of titles and honorifics (as in example b and h); (3) the use of please and thank you (as in examples d, g and i); (4) the use of “a soft voice” (as in examples a and e) and (5) being silent as and when necessary (as in examples c and f).

We saw that whereas some informants mentioned only one communicative behaviour as a behaviour that expresses politeness, others mentioned two or more. Also, we observed that the various communicative behaviours identified are similar, however, the number of times a particular communicative behaviour was identified during the interview varied from one community to the other. For instance, the use of please and thank you, which is identified as a polite communicative behaviour in nine responses in Kumasi, is identified in fourteen responses in Ho. The following further explore this occurrence.

4.1 Frequencies at which informants mentioned the polite communicative behaviours

Table 3 and Figure 2 present the number (N) and percentages (%) of occurrence of each polite communicative behaviour mentioned in all the responses gathered across the three communities investigated. Even though there were 50 informants from each community, Table 3 shows the total number (N) of times a particular communicative behaviour that signals respect or deference was mentioned in all the interviews conducted in the various communities.

Table 3: Polite communicative behaviours in Accra, Kumasi and Ho

Constituent	Accra		Kumasi		Ho		Total	
	N	Percent %	N	Percent %	N	Percent %	N	Percent %
Greetings	14	23	10	19	15	23	39	22
Honorifics and Titles	16	27	13	24	13	20	42	23
Please and Thank you	12	20	9	17	14	21	35	19
Soft voice	11	18	17	31	16	24	44	25
Silence	7	12	5	9	8	12	20	11
Total	60	100	54	100	66	100	180	100

It is obvious from the table that 60 communicative behaviours were gathered for analysis from the responses given in Accra, 54 communicative behaviours were gathered in Kumasi and 66 communicative behaviours were gathered in Ho. The table also shows the actual number of occurrences of a particular polite communicative behaviour. In order to arrive at a percentage, 100 is used to multiply the total number of all the communicative behaviours gathered for analysis in one community and the product obtained is used to divide the actual number of an identified communicative behaviour.

For instance, in Accra, we have $14 \text{ (greetings)} \div 60 \times 100 = 23 \%$. In Kumasi, we have $10 \text{ (greetings)} \div 54 \times 100 = 19 \%$ while in Ho, we have $39 \text{ (greetings)} \div 66 \times 100 = 22 \%$. The percentage of occurrences of each of the polite communicative behaviours in the various communities studied are shown and interpreted in Figure 2. The percentages are used, as the total number of communicative behaviours gathered from the responses differs from community to community.

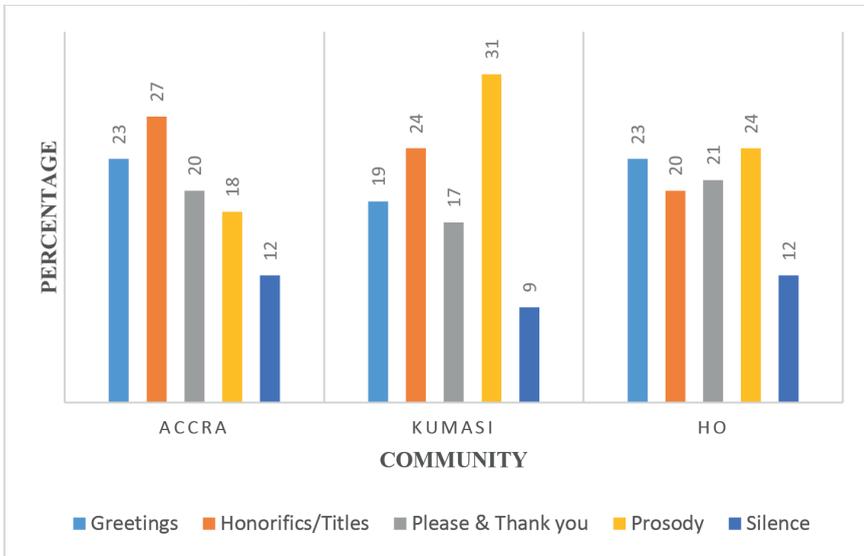


Figure 2. Polite communicative behaviours in Accra, Kumasi and Ho

Figure 2 points out that in Accra, the polite communicative behaviour that was mentioned the most is the appropriate use of honorifics and titles. The second most mentioned communicative behaviour is greetings, and the use of please and thank you is the third communicative behaviour mentioned. These communicative behaviours are followed by the use of a soft voice and lastly, silence. Unlike

