

## A Cross-cultural Pragmatic Comparison of Some Polite Forms in English and Kihavu

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**ABSTRACT:** This article probes into Leech's Interpersonal Rhetoric and more precisely the politeness principles chosen in expressing politeness in English and Kihavu. It pinpoints the main differences and similarities of politeness as well as the different cultural features pertaining to connotational aspects of politeness in both English and Kihavu. It draws instances from actual speech situations in either language to show how politeness is expressed by English people differently from Havu people owing to their different cultural backgrounds. Throughout this research, the findings have revealed that an accurate selection of the politeness principle to employ and a good mastery of the English culture by Havu people are vital to avoid being misconstrued by English interlocutors, especially in the perspective of cross-cultural communication. Further, this research has been possible thanks to the library and ethnographical researches, the socio-linguistic and pragmatic approaches, the analytical method and interviews.

**KEYWORDS:** Pragmatic Comparison, Cooperative Principle (CP), Politeness Principle (PP), Irony Principle (IP) and Cross-cultural Communication.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics has long mesmerized researchers in socio-linguistics from the early sixties and seventies, especially when they found certain issues related to the contextual use of language that syntax, semantics and phonology could not deal with. In fact, a key distinction in pragmatics is that it uses utterances from real life situations to attribute meaning through social force.

In Austin and Searle's view quoted by Mey (2001:7) pragmatics posits that by an utterance, a speaker not only says something but performs an action of informing, explaining, arguing, appreciating, complimenting, stating, etc. It is a study that evolves into performatives, a hypothesis of speech act which holds that a speech event embodies three acts namely locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. They pursue saying that in pragmatics, implicature is important in knowing the implicit meaning of an utterance derived from context that is present from its conventional use and therefore the success of communication is made possible because interlocutors cooperate in conversation by contributing to an ongoing discourse.

Comparing and contrasting English and Havu polite illocutions in the context of cross-cultural communication requires an analysis of those polite forms considered in their respective contexts of production and the reference to Brown and Levinson's model of linguistic politeness(1983) in which they state some universal features. Moreover, the selection of the principle of politeness to use in different circumstances and the maxims of politeness obligatorily upheld in peculiar illocutions from the two languages hold an important part of analysis in the comparison made in the present work.

#### 1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Some language users tend to use any kind of expression towards their addressees regardless the latter's cultural background. The problem is thus to know how a culture-specific way of expressing politeness can profoundly hamper the communication process and create total pragmatic failure due to interactants' ignorance of the cultural features and pragmatic principles that govern the language being used.

## **1.2 WORKING POLICY**

In the completion of the present research, I resorted to assorted methods or approaches, techniques and processes respectively in data analysis, comparison and collection. The library research consisted of intensive reading of books on pragmatics, cross-cultural comparisons and politeness to have a general overview on the topic under study. The ethnographical research aimed at getting into contact with native speakers of English and Kihavu in order to figure out the way polite illocutions are handled pragmatically. Mulamba (2009:7) states that this particular research method consists of either an oral or a written contact with informants also known as respondents, subjects or interviewees. The pragmatic approach in its comparative form helped quite a lot in the analysis and comparison of polite illocutions I got from structured and unstructured interviews in both English and Kihavu. Adler (1980:73) argues on this point that analyzing utterances requires their contextual interpretation taking into account certain pragmatic principles. In Douglas and Coleman's view (2001:21) 'through interviews, the researcher is able to collect data regarding information related to his/her subjects' communicative behavior.'

## **2 THEORETICAL FRAME ON POLITENESS AND CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION**

To make the present investigation reliable, it is worth stating its theoretical setting and background as well as the different scholars' views on the issues under study. Politeness is a kind of social phenomenon, an approach used in order to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationship, and a kind of conventional behavioral norm (Jiang, 2010:1). In expressing politeness, people need to be cooperative, i.e. they have to adopt an appropriate style and uphold the maxims of the Cooperative Principle. Grice espouses this view saying that the Cooperative Principle (CP) works hand in hand with the Politeness Principle (PP) in the sense that the utterer of a polite illocution has to observe truthfulness (quality maxim), informativeness (quantity maxim), relevance (relation maxim) and style (manner maxim). When people want to display a more acceptable attitude in their interaction whether the situation is formal or informal, they absolutely need to resort to politeness using well-chosen and clear principles of courteousness. In this perspective, Lakoff (1973:297) postulates two rules of pragmatic competence with three sub-maxims under the second rule: Be Clear and Be Polite

