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## **Politeness Principle and Ilorin Greetings in Nigeria: A Sociolinguistic Study**

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### **Abstract**

This essay examines greetings as one of the elements of politeness in a Nigerian community and how it influences the cultural characteristics of the people. To analyze, this essay makes use of speech act theory and politeness principle and also considers the pragmatic context in analyzing different types of greetings such as condolences, departure and arrival, rejoicing, daily greetings, casual greetings, and seasonal or festivity greetings. The paper finds among others that 'greeting' is part of the culture of Ilorin people, and the failure to comply is an aberration. It does not only create warmth, but establishes relationships which go a long way in cementing communality. The paper concludes that Ilorin greetings are embedded in and constrained by cognition, social principles of communication, and the contexts of use. Little wonder why Ilorin greetings may come as carefully chosen, catchy, and precise words which are not without religious colorations.

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## 1. Introduction

The development of human culture is made possible through communication, and it is “through communication that culture is transmitted from one generation to another” (Schauer, 2009, p. 12). Culture and communication are intertwined so closely that Hall (1959, p. 5) maintains that “culture is communication” and “communication is culture”. Gudykunst and Kim (2003) emphasize that culture always affects the way interlocutors communicate because competent speakers know what is acceptable and appropriate in a given context or not. They know this because they have been socialized into a particular culture and have been made aware of the rules and expectations from an early stage. In this article, the greeting culture of the people of Ilorin, Kwara state is to be brought to the foreground.

Different sources have provided a history of Ilorin from perspectives which inevitably take into account the emirate and the throne of Ilorin primarily. The account in this paper is gathered from Wikipedia and other notes and stories told by the elderly in Ilorin. According to all these sources, the Ilorin Emirate is a traditional city in Kwara State located in the north-central part of Nigeria. It is considered as one of the Banza Bakwai, or copy-cats of the Hausa Kingdoms. At the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ilorin was a border town in the northeast of the Oyo Empire, with a mainly Yoruba population but with many Hausa-Fulani immigrants or slaves.

Ilorin was the headquarters of an Oyo General, Afonja who rebelled against the empire and helped bring about its collapse with the assistance of the Fulani. The rebellion was powered by Hausa, Nupe, and Borno Muslim slaves. Afonja had been assisted by Salih Janta, also called Sheik Alimi, a leader of the local Fulani. In 1824, Afonja was assassinated and Alimi’s son Abdulsalam became the Emir. Ilorin became an emirate of the Sokoto Caliphate. For some time, Ilorin became a major center of the slave trade.

Up till today, the influence of Alimi remains indelible as the throne of Ilorin is occupied by an *Emir* as it is in the far northern parts of Nigeria. However, Yoruba language remains

the legacy left behind by *Afonja*, the conquered warrior that settled in Ilorin before he was betrayed by the Fulani herdsmen. Since that conquest, hundreds of years ago, Yoruba has been the predominant language of the people. With this language, Ilorin people perform the three functions of language (i.e., interpersonal, interactional, and textual) according to Halliday (1994).

In Ilorin, little children are frequently told to respect their parents, teachers (Alfa or Ustaz), elderly ones, and their peer groups. However, because the process of first language (L1) socialization starts at a very early age and is continuous, involving a large number of diverse rules (e.g., non-verbal such as bending down in some certain contexts like mosques or some important gatherings; addressing certain interlocutors by the expression ‘e’ (plural in place of singular for elderly people; apologizing for doing something wrong such as stepping on someone’s foot etc.), members of a particular culture tend not to think of these rules as being culture-specific but often assume that these rules will be universally applicable.