the situation in Accra, in Kumasi, a speaker's ability to manage the volume of the voice to signal respect or deference, has the largest percentage of occurrences in the responses gathered. This is followed by the use of honorifics and titles. Like in Accra, greetings is followed by the use of please and thank you. Again, silence has the least percentage of occurrences in the responses gathered.

In Ho, just as the case in Kumasi, the use of a soft voice has the highest percentage of occurrence but here, the use of a soft voice is not followed by the appropriate use of honorifics and titles. In contrast to earlier occurrences in Accra and Kumasi, in Ho, greetings precede the use of honorifics and titles. Like in both Kumasi and Accra, silence has the least percentage of occurrences in the responses gathered in Ho.

4.2 Interpretations of the percentages of occurrences of the polite communicative behaviours as indicated in Figure 2

Based on the presentation in Figure 2, we note that the percentages of occurrence of each communicative behaviour may suggest how familiar the informants are with it as a behaviour that signals politeness. In Accra, the informants may be more familiar with the appropriate use of honorifics or titles as a polite communicative behaviour in a speech event as compared to greetings, and the use of please and thank you. However, one can say that in Kumasi, the informants are generally more familiar with the situation where speech participants adopt a tone or pitch that expresses respect to one another in an interaction to show that they are polite and communicatively competent. Hence, the vast difference in percentage between the use of a soft voice and the other communicative behaviours.

Among the informants in Ho, we see the closeness of the percentages of occurrence between the first four polite communicative behaviours. Here, emphasis is not laid on one particular polite communicative behaviour over another. This may be an indicator that, among these informants, all of these communicative behaviours are needed side-by-side to enhance smooth communication among interlocutors.

It is obvious that, in all three communities, silence is the least mentioned polite communicative behaviour. This can be attributed to the fact that silence, as a communicative behaviour, has both positive and negative effects in the communities investigated (see also Agyekum 2002 and 2007). As a result, one can never be sure of its intended effect on an addressee. It may also be that respondents in all the three communities are more familiar with its negative effects rather than its positive effects.

5 Discussion

The responses given to the interview questions show that politeness, for the informants, generally refers to the use of language to show respect and deference. Respect means appreciating another person's face in an interaction and not doing anything to threaten it, and deference is the respect an individual shows to another as a result of their unequal statuses in terms of age or position in the society (Ide 1989). In all the communities investigated, we realized that power/authority/social status and age are very important variables that influence polite behaviour.

Emphasis is laid on the fact that, in any form of interaction, a speaker must consider the elders and those in authority as more respectable than his or her co-equals. Speakers must not in any way behave or say anything that will threaten the faces of those older or more powerful than them. From the responses, we notice that politeness in the three communities investigated is expressed through various communicative behaviours that reduce friction, guarantee good interpersonal relations, and maintain social harmony (see also Holmes 2013). The most frequent communicative behaviours identified as shown in section 4 are discussed in the subsections below.

5.1 Greetings

Greetings are considered as pre-sequences in many speech events. According to Obeng (2003: 11), "pre-sequences help eliminate perceived obstacles to making an announcement, a request or an invitation". 14 (23%), 10 (19%) and 15 (23%) of the responses gathered in Accra, Kumasi, and Ho respectively show that greetings are a communicative behaviour that expresses politeness. In these communities, greetings are crucial for the introduction of a discussion or a verbal transaction of any kind.