Do not impose (Formal Politeness)

Give Options (Informal Politeness)

Make the Addressee Feel Good (Intimate Politeness). In addition, to get the expected goal in expressing politeness, a pragmatic interpretation of polite utterances is paramount. Lyons (1977:34) asserts on this point that both addressers and addressees are supposed to be interpreters to get the expected message in conversational exchanges. As for Gazdar (1979:53) emphasized how the study of meanings of polite words in pragmatics should not overlook the language use. Moreover, Crystal and Davy (1969:13) confirm that a good language study requires its pragmatic use, i.e. how language illocutions are used in different situations. I particularly paid heed to the above scholars' views in trying to consider both English and Havu polite illocutions in the contexts or situations they are uttered to show clearly the main convergent and divergent aspects of the two languages. In the present investigation, the adjective cross-cultural refers to what involves or contains ideas from two or more different countries or cultures (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, 2001:351). This pragmatic comparison is based on similar and different aspects constituting the core of contextual polite illocutions in both English and Kihavu. The term cross-cultural communication has also been sketched out to show how English and Havu people can interact in English and the factors that bump smooth conversation between them. While dealing with politeness as a universal factor across cultures, Leech Geoffrey (1991:79) highlights that interactants belonging to different cultures should do their best to minimize impolite attitudes and maximize polite attitudes in conversation. This is what Stephen and Kurt (1999:206) consider as the best way of keeping the addressee's face inviolable. Espousing this view point in his theory on Face Threatening Acts (FTA's), Goffman (1963:12) asserts that 'face is sacred and inviolable to every single person and it is the most basic and cannot be neglected to every communicator.' Cross-cultural communication usually refers to the communication between any two people under different cultural background. It includes not only the international cultural communication but also communication across different races or ethnic groups in the same country, and communication between different groups under the same culture. It is a verbal communication between two ethnic groups. In cross-cultural communication, cultural differences play an important role in speech act and in the disciplines of speech use. Moreover, people tend to use the principles of their own culture as the standard to explain and evaluate other people's behavior. This is what is called pragmatic transfer. Due to this, pragmatic failure occurs easily and cross-cultural communication is blocked (Jiang Zhu, 2010:1). This is my reason in this study to spell out how polite illocutions are used cross-culturally in English and Kihavu and how to make them more easily understood in the context of cross-cultural communication.

## 2.1 THE CONCEPT OF POLITENESS IN ENGLISH

The British linguist Leech (1983:79) gave six politeness principles according to the English culture. Though they are not equally important in different utterances, but to some extent, summarize the English people's behaviors of politeness that they display while uttering polite illocutions in different situations. They are listed hereafter:

- (1) Tact Maxim: Minimize cost to other or maximize benefit to other;
- (2) Generosity Maxim: Minimize benefit to self or maximize cost to self;
- (3) Approbation Maxim: Minimize dispraise of other or maximize praise of other;
- (4) Modesty Maxim: Minimize praise of self or maximize dispraise of self;
- (5) Agreement Maxim: Minimize disagreement between self and other or maximize agreement between self and other;
- (6) Sympathy Maxim: Minimize antipathy between self and other and maximize sympathy between self and other.

As it can obviously be seen in the above maxims, though Leech resorted to his culture to work them out, they somehow summarize all human beings' attitudes in terms of politeness. However, cultural language features differentiate the way those maxims are used and observed in utterances and that makes possible a specific way of expressing politeness by different ethnic groups or societies.

## 2.2 THE CONCEPT OF POLITENESS IN KIHAVU

In Kihavu, politeness as a rhetorical device is based on the following basic concepts and principles: enhancement, clear diction of illocutions, irony, fear, non-verbal or gestural illocutions to show a high degree of politeness, humility and connotational or symbolic expressions. Firstly, the enhancement which is not found in Leech's model consists of using a culture-specific term at the end of a polite illocution as a way of improving or making an illocution more polite. Secondly, a clear diction of illocutions refers to an accurate selection of polite utterances to use in specific contexts. Thirdly, to reach their aim or find what they are looking for, Havu people often tend to use ironical terms related to their culture and display a kind of fear while talking to authorities for reasons of high consideration or respect. In addition, they use gestures as a kind of overstatement that shows how polite they always are, and finally humble themselves and use cultural terms that pertain to the values, qualities and strength embodied in their culture.