Our concern in this paper is the language of greetings as well as the other forms of greetings with different themes. The meanings embedded in the actions and utterances are examined using a synthesis of pragmatic and sociolinguistic theories in a pragma-sociolinguistic theory. Before, dwelling on greetings in the following section, we shall review a major aspect of the acts of courtesy known as culture in Yoruba land. Yoruba land comprises Oyo, Osun, Ogun, Ondo, Ekiti, Lagos, and some parts of Kwara and Kogi states in Nigeria.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Greetings and Yoruba Culture

Culture is not a static phenomenon. It comes to play as Ilorin people conduct their daily activities. Culture denotes a body of shared knowledge; that is, what people “must know in order to act as they do” (Quinn & Holland, 1987, p. 4). ‘Act’ in this sense includes verbal acts in the spoken or the written mode. The shared knowledge in verbal behavior refers to the familiar conventions followed in using language, which makes it easier for us to

“interpret” or “make sense” of one another’s utterances and actions (Kachru, 1999, p. 77).

According to Ekanjume-Ilongo (2013), greeting is a way by which people consciously and deliberately make their presence felt by other(s), show attention, and suggest a type of relationship or social status between themselves and others. According to Akindele (2007, p.3) “greetings can be described as the exchange of expressions, pleasantries, or good wishes between two people or a group interacting for the purpose of fulfilling social obligations or for the purposes of establishing interpersonal relationship”. Greetings can be described as a kind of collaboration, which does not just proceed at random, but obeys certain rules. Greeting is an expression of pleasure while meeting someone (Akmajian, Demers, Farmer, & Harnish, 2001). But these expressions can vary enormously in complexity and formality.

## 2.2. Politeness Principle

This section focuses on politeness theories that are of particular relevance to inter-language-pragmatics in the present investigation. For a general overview of key issues in linguistic politeness see Eelen (2001), Fraser (1990), and Watts (2003). Western-European as well as Anglo-American contexts of greetings is worth investigating. For politeness theories in Asian context see, for example, Chen (2001), Gu (1990), Pizziconi (2003), and Fukada and Asato (2004).

Like the speech act theory, cooperative principle, and the concept of conversational implicature, politeness theory is generally regarded as one of the corner stones of pragmatics. The question of what constitutes a polite utterance has been a vocal point of pragmatic investigation since the late 1970s (Kasper, 1990). One of the first scholars who concentrated on linguistic politeness in a pragmatic sense was Lakoff (1987), who “could well be called the mother of modern politeness” (p. 86). Lakoff (1987) argued that “the pillars of our linguistic as well as non-linguistic interactions with each other’ are to make one clear and be polite” (p. 86).

With regard to the first pillar, ‘make yourself clear’, Lakoff’s (1987) argument is influenced

by Grice’s (1975) work and his maxims of the co-operative principle. Concerning the second pillar, ‘be polite’, she proposes three rules of politeness: formality, which holds that ‘don’t impose/remain aloof’, hesitancy, which allows the addressee his opinions and equality, or camaraderie which suggests that one acts as though one is equal with the addressee in order to make him feel good (Lakoff, 1987). Other than Grice’s (1975) maxims of the cooperative principle, Lakoff’s (1987) rules of politeness are to some degree mutually exclusive. Thus, while the rule of formality involves addressing hearers by their last name and the t-form of you (in languages that make this V/t form distinction), the rule of equality/camaraderie postulates using the interlocutors’ first name and the t-form of you.

Lakoff (1987) stresses that the appropriate rules of politeness which have to be selected by the speaker depending on the contextual conditions was also a major factor in Grice’s (1975) cooperative principle and conversational implicature. However, while he concentrated more on contextual components such as shared background knowledge, Lakoff (1987) focuses on issues such as status, differences between interlocutors, degree of familiarity between speaker and hearer, and the culture in which the utterance is made. She argued that these three factors are crucial in what constitute a polite utterance or not. For example, in many western societies it could be regarded as impolite, if a lower status speaker calls a higher hearer by his first name when they have not been previously invited to do so by the higher hearer.