In the communities investigated and many other cultures in Ghana, a person who goes to meet a group of interactants and wishes to participate in the on-going discussion must often endeavour to first greet these interactants before expressing his or her views. The act of greeting paves the way for the contribution to the conversation and marks him or her as communicatively competent (see Eglewogbe 1990; Dzameshie 2002; Agyekum 2008; Ameka 2009; Salifu 2010). Any participant who refuses to greet before making his contribution can be regarded as communicatively incompetent. This can be related to Holmes' (2013: 308) assertion that "greeting formulas universally serve an affective function of establishing non-threatening contact and rapport".

As part of the socialization process, children growing up in the communities investigated and other Ghanaian communities are taught to greet adults or older strangers they encounter in any situation. In all these communities, greeting is seen as a daily indispensable act that depicts that there is some kind of peace among members of a speech community. Greetings are thus not only used to express politeness but they are used to strengthen the social bonds between interactants in any speech event.

5.2 Honorifics and titles

Another way of expressing politeness identified in all the three communities is the appropriate use of honorifics and titles. 16 (27%) in Accra, 13 (24%) in Kumasi, and 13 (20%) in Ho of the responses gathered show that politeness is an act of addressing people with their correct honorifics and titles. Agyekum (2003: 369) defines honorifics as “specialised address and deference forms used to show politeness and competence in language and culture”. The use of honorifics suggests that a speaker recognizes the power, achievements and personal integrity of his addressee. In Shibatani’s (1994) view, anytime a speaker uses honorifics, he displays the deference due his addressee based on his (the addressee’s) social standing (Shibatani 1994: 1607).

A speaker can also use honorifics to save his face by showing his relationship to his addressee in a coded and respectful manner. This means that the use of honorifics shows the social asymmetry between the speaker and the addressee. Some of the informants mentioned that, in cases where the level of intimacy between interactants is low, the speaker is expected to employ traditional titles like *me wura*, ‘my lord’, and *ɔhema*, ‘queen’ in Akan; *onukpa*, ‘elder’ in Ga; and *torgbui*, ‘chief’ in Ewe, etc. In other cases, address terms that show kinship relations like *dada*, ‘mother’, and *efo*, ‘elder brother’ in Ewe; *ntse*, ‘my father’ in Ga; and *wofa*, ‘uncle’ in Akan, etc. may be used. This is not just a way of showing respect or deference but it is also a way of building some form of rapport and intimacy between the interactants to enhance smooth communication. This is in consonance with Dakubu’s (2000) observation that, in Ghana, the name of a person who is older or higher in status must be preceded by a kin term whether the speaker and the addressee are kin relations or not.

Three informants from Ho recounted that, among the Ewes, it is unacceptable to address an elderly kinsman, while in a face-to-face interaction, with his title plus name. In order to block potential conflicts, the kinsman must be referred to with his kinship title only. For instance, it is expected to address one’s uncle as *Torgah* ‘Uncle’ instead of adding his name to the title (e. g. *Torgah Kwasi* ‘Uncle

Kwasi') when interacting with him or when he is within earshot. This suggests that it is prudent to address any respected person with their titles or appropriate honorifics.

Ide (1989: 230) asserts that “the use of honorifics is inherently dependent upon speakers’ observations of the social conventions of the society of which they are members”. In all the communities investigated, it is considered impolite and a punitive act to refer to an older person or a respectable person without any honorific or title in a formal situation or in public, no matter the relationship between the speaker and his referent. In Dakubu’s (2000: 54) opinion, the avoidance of mentioning the name of an older person or a person of higher status ‘without qualification’ (in this case, honorific or title) is a basic norm in Ghana.

A speaker, in all three communities under study, who appropriately addresses people with their honorifics or titles in an interaction at any point in time, saves his own face. He shows that he is civilized, communicatively competent, and aware of the social-contract view of politeness in the community in which he lives.

5.3 Use of please and thank you

The use of “please” and “thank you” in the languages of all the communities investigated also depicts how polite a person is. Of the responses gathered, 12 (20%) in Accra, 9 (17%) in Kumasi, and 14 (21%) in Ho demonstrate the value placed on the use of *please* and *thank you* as politeness markers. The equivalent of ‘please’ is *mepa wo kyew* in Akan, *mede kuku* in Ewe, and *mekpa bo fai* in Ga. All of these expressions mean ‘I doff off my hat for you’. This implies that a speaker who uses this expression is telling the addressee that, “I cannot continue to wear my hat and talk to you or ask you to help me; I must show you respect”. ‘Thank you’ translates as *medaase* in Akan, *akpe* in Ewe and *oyiwaladɔɔ* in Ga. The informants remarked that these expressions are used as fundamental politeness markers in any communicative event in and around these communities, such that even if one finds himself outside his speech community, he is expected to use them.

