

# **Using of the Politeness Principle in Dissertation Writing: Focus on the English Department of the Teacher Training College of Mbujimayi**

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## **Abstract**

Communication is oral, written, etc. When we communicate through writing or any other way, we should pay attention to our addressee or interlocutor so as to avoid hurting the latter, be it in speaking or writing. I was shocked to notice students are not prudent to the way they are addressing to others: teachers, pupils, inspectors and so on. The speaker or writer of any language should respect some established principles of that language i.e. the communication in any language is interesting when it implies the use and respect of that languages' politeness rules.

I have selected twenty dissertations from the department of English of the Teacher Training College of Mbujimayi, DRC. These dissertations are from different domains: grammar, theoretical linguistics, and literature or applied linguistics. I have been focused on dissertations sections such as: Problem definition, choice and interest of the work, aims and purposes of the study, and further studies. I have noticed that the politeness maxims are more violated in dissertations than they are observed. To avoid violating more the politeness principle (PP) in both speaking and writing, I have suggested that the PP get taught to students in conversations and research methodology courses. Students should be familiarized to practicing the PP maxims in classroom reports and debates, in essay writing, in letters, etc.

**Key Words: addressee, politeness principle, politeness maxim**

## **1. Introduction**

This article is an investigation into using of the politeness principle in dissertation writing by students of Teacher Training College of Mbujimayi, DRC. It discusses language and communication. It also presents some language functions, the Cooperative Principle (manner maxim, relevance maxim quantity maxim and quality maxim), and the Speech Acts as well. But the article remains focused on Politeness Principle use in students' dissertations. As far data collection, I resorted to library research since students' dissertations where the source of the data. To analyze these data, I used text analysis with both qualitative and quantitative methods triangulate.

## **2. On Language and Politeness**

### **2.1 What language is**

Discussing this issue, Tshimanga (2016: 6) notes that this question is and has been answered differently throughout the history of linguistic science. Accordingly, he paraphrases O'Grady, Dobrovolsky and Aronoff (1991:1) who mention the following definitions: (1) a system of communication, (2) a medium for thought, (3) a vehicle for literary expressions, and so on.

However, these definitions are not generally accepted by everybody without controversy. For example, these definitions of language have been criticized for saying only what language is used for rather than what language actually is (Tshimanga 2016). Therefore, for Chomsky, cited in Tshimanga (2016) an important distinction is to be made between I-language (Internalized language), which is part of the brain, and E-language (Externalized language). I-language is considered as innate and correspondent to competence

while E-language refers to performance. This innate linguistic competence is made up of a finite set of principles and allows any normal human being to speak any natural language of the world.

Ferdinand De Saussure on his part considers language as a system of signs that express ideas, and divides it into *Lingue* and *Parole*. *Lingue* refers to the abstract system of language that is generalized by members of a given speech community. By contrast, *Parole* is the individual acts of speech and the putting into practice of language. In this definition, De Saussure stresses the social aspects of language (See Tshimanga 2016).

## 2.2 Language Functions

Functions of language are very important when we consider the social aspect of language. Here, we consider the use to which language is put. Language has various functions, among which: expressive function, textual function, interpersonal function, conative function, phatic function, etc. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004:30), speak of metafunctions among which they distinguish between interpersonal metafunction and textual metafunction. The first refers to language as action, and the second concerns the way to build up sequences of discourse, organizing the discursive flow and creating cohesion and continuity as it moves along.

## 2.3 Communication

Communication (from Latin *commūnicāre*, meaning "to share" ) is the activity of conveying information through the exchange of thoughts, messages, or information, as by speech, visuals, signals, writing, or behavior. Hornby (2015) states that communication is the activity or process of expressing ideas and feelings or of giving people information.

## 2.4 Politeness in Language

### 2.4.1 What Politeness Is

The term *politeness* is differently defined. According to Hornby (2015) polite is an adjective meaning having or showing good manners and respect for the feelings of others. Politeness is the noun deriving from the adjective polite. For Lakoff cited in Puspita (2011:9) politeness is “A system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange”.

From the above definitions, we see that politeness is used to facilitate communication among people; it avoids conflicts and other communicative difficulties in people’s interaction. To illustrate this, we would say that in a group where politeness is applied, the interaction is not difficult. This group can comprise members of a family, schools, hospitals, people in the society, and so on.