The importance of factors such as differences between the interlocutor and relative power of the speaker and the hearer has been stressed by Mey (2001) in his investigation of linguistic politeness. In addition to the two aforementioned factors, Mey (2001) included a further element in his study which then formed the third factor of his investigation of linguistic politeness, namely the degree of imposition involved in their utterance directed at the hearer. The interlocutors’ status and the degree of the imposition involved in the individual request will provide the basis for the contextual conditions.

Mey (2001) also introduced the distinction of interlocutors' positive and negative face in politeness research. The term *face* was based on Goffman's (1967) notion of face as the "positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (p. 5). Thus, "face is something that resides not within an individual, but rather within the flow of event in an encounter" (Holtgrave, 2001, p.30) and "something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (Mey, 2001, p. 34). According to Mey (2001, p. 34) a person's negative face is then referred to a person's "freedom of action and freedom from imposition" and their positive face is referred to a person's desire being appreciated and approved by at least some other people.

Mey (2001) suggests that it was to the mutual interest of interlocutors to maintain their respective faces and not to use language that would lead to the loss of face of either of the parties. They also considered some speech acts, such as requests, to be intrinsically impolite and therefore face-threatening, which lead them to label them face-threatening-acts (FTAs). Acts that fall into this category, such as complaint and refusal, have been one of the key research areas in interlanguage pragmatics. Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of face is not regarded as uncontroversial in pragmatic research. Nevertheless, their ideas have inspired much research on politeness and pragmatics and helped to establish terminologies, such as face, face-threat and face-loss, which have been useful for pragmatics as a discipline.

Another important contributor to politeness theory was Leech (1983, p. 132) who developed his politeness principle as a component of this interpersonal rhetoric framework, containing six maxims:

1. Tact i.e., minimize cost to others; maximize benefit to others
2. Generosity i.e., minimize benefit to self and maximize benefit to self
3. Appropriation i.e., minimize dispraise of others; maximize praise of others
4. Modesty i.e., minimize praise of self and maximize dispraise of self

5. Argument i.e., minimize the disagreement between self and others; maximize the agreement between self and others
6. Sympathy i.e., minimizes antipathy between self and others; maximize sympathy between self and others.

Although Leech's (1983) politeness principle has been also been criticized (see, for example, Mey, 2001), his tact, appropriation, and sympathy maxims are helpful in explaining while speakers employ certainties and modifiers to formulate their request utterance. Also, of particular relevance to the present investigation of learner's productive pragmatic development in requests is Leech's (1983) observation that indirect requests are regarded as more polite than direct requests in English, because they appear more tentative. He explains that the reason for this was that their illocutionary force diminishes and they provide higher degree of optionality.

Fraser's (1990) views of politeness approaches the issues from a somewhat different angle. His conversational contact (CC) view of politeness is based on the belief that interlocutors are conscious of their right and obligation with effects on their communication with each other. With regard to present investigation this would mean that students are aware that professors have a higher status than they do in the institutional context, which in turn would normally result in students using a higher amount of strategies toward their professors than vice versa. Although not specifically related to the academic context in Fraser's (1990) article, he illustrates deferential behavior as follow: The sentence, 'would you mind helping me today?' used to indirectly convey a request, is certainly more deferential than 'help me today'. The former conveys to hearers, if only symbolically, that they have a choice in deciding whether or not to comply, hence that they are more highly "appreciated in the estimation of the speaker" (Fraser, 1990, p. 233). Importantly, he also argues that polite behavior is the expected norm in conversation and that rational participants in a conversation are expected to adhere to the norm of the conversational contract (i.e., should behave according to their rights and obligations as an interlocutor based on the contextual conditions). This notion is significant for this study, as it points towards

the potential problems students in the study above contexts may encounter.