## 3 CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES BETWEEN ENGLISH AND HAVU POLITENESS

In any society or group all around the world, people's behavior is restricted by politeness and maintained by face (Jia quoted in Jiang, 2010:849). In Havu culture, people's behavior is often dictated by 'the social etiquette' based on class distinctions or people's cultural positions in the community. The restriction of etiquette on Havu people's behaviors of politeness overtly shows how they are different in nature from English people and other cultures all around the world. These differences are clearly exemplified in the connotational use of politeness, the selection of the principle of politeness and the way politeness is expressed in different circumstances in both English and Kihavu.

### 3.1 CONNOTATIONAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ENGLISH AND HAVU POLITENESS

Though English people's life is mainly centered indoors, i.e. not caring about other people's privacy; when they express politeness, they respect the principle of inviolability of the hearer's face and utter their polite illocutions purposefully not only to display politeness but also to reach their aim in communication. This is often found in invitations and demands for things. Moreover, English native speakers never use greetings as an overstatement to praise the hearer (approbation) but simply consider formal, semi-formal, informal, neutral situation and time depending on the hearer's professional status. Kihavu native speakers on the contrary overestimate the hearer in greetings, especially when they expect a help or anything special from him/her.

- (1) Good morning/good afternoon/good evening sir/madam→Hello sir [ English]
- (2) Hi, sir [ English]
- (3) Rhwàlámúsiz'ómúkùlù [Kihavu]
- (4) Òkóméré sí múzáwé [Kihavu]

As it is remarkably shown in the above four ways of greeting people, they denote different meanings and goals as far as the utterer is concerned in his respective culture. In fact, utterance (1) being a formal English greeting simply takes into account time and the status of the hearer without another intention other than that of greeting someone formally and utterance (2) as an informal English way of greeting people takes into consideration the circumstance and the familiarity and close social relationship between the addresser and the addressee. Utterance (3) meaning 'Our greeting, dear elder/chief' however, as a formal Havu way of greeting others has a two-fold connotation. First, the utterer may be any lower class Havu person greeting his/her upper class Havu person counterpart. Second, it may be uttered by any Kihavu native speaker who expects a hand or help from his/her addressee. Then, to persuade the addressee in advance to grant a hand, the cultural word 'ómúkùlù', i.e. 'chief/elder or great person' is used ironically together with that greeting to show the addressee that he/she is the only source of salvation so that a grant to the speaker becomes somehow compulsory. It is worth noting here that while uttering this greeting, though the speaker uses the term 'ómúkùlù', age factor is not stressed. Finally, utterance (4) is used among Havu peers or any Havu person who wants to be familiar to his/her interlocutor. Due to this cultural influence, a Kihavu native speaker may overestimate a native English speaker in greetings with intentional purposes, an overstatement which is conducive to pragmatic failure. For instance, if a Kihavu native speaker expecting a help from an English person says 'Hello, great man/woman', the first reaction would be denying that greatness before conversation takes place. Hence, as a pragmatic principle, the selection of a principle of politeness to use firstly depends on the one hand on the native language (mother tongue) characteristics and cultural language characteristics of the addressee on the other hand, especially in cross-cultural communication. That is why all speakers need to master the cultural characteristics of the target language.

### **3.2 SIMILARITIES IN THE USE OF POLITENESS IN ENGLISH AND KHAVU**

Politeness being a universal phenomenon found in almost all world cultures is expressed in the same way in English and Kihavu, especially in the use of the Cooperative Principle to maximize politeness and in the way addressers make an effort to keep their addressee's face inviolable. In whatsoever circumstances both language users are tactful in their polite illocutions, i.e. They maximize the hearer's chance to interpret the message contained in the polite utterances they produce and flout the less prevalent maxims of the CP and PP within the same sorts of utterances.

### **3.3 DIFFERENCES IN THE USE OF POLITENESS IN ENGLISH AND KHAVU**

This point examines both English and Havu polite forms produced in different circumstances in order to see if they are uttered observing certain cultural norms and to find in their use the aspects of language that can impede cross-cultural communication. They are found hereafter:

#### **3.3.1 GREETINGS AND RESPONSES**

Important as greetings are in people's daily lives, they are culturally conducted in a different way in English and Kihavu. In English for instance, when people meet for the first time; they usually say 'How do you do?' and 'Nice to meet you!' but in Kihavu, the expressions 'mwàlègérèrè' and 'mwàzúkírè' are immediately used instead to start conversation with known or unknown persons. The first expression means 'Good morning' while the second means 'Good afternoon and/or good evening.' Other culture bound sorts of greetings are found in the following illocutions:

(1) → A: Lébé wée, óndángúlè! Which means 'Mister x, make me see!'