Similarly, Richard cited by Puspita says that politeness is concerned with how language shows social distance between the speakers and the relationship of their role in a society. For this author, politeness is seen in the relationships people have with one another; for example, learner – teacher, child – parent, employee– employer, and so on. While these people are communicating, they have to observe a certain distance. But breaking this social distance is considered not polite. In every human society, there are always differences of occupation, age, sex, and so on. This will require different forms of behavior among these people even if this depends on groups, areas, beliefs, customs, and so on.

Brown and Levinson (1987) cited in Kalongo (2009:4) state:

*Politeness is best expressed as the practical application of good manners or etiquette. It is a culturally defined phenomenon, and what is considered polite in one culture can often be rude or simply strange in another. This means that politeness is seen in practice i.e. the practice of good manners or of a set of rules for behaving in a particular social situation.*

Each culture has its own rules showing politeness and these rules may be considered inappropriate in another culture. For example, Congolese children call people of the same age as their father ‘father’; yet in England, for example, this is not considered normal.

### 2.4.2 The Maxims of the Politeness Principle (PP)

Leech (1983) cited in Villota (2013:8) formulates the politeness principle (PP) by proposing a set of maxims. His concept is based on the terms *self* and *other*. In conversation *self* would be considered the speaker (writer) and *other* the listener or hearer. According to Leech cited in Urbetová (2013:14), ‘an

interesting example related to whom or what is considered to be the speaker (s) and who or what is considered to be the hearer (h), and indeed one which may shed light on this division, is when referring to s's or h's spouses'.

To identify the speaker's and the hearer's polite contribution in a talk, one will refer to the politeness principle stated by Leech cited in the previous paragraph. The politeness principle is of paramount importance by the fact that it aims at maintaining the social equilibrium and friendly relationships which enable people to assume that they are cooperative with their interlocutors. Leech (1983:16) mentioned in Yaqubi et al. (2016:54) states that:

*Cooperation and politeness are largely regulative factors which ensure that one conversation is under way and it will not follow a fruitless or disruptive path"; however, he maintains that "PP has higher regulative role than CP: to maintain the social equilibrium and the friendly relations which enable us to assume that our interlocutors are being cooperative.*

The Politeness Principle consists of the following maxims: Tact maxim, Generosity maxim, Approbation maxim, Modesty maxim, Agreement maxim, and the Sympathy maxim.

**(1) Tact maxim**

- Minimize cost to other
- Maximize benefit to other

**(2) Generosity maxim**

- Minimize benefit to self
- Maximize cost to self

**(3) Approbation maxim**

- Minimize dispraise of other
- Maximize praise of other

**(4) Modesty maxim**

- Minimize praise of self
- Maximize dispraise of self

**(5) Agreement maxim**

- Minimize disagreement between self and other
- Maximize agreement between self and other

**(6) Sympathy maxim**

- Minimize antipathy between self and other
- Maximize sympathy between self and other

The maxims constitute the focus of the study and will be applied in dissertations to know whether they are respected or not. If respected, which ones are more respected than others?

## **2.5 Politeness and Speech Acts**

Speech acts are related to politeness. According to John Austin cited by Urbetová (2013:10),

*Language is not simply used to describe the world around us, but it is also used as action to influence our environment. In other words, language is used in its ideational function, but also in its interpersonal function.*

This way of viewing language has led to talk about speech acts. Discussing speech acts, John Austin (1962) notes that the speech act is therefore an utterance functioning as a unit of communication and it comprises three components, viz. locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act.

A locutionary act is the producing of an actual meaningful utterance. That is, it is an act of saying something. An illocutionary act is the intended significance and socially valid verbal actions (ordering, warning, undertaking, etc.). That is, it is an act of doing something by saying something. Generally speaking, people talk of illocutionary force. Finally, a perlocutionary act is the actual effect of the utterance, or what we achieve with an utterance (detering, convincing, persuading, surprising, misleading, etc.). Building upon Austin's work, Searle (1965) mentioned in Urbetová (2013:10) argues that:

*“to understand language, one must understand the speaker’s intention. Since language is intentional behavior, it may be treated like a form of action.”*

### **2.5.1 The Cooperative Principle**

Hornby (2015:1220) defines the principle as a moral rule or a strong belief that influences your actions or a belief that is accepted as a reason for acting or thinking in a particular way. The same author defines a maximum as a well-known phrase that expresses something that is usually true or that people think is a rule for suitable behavior.

According to Urbetová (2013:11), the basis of the majority of linguistic theories of politeness could be traced back to the Cooperative Principle of Grice. Summarizing the Cooperative Principles, Grice (1975: 45) writes that ‘make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.’