### 2.3. The Speech Act Theory

The foundations of the speech act theory were laid by philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Austin, and Searle. Although Wittgenstein (1953, cited in Schauer, 2009) made an important contribution to pragmatics by stating that language was a social activity and that “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (p. 463), it is Austin who is generally regarded as the father of pragmatics and the speech act theory (Mey, 2001). Austin’s (1962) theory was based on his belief that speakers do not merely use language to say things, but to do things and those utterances could be regarded as speech acts. Based on this notion he developed a system which distinguished three components of speech acts:

1. the locutionary act i.e., the actual words that the speaker uses
2. the illocutionary act i.e., the intention of force behind the words
3. the perlocutionary act i.e., the effect the utterance has on the hearer

For example, in the sentence ‘it’s cold in here!’ the locutionary act is simply the statement that the temperature in the room is rather low. The illocutionary act refers to what the speaker intended to achieve by making the utterance, in this case that the hearer closes the window or turns up the radiator. The perlocutionary effect of the utterance could then be observed if the hearer interprets the sentence as a request and remedies the situation the speaker commented on. Of the three speech act constituents, it is the illocutionary act which has received the most attention in pragmatics research. Closely associated with the notion of illocutionary acts is the concept of illocutionary force, “which is the communicative plan or design behind speakers’ remark”.

### 2.4. Context in Pragmatics

Context is usually understood to mean the immediately preceding discourse and the situation of the participants (see Brown & Levinson, 1987). Our major concern in this paper is to look at the place of context in

greetings especially in the culture of the people of Ilorin. According to Ayodabo (2012), context can be described as the place in which a communicative event occurs. He went further by saying a context would involve discussing the setting with regard to time and place. Allan (1986, p. 36) has used the term ‘context’ to mean any one or more of three different kinds of things. These are:

- i. Setting which is defined in spatio-temporal location of the utterance, i.e., on the particular time (movement) and particular place at which S utters U and the particular time and place at which H hears or reads U.
- ii. The world spoken in U, and
- iii. Textual environment, which is provided by the TEXT in which U appears, i.e., the set of utterances of which U is a member and which together constitute a cohesive semantic unit.

Adegbija (1982) says the term context refers to the relevant aspects of the physical or social setting of an utterance or discourse. He has identified four broad types of contexts (i.e., physical, sociocultural, linguistic, and psychological) as impinging on utterance interpretation.

The pertinent questions for probing into the physical context include: Did the communicative event occur at night, in the morning, twenty years ago, at a church, at a mosque, in a bedroom, in a market, at a cemetery, at a hospital? With the sociocultural, one may ask questions such as: what are the beliefs, habits, value system or culture of those involved? Are they Nigerians, English people, Americans, Arabs, Russians, or Germans? What are their religious and cultural beliefs and how do they relate to situations at hand? Linguistically, what other words are appearing in the environment of the word used? What do they mean? What do they imply within the physical and sociocultural setting? Psychologically, what is the state of mind of those involved in the interaction?

Lawal (2012) believes that “language and context are so intricately interwoven that a piece of language can create its own context(s) and, conversely, certain contexts of social interaction tend to predetermine their own language forms” (p. 161). Lawal (2012) has

thus identified levels of contexts as: 'situational', 'psychological', 'social', 'socio-cultural', and 'cosmological'. There are several other scholars who have done considerable works on the place of context of a form of greetings. At this juncture, we shall examine the greeting forms among the Ilorin people of Nigeria.

### 3. Data Presentation and Analyses

We present the data for this study and analyze them accordingly. The data are greetings in Yoruba language, the language of the natives of Ilorin. A few of these greetings have been examined in this section in order for us to situate them pragmatically and sociolinguistically to reconcile the themes of the greetings with the relevance they have in a culturally conscious neighborhood such as Ilorin. The data are analyzed below:

#### 3.1. Greeting the Elderly and the Young

The elderly are sacredly respected in Ilorin. The major difference in the greetings of the elderly and the young is in the use of pronominals. The pronominal /é/ and /əu/ are used interchangeably for the old and young, respectively. A conversation is presented thus:

Mr. A: ɛpèlè fa (sorry indeed)  
 Mr. B: oooo (okay)  
 Mr. A. sé ara yín mún okun (Hope you are strong?)  
 Mr. B: adupe lówó olórun  
 Mr. A. Báwo nin báyíí (How is it now?)  
 Mr. B. Ara ti balè (Health is better)

Two honorifics are observed in the conversation above between Mr. A and Mr. B. Mr. A is obviously a younger person to Mr. B who seems to have a health challenge. In his choice of Yoruba pronominals, he uses /é/ instead of /ó/ or /əu/ and also the word "yín" instead of /ó/ or /əu/. The two words represent the "you" as subject pronoun and "you" as object of the sentence. Society approves that the young should not call the elders by their names neither should they use same referring expressions for both their peers and the aged. This agrees with Lakoff's (1987) idea that the appropriate rule of politeness is a major factor in a cooperative principle and conversational implicature.

Greeting the elderly by using the appropriately deserving honorifics is a virtue which is appreciated in Ilorin. The choices are not strange and as such interlocutors share similar background knowledge. Lakoff (1987) focuses on issues such as status and differences between interlocutors, degree of familiarity between speakers and hearers, and the culture in which the utterance is made. On the other hand a younger person can be greeted with the words which are unmarked by the respectful pronominal choices. Thus, a younger and older person can be greeted thus:

Mr. A. (Old): Epèlé  
 Mr. A. (Young): Pèlé

The difference between the two words above is in the clipping of the latter to pèlé while the initial /ɛ/ is elided for specificity. There are other forms and reasons for greetings.

#### 3.2. Loss of Life

When an indigene of Ilorin is bereaved, certain utterances are heard. These utterances are as exemplified in the conversation below.

Mr. A.: Epèlé fa (sorry indeed)  
 Mrs. B.: Eseun (thank you)  
 Mr. A. ekú orò omo, esì kú iròjú (I salute your motherly patience and courage)  
 Mrs. B.: àwa nùuni (Here we are)  
 Mr. A.: àdíní írú è mún lólá ànánbì. (May this not repeat itself by the grace of Prophet Mohammad, S. A. W)  
 Mr. B.: àmín (amen)  
 Mr. A.: ṣṣṣṣ yio se àrò padà olóore (God will replace the baby with a better one)

The pragmatics of association in Ilorin requires that people come around to visit the bereaved. The context of the greetings in the conversation above is that of woman whose son died. "Epèlé fa" means sorry indeed as it is the first pacifying statement expected from sympathizers. The context is of the dead. The environment is tense and serious because someone has lost a child. The "Epèlé fa" is a speech act which does the initial expression of sympathy. Thus, speaker A sympathizes with speaker B. The society accepts that people identify with whoever loses a relation as a mark of empathy and consolation. This act brings succor to the bereaved and post-humus



### 3.5. Politeness Issues and the Ilorin Indigenes

In Ilorin like other communities in Nigeria, there is a sense in which politeness has been inculcated into the upbringing of children. From the first extract of conversations which serve as data in this study, the maxims of politeness have been obeyed evidently from not just the role relations but in the choices of words used to address the circumstance needing mutual share of fortune. Leech (1983) develops politeness principles as a component of his interpersonal rhetorical framework. The principles include tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy. We can appreciate these principles in the behavior of Ilorin people when a fellow indigene falls victim of any ill.

Whenever Ilorin people say “*olórun yó fi òfò ra èmí*”, meaning God will recompense the loss with longevity, they imply that there is a spiritual interface between losses and longevity. In other words, human life is viewed as more important than mundane things in form of cars, houses, clothes, household utensils, and other valuables which can be stolen or gutted away by fire. Whenever evil strikes an individual in Ilorin, people rally round him, to comfort him as a mark of love. This is because they acknowledge that such acts are from Allah. This kind of association has religious colorations and far-reaching implications on communal relationships.