A speech participant may generally use *mepa wo kyew* in Akan; *mede kuku* in Ewe; or *mekpa bo fai* in Ga as an attempt to soften the direct nature of a statement or an utterance, and to avoid an impending face-threat. It is also used as a hedging marker to reduce the force of direct face-threatening acts in the form of imperatives. This can be associated with Wichmann’s (2004: 1524, italics original) assertion that, in spoken English, “the word *please* in contemporary usage is undeniably associated very closely with being polite”. The equivalent of ‘please’,

as a politeness marker in all of the communities under study, is mainly used in request making to lessen the impending imposition among close peers, and among people of different age and status. A superior is even expected to precede a request to his subordinate with ‘please’ to make it less forceful and more polite.

In the communities investigated, the informants stated that they value the reciprocal use of *mepa wo kyew*, *mede kuku* or *mekpa bo fai* among speech participants. In order for interlocutors to exhibit their communicative competence and express regard for the norms of their communities, they must precede the questions they ask one another with “please”. In the same vein, the responses to such questions should be preceded with “please” to express politeness. Other communicative behaviours such as routine greetings, apologies and the expression of gratitude can also be preceded with please. For instance: *mepa wo kyew maakye* (Akan), *mede kuku ndi* (Ewe), and *mekpa bo fai ojekoo* (Ga) – ‘please good morning’; *mepa wo kyew, fakyē me* (Akan), *mede kuku koe kem* (Ewe) and *mekpa bo fai kē ke me* (Ga) – ‘please I am sorry, forgive me’; *mepa wo kyew meda ase* (Akan), *mede kuku akpe* (Ewe), *mekpa bo fai oyiwaladɔɔ* (Ga) – ‘please thank you’. A speaker who regularly uses these forms presented is regarded as communicatively competent.

The informants also mentioned that “thank you” is usually expected from a person to whom a service has been rendered, or a person who has accepted any kind of gift from another, as a means of expressing appreciation. Anytime a person fails to say “thank you” for a service rendered unto him or a gift he has received, it simply suggests to the benefactor that the person has no regard for the benefactor’s service or gift, and even for his personality. This is a form of face-threat to the benefactor, and thus impolite. A beneficiary, higher in terms of status or age than his benefactor, who does not say “thank you” to appreciate a service rendered to him may also be considered as communicatively incompetent. According to some of the informants, the act of saying “thank you”, like the act of saying “please”, is highly expected to be reciprocal even between children and their parents, and between couples (see Agyekum 2010 for more on thanking).

While proposing an alternative to the Gricean norm-based approach to communication, Jary (1998) opines that the omission of politeness markers such as “please” or “thank you” can make others consider a speaker to be impolite, especially if it is not the first time he has breached those socially sanctioned politeness norms within a group in which he is interacting. During a speech event, a person’s willingness to regularly use “please” and “thank you”, or their equivalents in other languages, does not only show that he is polite, it also ensures smooth and effective interpersonal communicative events between him and other interactants.

5.4 Use of a soft voice

A potential face-threat in an utterance can be in “how something was said rather than what was said” (Culpeper et al. 2003: 1576). Prosody therefore plays a significant role in the interpretation of an utterance as polite or otherwise. Prosody, here, refers to the degree of a speaker’s pitch, tone, voice or tempo in a communicative event.

In all the communities investigated, a “low-pitched voice” is usually more favoured than a “high-pitched voice” in a speech event. 11 (18 %), 17 (31 %), and 16 (24 %) of the responses collected in Accra, Kumasi, and Ho respectively highlight that the management of the volume of one’s voice can express politeness. This is because the use of a low tone or a soft voice is often related to humility and politeness and the use of a high tone is often related to harshness and rudeness. Similarly, Brown and Levinson (1987: 268) mention that low pitch conveys “comfort and commiseration”.