The Cooperative Principle (CP) consists of four maxims which are sometimes called *Grice’s or Gricean maxims*. These maxims are: the quantity maxim, the quality maxim, the relevance maxim and the manner maxim.

#### **a. The Quantity Maxim**

Grice (1975:45) states that the maxim of quantity relates to the amount of information to be provided. It is broken down further into the following sub-maxims

- Make your contribution as informative as required (for the current purposes of the exchange)
- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

It is important to note that to be more informative than required is not violating the quantity maxim, therefore, Grice (1975: 46) argues,

*“It might be said that to be overinformative is not the transgression of the CP but merely a waste of time. However, a contribution should be as informative as is required for the conversation to proceed. It should be neither too little, nor too much. It is not clear how one can decide what quantity of information satisfies the maxim in a given case.”*

**Q:** Where did Mary go?

**A:** She went downtown

The mutual expectation of the interactants is that quantitatively the speaker’s contribution is just right for the interaction at hand. More would be too much and less would be too little for successful communication to take place.

#### **b. The Quality Maxim**

Under the category quality maxim falls a supermaxim: ‘Try to make your contribution one that is true’ and two more sub-maxims Grice (1975: 46):

- Do not say what you believe to be false. Tell the truth.
- Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The mutual expectation of the interactants is that the speaker makes propositions or provides information that s/he believes to be true. Here, the speaker might be truthful. To quote Grice (1975:27) by (Villota 2013:3), the speaker would not say what s/he thinks is false... To be specific, the addressee should not give the answer below if s/he knows that it is not snowing outside.

(4) **Q:** What is it like outside?

**A:** Snowing.

#### **c. Relevance Maxim**

The relevance maxim is also called ‘relation maxim’. It runs as follows:

- Be relevant.

The mutual expectation of the interactants is that the speaker makes a contribution to the communicative exchange that is relevant to the topic and the situation of this exchange. The speakers' contributions should

relate clearly to the purpose of the exchange. This maxim has to do with the appropriateness of one's contribution to the context of communication.

- (5) **Q:** Would you like to go to a movie?  
**A:** I have to study for an exam.

#### **d. Manner Maxim**

To quote Villota (2013:3), the manner maxim relates to how the message is constructed. According to Grice (1975: 46), this maxim is relating not (like the previous categories) to what is said, but, rather to how what is said is to be said. And he also adds a supermaxim: 'Be perspicuous' and various sub-maxims such as:

- avoid obscurity of expression<sup>2</sup>
- avoid ambiguity
- be brief(avoid unnecessary prolixity)
- be orderly

The mutual expectation of the interactants is that the speaker makes his/her contribution as clear and as comprehensible as possible, and that while doing so, s/he takes all precautions to ensure such clarity in terms of performance and delivery.

The speakers' contributions should be perspicuous: clear, orderly and brief, avoiding obscurity and ambiguity.

- (6) **Q:** The man who lives with Mary is Bob. (Bob is not her husband or I would have said so).

These maxims are important in communication and are also called conversational maxims. Grice himself maintains that some maxims are more important than others, and he also acknowledges that these maxims are often violated. Nevertheless, they seem to form the basis of any rational conversation. Grice cited in Urbetová (2013:12) also points out that his list of maxims is not final, and identifies other important maxims e.g. be polite

Grice (1991:308) in (ibid) states,

There are, of course, all sorts of other maxims (aesthetic, social, or moral in character) such as be polite that are normally observed by participants in talk exchanges and are normally observed by participants in talk exchanges and these may also generate non conversational i.e. conversational implicatures.

That is, maxims provided are not all, but there are other maxims that are observed by speakers without them knowing. And these maxims produce conversational implicatures.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 Data Collection Techniques**

I resorted to the library research since the focus was put mainly on written materials. In other terms, I selected twenty dissertations in order to identify how students use the politeness principle. I targeted essentially four sections: problem definition, choice and interest of the study, aims and purposes of the study, and further studies. The reason why I targeted these sections is that they are places where students express their position vis-à-vis the research field and other members of the discourse community.

#### **3.2 Data Analysis Methods**

To analyze these data, I used Text analysis because I have to identify different portions of students' texts in the sections mentioned above and show how well they use politeness maxims in the writing. Moreover, I use both qualitative and quantitative methods to find how better and how much the politeness principle is used by third year students. In the case of qualitative analysis, I will discuss students' excerpts taken from different sections as said above in order to illustrate and discuss the application by students of politeness maxims in their writings. Thanks to quantitative analysis, I will find out different percentages of failure in using or successful use of politeness maxims.