A response such as “*aò nín fí irú è gbàá*”, meaning such will not befall you too, and what follows is an “amen”, because it is a goodwill prayer. This mindset agrees with Lakoff's (1987) idea of equality in politeness. It is believed that no human being is immortal. The status of immortality lends strength to the belief that human beings are susceptible to all kinds of mishap. It could be in form of road crashes or domestic accidents, the truth is that when there is a gory incident the victim should be sympathized with, without any humiliation from the empathizers.

The use of honorifics such as the morpheme /*é*/ for elderly people and /*o*/ for contemporaries agrees with Leech's (1983) principles of politeness whose markers are culture-based. Culture, however, reflects more in both the language people speak and their physical

appearance, i.e., dresses, food, shelter, and religion. In Yoruba parlance, the use of /*é*/ is noticed when there is an interaction between a younger and an older person. The younger person addresses the older person using the /*é*/ pronoun which is also used when people relate to more than one person. This term is culture-based and not observed in English language where the pronoun “you” and “you” are represented at the subject and object positions of a sentence as illustrated below:

You are a strong man  
S     V     C

The pronoun “you” occupies the subject position and serves as the subject of the sentence.

The man called you  
S     V     O

The pronoun “you” in the sentence above occupies the object position and serves as the object of the sentence. Yoruba language also has “*àwon*” (them) as plural of “*òhun*” (him). When an older person is to be addressed in Ilorin, the younger person would use the plural marking pronominal, “*àwon*” as a sign of respect for the elderly. There are many other instances of politeness demonstrated by Ilorin people. For instance, in a case of bargain of price between a trader and her customer, we have a locution of prayers as in Mrs. A: “*kòngé oore loose*” which means “you will be fortunate”. Mrs. A: also says “*ooní ko alágbèédá*”, which means “armed robbers will not rid you of your property”. The younger lady who is haggling prices of the commodities will be dumbfounded and weak. She replies, “*amin*”, which means “amen”. The politeness strategy employed by the trader is that of tact and generosity. The buyer then buys in pity of the trader who wishes to sell her goods. Trading is a major profession of Ilorin women. They do well by using attention catching words politely to win buyers to their sides especially where there are competitors for customers.

### 4. Concluding Remarks

After a pragma-sociolinguistic analysis of greetings in Ilorin, the following findings were recorded.



- Greetings is part of the culture of Ilorin people, and the failure to comply is an aberration
- Greetings create warmth unquantifiable among people in the same community or compound
- Greetings establish relationships which go a long way
- Greetings create a friendly atmosphere, relieve pain, allay fears, and assure the personality that is wearied
- Greetings promote the culture of Ilorin as a peace-loving and communal society
- Greetings portray people to be kind, humble, and friendly in the Ilorin culture
- Greetings is a strategy to win the heart of would-be customers
- Greetings in Ilorin require the physical act of bending down or squatting to greet each other.

Ilorin greetings have been examined using theories and elements of pragmatics. As it is already known, the aim of pragmatics is to investigate how meanings which are generated from utterances beyond the reliance on only the linguistic properties of the utterances made. It is obviously believed by many users of any language that language is the means of communication and there is the great need for members of a society to communicate, condole, rejoice, and sympathize, etc., with each other. It therefore behooves one to properly account for the meanings contained in the utterances of either friends, relatives, neighbors, business partners, and co-sellers. That is why greetings in a Yoruba language speaking environment was considered for study in this article.

Suffice it to say that Ilorin greetings are embedded in and constrained by cognition, social principles of communication, and the surrounding contexts. The analysis of the utterances in this paper has shown that the participants in discourse exchanges in this paper are careful users of words and performers of many actions with few utterances. Their utterances and actions are conditioned by Islamic rites and tenets. That is why words of prayer usually form responses from victims of mishaps who were visited by sympathizers. Studies into the culture of people could be approached multi-disciplinarily. Our attempt in this paper has

been to investigate the culture of greetings in Yoruba language and specifically in the Ilorin culture.

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