Being loud or using a raised pitch may be the result of a speaker’s negative emotional state. However, a speaker who always shows his displeasure by raising his voice at others is often considered as uncultured and impolite. In this regard, Jay (1992: 97) claims that a speaker who shouts in anger is not only making his anger known to the hearer but he is also invading the space of the hearer. In situations where the speaker combines loudness with abusive language, impoliteness is intensified and the effect on the addressee is compounded (see also Culpeper et al. 2003; Bernal 2008).

A speaker’s ability to choose the appropriate tone to convey his message in a speech event is dependent on his social competence rather than his linguistic competence. Some of the respondents pointed out that when a younger person sees a group of elders, and stands afar and shouts a greeting to them, he can be rebuked. The elders may even refuse to respond and ask the person to draw closer and greet calmly. In the same manner, a child who uses a high tone to make a request (though he starts with please) from an elderly person can be considered as impolite. Culpeper (2005: 68) rightly notes that the communicative resources for (im)politeness extend well beyond grammar and lexicon. One’s ability to manage prosodic features in a speech event therefore can make others consider one as polite or impolite.

During a speech event, a participant who always shares his views with a loud voice or at a very fast pace may be considered impatient and communicatively incompetent. The listeners may feel very uncomfortable listening to him, though his views may be very significant to enhance the subject matter of the conversation. It would not be a surprise if the other speech participants advised him to be patient.

The appropriate use of prosodic features therefore does not only show that a person is polite towards others, but it also shows that he has mastery over the norms and values of the community. This can be related to Rababa'h and Malkawi's (2012) assertion that the appropriate use of paralinguistic and extralinguistic features in an interaction reveals one's knowledge about the cultural norms of one's society.

5.5 Silence

Silence is one of the politeness strategies valued in the various speech communities investigated. 7 (12%) in Accra, 5 (9%) in Kumasi, and 8 (12%) in Ho, of all the responses gathered, show that politeness is expressed when one remains *silent* and walks away from a communicative event that provokes him or her to make some utterances that he or she is likely to regret later. In such instances, silence shows respect and strengthens social rapport. Silence, in various cultures, is considered as a politeness strategy that prevents disagreement and confrontation (Sifianou 1997, Greeks; Agyekum 2002, Akans; and Al-Harabsheh 2012, Australians and Jordanians). Al-Harabsheh (2012: 264) opines that silence is usually employed when a speaker is trying to avoid saying something discomfiting to somebody in order to maintain social ties. Similarly, Zsubrinszky (2012: 4) states that, "in order to avoid conflicts, speech participants can be silent to exhibit politeness towards others".

During interactions, a participant who remains silent to allocate turns to others indicates his respect towards them. A participant who also remains silent as a way of overcoming his anger, and does not even respond to another who is attacking him verbally, is regarded as more civilized than the one who responds with abusive language.

Some of responses gathered during the interview indicate that good listeners are preferred above loquacious people because they rarely upset others. Conversation is extended and more efficient when one is silent while another is talking. Silence is socially required, therefore, interlocutors in these communities are encouraged not to be loquacious.

Some respondents highlighted that younger people especially are expected to remain silent and not talk back at any elderly person angrily interrogating them. If they do not keep silent and they talk back, they can be regarded as impolite. Younger people who are usually silent in a communicative event with a group of elders, and speak only when they are expected to, are often regarded as polite. Silence is thus a politeness strategy that organizes and regulates social relationships among members of these speech communities.

6 Conclusion

Politeness, in the communities investigated, is mainly considered as an act of expressing respect or deference through greeting, the use of titles and honorifics, the use of “please” and “thank you”, the use of a soft voice, and being silent when necessary. Employing any of these communicative behaviours when expected ensures that friction among interlocutors is reduced or avoided. Also, it enhances social harmony and shows that a speech participant is disciplined and communicatively competent. Across the three communities investigated, communicative behaviours that manifest politeness usually involve speech. Nevertheless, it is also clear that politeness can be achieved by employing paralinguistic and extralinguistic features like soft voice and silence.