### **4. Results**

In the table below, I am going present the results in terms of violated and observed maxims. Observance of PP maxims is symbolized with (1) and the violation is symbolized with (0). The symbol (-) means zero.

Selected Areas	Maxim	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Totals	
																							1
Problem definition	TM			0																		-	1
	GM																			1		1	-
	ApM																				0	-	1
	MM									1	0											1	1
	AgM										0											-	2
	SM																					-	-
Choice and interest of the study	TM			0									0									-	2
	GM	1	0		1																	3	1
	ApM																					-	-
	MM										0											-	1
	AgM																0	0				-	3
	SM																			1		1	-
Aims and Purposes of the Study	TM							0		0			0									-	3
	GM		1					1														2	-
	ApM																					-	-
	MM												0			0			0			-	2
	AgM					0							0		0	0					0	-	5
	SM																					-	-
Further Studies	TM			0						1		1			0							2	3
	GM				1						1									1		3	-
	ApM																					-	-
	MM			0			1	0			0	1		1	0	1				1	1	9	4
	AgM																		0	1		1	2
	SM	1																				1	-
																						24 (43.6 %)	31 (56.4 %)

In this table, the horizontal columns present dissertations from which I have taken data. And the vertical columns present the areas of dissertations I based on for collecting data (problem definition, choice and interest of the study, aims and purposes of the study, and further studies). The PP maxims are abbreviated in this table: tact maxim (TM), approbation maxim (ApM), modesty maxim (MM), agreement maxim (AgM), and sympathy maxim (SP). The number each PP maxim is observed or violated is indicated in the horizontal columns of observances and violations.

Out of fifty-five sentences taken from different twenty different dissertations, I have found that the PP is more violated than it is observed in dissertations. This is comprehensive because research methodology courses do not care about politeness use in dissertations. Students in researches, write without tentativeness, tactfulness, hedging, etc just because it is an aspect neglected in practical courses they take.

From the above table, it is clearly visible that the Modesty maxim is the most observed by students in their dissertations by its frequencies. And the Agreement maxim is the most violated. My suggestions focus on the fact that we write to be read, and we speak to be listened. Each skill goes with its opposite skill. And in any case we are to think of what our addressee/audience will be likely while reading or listening to us. Now we will certainly make use of the PP in any case. The PP should be taught in research methodology courses, in conversation and other practical courses. It should be practiced by students in in-class lessons.

## 5. Conclusion

This article has been based on how students use the politeness principle in the dissertations. The results have shown the PP maxims are more violated than they are observed in dissertations. This is due to the fact that students, while writing, do not give much interest to the fact that they will be read. They think that their dissertations are just ceremonial for the graduation. To avoid violating more the politeness principle (PP) in both speaking and writing, I have suggested that the PP get taught to students in conversations and research methodology courses. Students should be familiarized to practicing the PP maxims in classroom reports and debates, in essay writing, in letters, etc.

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## APPENDIX

These data are collected in the following areas of third year students’ dissertations:

1. Problem Definition
2. Choice and Interest of the Work
3. Aims and purposes of the study
4. Further Studies

I selected 20 works divided as follows:

Grammar7, theoretical linguistics 8, and literature or applied linguistics 5.

1.

- I have chosen this topic because I observed that gender and language as a research field has been concerned with other languages, for example English. G
- ...it will help the readers to have a thorough knowledge of gendered compounds in English, but also in Bantu languages such as Ciluba. G
- In this dissertation, I have analysed not all the gendered compounds in English and Ciluba. M

2.

- The choice of this topic is inspired by my personal interest or desire to deepen knowledge of European languages, especially French. G\*
- As for its interest, it is useful too for other researchers, particularly teachers and learners of English. G

3.

- This dissertation deals with a contrastive analysis of quality adjectives in English and French. That is, it contrasts these two languages on the basis of quality adjectives in order to find out similarities and differences, the latter being the areas learners often experience difficulties in their learning process. T\*
- As a trainee in third and fourth forms at Katumba secondary school, I usually heard such wrong structures while interacting with my pupils. T\*
- This dissertation is helpful for both teachers and learners of English as foreign language. M\*
- ...they will be aware of different features of similarity between English and French quality adjectives. T\*
- ...further more, teachers will know the areas where their pupils can face difficulties in learning English, as far as quality adjectives are concerned. AG \*

4.

- Through the figures of style used from the beginning up to the end of the novel that can impede the listeners or readers of this novel, it is of a paramount importance for, me to enlighten some of them, and help people to understand or grasp the message contained or conveyed. G
- I let the work open to those who will try to focus their research in this domain. G

5.

- In writing this paper, I am to aware people in such situation, that white people consider black as machines, they have to work for them and later on to give insufficient salary. Ag \*

6.

- Indeed, this work is neither perfect nor exhaustive. Further research can fruitfully complete this one. M



7.

- I have chosen this topic because I have found during my training that English for Africa 4<sup>th</sup> does not containing a variety of grammar exercises. (sic). G
- ...above all, some teachers follow this coursebook blindly and are not able to divide their own exercise. T\*
- . But this study will remain a good source of inspiration for teachers and students. M\*

8.

- All in all this work is the human's production, remarks and suggestions will be welcomed. M

9.

- There are several possessive expressions in English. But a great number of them are not taught by teachers in some Congolese secondary schools. Ag\*
- -in the schools where all those expressions are taught, not all the teachers are informed about the approach to use for each case and the appropriate exercises to set for the mastery of the structures. Ag\*
- --this work is an answer to several queries that such teachers of English may have. M\*
- It would have been finer to either hear teacher's account of or observe how they got on with these expressions. T

10.

- Teachers will be informed on the adequacy of these textbooks in the use of non sexist language. M\*
- If teachers expect their pupils to use English as a means of communication in an appropriate way, they have to train them in the use of non sexist language. T\*
- I cannot claim that this dissertation is perfect. M
- This dissertation will be an important tool. M\*

11.

- This dissertation is not exhaustive, M
- that is the reason why I invite (G) other researchers to work on the same topic focusing on errors actually made by these learners in order to improve the findings.

12.

- This dissertation will be a helpful tool especially to teachers of English as a foreign language since it makes them aware of areas of similarities and differences between the two languages in the syntactic position of adverbs. T

13.

- Examiners without confusion will design suitable questionnaire upon the section as well as teachers will get knowledge of teaching scientific English in scientific section. T\*
- In this work, my first task is to clarify the difficulties on the taxonomy of questions in order to show its lacunas. T\*
- In this concern, we are going to focus my criticism on the question designed in order to help examiner to select good question in English. Ag\*
- We hope that those researchers who will find that this work is not exhaustive, we also try to bring their contribution for its improvement. M

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- With this teachers of English will be well equipped to help Luba speakers. M\*
- I close this work with the hope that this study will remain a good reference document for anyone. M\*
- Therefore as a human being, I am imperfect, M
- with this, the imperfections likely to be found in the work, the reader should consider them as a starting point for further research. T\*
- However, as a human being, I am imperfect. M

15.

- This dissertation was chosen by the fact that some English department students' dissertations are about tenses or the use of auxiliaries, language in English and analyzing the novel without criticizing the author's speech. Ag\*
- All remarks and suggestions from our readers will be welcome. M

16

- As a trainee at, I noticed that 4<sup>th</sup> form pupils could not use tenses of verbs correctly in making if-clauses. Ag\*
- The aim of this is to point out all different confusions of tenses made by pupils in making if-clauses. Ag\*

17.

- I have chosen this topic to show Kanyok people's ideologies about men and women and their view of the world. Ag\*
- This work will be an important tool for anyone interested in paremiology and paremiography, as well as in language and gender. M\*

18.

- It is often difficult for those, who read this to cath broadcast programmes. Ag \*

19.

- Many African societies and families are not at present what they could be. S

- it is this religion that exerted a prevailing influence on the traditional society and family to the extent that it became a threat for its cohesion. Ag\*
- Our people are complaining about their loss of traditional values and perhaps accuse one another. G
- I would like then, by the present monograph to warn our people, our readers not to accept blindly all the constraints that religion exert on our families. T
- we call the readers' attention to the fact that any human realization cannot be perfect or near perfect. M
- we would like to make the reader aware of the fact that the topic under study has not been treated exhaustively since we tackled one aspect of Christianity. M
- All positive remarks will be welcomed. Ag

20. W

- I realized that most of secondary school pupils from third and fourth forms were unable to communicate in English among themselves and with their teachers. Ap\*
- This dissertation aims at identifying the problems encountered by English teachers in teaching dialogues in third and fourth forms, and causes of students' failure to practice dialogues in every day communication and suggest remedies. Ag\*
- We have noted that teachers face to many serious problems according to which we have suggested adequate solutions above to allow our pupils to understand and succeed in our English tests. T\*