The data for this study was gathered from informants in Accra, Kumasi and Ho. These settings represent a major section of Southern Ghana, and this implies that Northern Ghana has been excluded from this research. Future researches on the perception of politeness can concentrate on speech communities in any or all of the three regions in Northern Ghana.

The present study focused on the notions of politeness among older informants in urban communities, further research can also be done to consider the notions of politeness among a younger generation, or to compare and contrast the perception of politeness between some urban and rural speech communities.

References

- Agyekum, Kofi. 2002. The communicative role of silence in Akan. *Pragmatics* 12(1). 31–51.
- Agyekum, Kofi. 2003. Honorifics and status indexing in Akan communication. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 24(5). 369–385.
- Agyekum, Kofi. 2004a. The sociocultural concept of face in Akan communication. *Journal of Pragmatics and Cognition* 12(1). 71–92.
- Agyekum, Kofi. 2004b. Indigenous education in African: Evidence from the Akan people of Ghana. *Journal of Cultural Transmission in the African World (JCTAW)* 1(2). 115–143.
- Agyekum, Kofi. 2007. The negative role of silence in Akan communication. *Issues in Intercultural Communication* 2(1). 159–178.
- Agyekum, Kofi. 2008. The pragmatics of Akan greetings. *Discourse Studies* 10(4). 489–512.
- Agyekum Kofi. 2010. The sociolinguistics of thanking in Akan. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 19(2). 77–97.
- Al-Harahsheh, Ahmad Mohammed Ahmad. 2012. Silence and politeness in Jordanian society. *Arab World English Journal* 3(3). 246–269.
- Ameka, Felix K. 2009. Access rituals in West African communities: An ethnopragmatic perspective. In Gunter Senft and Ellen B. Basso (eds.). *Ritual communication*. 127–152. New York: Berg.

- Batibo Herman. 2005. *Language decline and death in Africa: Causes, consequences and challenges*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters
- Bernal, Maria. 2008. Do insults always insult? Genuine impoliteness versus non-genuine impoliteness in colloquial Spanish. *Pragmatics* 1. 781–802.
- Brown, Penelope & Stephen Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some universals in language use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Culpeper, Jonathan. 2005. Impoliteness and entertainment in television quiz show: The weakest link. *Journal of Politeness Research: Language, Behaviour, Culture* 1. 35–72.
- Culpeper, Jonathan, Derek Bousfield & Anne Wichmann. 2003. Impoliteness revisited: With special reference to dynamic and prosodic aspects. *Journal of Pragmatics* 35(11). 1545–1579.
- Dakubu, Mary Esther Kropp. 2000. Personal names of the Dagomba. *Research Review (New Series)* 16(2). 53–65.
- Dzameshie, Alex K. 2002. The forms, functions and social value of greetings among the Ewes. In Felix K. Ameka and E. Kweku Osam (eds.), *New directions in Ghanaian linguistics*. 381–408. Accra: Black Mask.
- Eelen, Gino. 2001. *A critique of politeness theories*. Manchester: Saint Jerome Publishing.
- Egblewogbe, Eustace Y. 1990. Social and psychological aspects of greeting among the Ewes of West Africa. *Research Review (New Series)* 6. 8–18.
- Fraser, Bruce. 1990. Perspectives on politeness. *Journal of Pragmatics* 14. 219–236.
- Ghana Statistical Services. 2012. *2010 Population and housing census summary report*. Accra: Ghana Statistical Service.
- Goffman, Erving. 1967. *Interaction ritual: Essays on face to face behaviour*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Gu, Yuego. 1990. Politeness phenomena in modern Chinese. *Journal of Pragmatics* 14(2). 237–257.
- Haug, Michael. 2007. The discursive challenge to politeness theory: an interactional alternative. *Journal of Politeness Research* 3. 295–317.
- Holmes, Janet. 2013. *An introduction to sociolinguistics* (4th ed). London: Longman.
- Ide, Sachiko. 1989. Formal forms and discernment: Two neglected aspects of universals of linguistic politeness. *Multilingua* 8. 223–248.
- Jary, Mark. 1998. Relevance theory and the communication of politeness. *Journal of Pragmatics* 30. 1–19.
- Jay, Timothy. 1992. *Cursing in America: A psycholinguistic study of dirty language in the courts, in the movies, in the schoolyards and on the streets*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Kerbrat-Orecchioni, Catherine. 1996. A multilevel approach in the study of talk-in-interaction. *Pragmatics* 7(1). 1–20.
- Lewis, Paul M. (ed.). 2009. *Ethnologue: Languages of the world, Sixteenth edition*. Dallas, Texas: SIL International.
- Locher, Miriam & Richard Watts. 2008. Relational work and impoliteness: negotiating norms of linguistic behaviour. In Derek Bousfield and Miriam Locher (eds.), *Impoliteness in language*, 77–99. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Mao, Luming R. 1994. Beyond politeness theory: 'Face' revisited and renewed. *Journal of Pragmatics* 21. 451–86.
- Marshall, Martin N. 1996. Sampling for qualitative research. *Family Practice* 13. 522–525.
- Matsumoto, Yoshiko. 1989. Politeness and conversational universals: Observations from Japanese. *Multilingua* 8. 207–221.
- Nwoye, Onuigbo G. 1992. Linguistic politeness and socio-cultural variations of the notion of face. *Journal of Pragmatics* 18. 309–328.

- Obeng, Samuel Gyasi. 1994. Verbal indirection in Akan informal discourse. *Journal of Pragmatics* 21. 37–65.
- Obeng, Samuel Gyasi. 1996. The proverb as a mitigating and politeness strategy in Akan discourse. *Anthropological Linguistics* 38(3). 521–549.
- Obeng, Samuel Gyasi. 2003. *Language in African social interaction: Indirectness in Akan communication*. New York: Nova Science Publishers.
- Owu-Ewie, Charles. 2013. The language policy of education in Ghana in perspective. The past, the present and the future. *Language and Linguistics* 32. 53–72.
- Rababa`h, Mahmoud Ali & Nibal Abd Alkareem Malkawi. 2012. The linguistic etiquette of greeting and leave-taking in Jordanian Arabic. *European Scientific Journal* 8(18). 14–28.
- Salifu, Nantogma Alhassan. 2010. Signaling politeness, power and solidarity through terms of address in Dagbanli. *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 19(4). 274–292.
- Shibatani, Masayoshi. 1994. Honorifics. In Ronald E. Asher & James M. Y. Simpson (eds.), *The Encyclopaedia of Language and Linguistics* 3. 1600–1608. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Sifianou, Maria. 1997. Silence and politeness in silence: Interdisciplinary perspectives. In Adam Jaworski (ed.), *Studies in Anthropological Linguistics* 10. 63–84. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Watts, Richard J. 2003. *Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wichmann, Anne. 2004. The intonation of please-requests: A corpus based study. *Journal of Pragmatics* 36. 1521–1549.
- Yankah, Kwesi. 1991. Oratory in Akan society. *Discourse and Society* 2. 47–64.
- Zsubrinszky, Zsuzsanna. 2012. An exploratory study of the role of silence in business communication. *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* 2(4). 1–5.

Appendix

INTERVIEW GUIDE

- a) What is politeness?
- b) What are some of the communicative behaviours that signal politeness in this community?
- c) What is impoliteness?
- d) What are some of the communicative behaviours that signal impoliteness in this community?

Bionotes

Rachel Thompson

Rachel Thompson is currently a PhD candidate at the Department of Languages and Linguistics, Griffith University, Australia. Her major research interest is the use of language in the electronic media in Ghana. She is also interested in the study of (im)politeness and discourse analysis across various domains such as politics, health and language contact situations.

Jemima Anderson

Dr. Jemima Anderson is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English, University of Ghana. Her areas of research interest are sociolinguistics, politeness in English in Ghana, pragmatics (speech acts in non-native varieties of English), language choice and language use in Ghana.