B: Àyìrwísè. It means 'He has understood'

(2) → A: Hello, dear President of the USA.

B: Hello!

(3) → A: Hello Mr. David Cameron, former UK Prime Minister.

B: Hello!

The above three types of greetings show clearly how English people are different from Havu people in terms of politeness. In effect, for utterance (1) the person who greets does not directly convey his/her greeting to the hearer considered as the Representative of the Havu culture and custom but asks one of the persons around the chief to greet him even though the physical or body distance between the speaker and cultural authority is not considerable. In greeting that authority through another person, he/she must stand still without uttering any other word waiting for a reply. Such an indirect way of greeting an authority is not found in English culture. If a native speaker of Kihavu greets a cultural authority the way it is done in

utterance (2) and (3) he/she can be considered rude and even be sentenced to some weeks or days of imprisonment. Illocutions (2) and (3) are considered formal and polite as they are followed by titles of respect respectively 'President of the USA' and 'Former Prime Minister of the UK.' In English culture, a polite is directly addressed to the person concerned and the latter gives a response depending on the language used (formal, informal, neutral, tentative, and diplomatic...). But in Havu culture, people totally uphold the approbation maxim in certain greetings like 'wàzúkírè sí Cùbàkà' to mean literally 'Good morning builder.' In principle, when mature and old Havu persons greet a young boy, they add the tribal term 'Cùbàkà' as a way of praising and showing that the addressee is someone whose ideas and hard work will help the culture thrive and go forward.

### 3.3.2 OFFERS: OFFERING FOOD AND DRINK

The way English people offer food and drinks differs enormously from the Havu way as it is seen in the following polite illocutions:

- (1) Have bread and butter.
- (2) Have a glass of whisky.
- (3) Rhòlábúnó búshà, i.e. 'Take this nothing.'
- (4) Nywà k'órhúrhwínjì, 'Drink this drop of water.'

Taking into account the way politeness is handled in the aforementioned offers, we realize that they denote different meanings of politeness inherent to the culture and language in which they are produced. In (1) and (2) we see that the speaker takes into account the hearer's face and uphold the tact maxim by maximizing benefit to offer food (bread and butter) and drink (a glass of whisky). If an English person offers a glass of whisky, it neither means more than a glass or less of it. On the contrary, Havu people often offer less to mean more. In fact, the offered food is minimized in (3) and the drink offered in (4), a kind of nothingness and minimization employed in Havu offers for reasons of excessive understatement and modesty. For Havu people, it is only by minimizing sufficient food and drink that they have offered, can the modesty maxim be upheld.

### 3.3.3 APOLOGIES AND THEIR REPLIES

Both English and Havu people apologize in their language whenever they realize that they have offended the addressee and the latter's responses are interpreted in the following ways of apologizing:

- (1) →A:- Ómbér'óbónjò Nnàkùnò 'Please, do forgive me, dear Landowner'  
 B:-Nàyùnvírhè mwáná wání 'I have understood, my child.' → (forgiving)  
 -Ntàkàyémér'ékyò 'I cannot accept that.' → (displeasure in reaction to an apology)
- (2) →A: -I'm awfully sorry for killing your cat.  
 B: -Never mind (forgiving)  
 -That's unacceptable (displeasure in reaction to an apology).

Pragmatically, the above two ways of apologizing are different in this that in (1) the utterer uses the cultural term 'Nnàkùnò', i.e. Landowner to get the hearer's immediate forgiveness and the two replies (positive and negative) are polite because the hearer mitigates the illocutionary responses in order not to threaten the one who apologized (addresser). In (2) however, the speaker humbles himself/herself while apologizing but the negative reply to that apology directly threatens the one who apologized and can create in him a kind of fear and anxiety.

### 3.3.4 INVITATIONS AND RESPONSES

Sapir (1970:61) shows concerning invitations how politeness is conducted in English culture. In addition, Prosser (1978:26) asserts that English people tend to present a three-step conversational model like the following: the speaker makes an invitation, the hearer politely refuses an invitation and the speaker stops making an invitation. This is shown in the following instance: A: Stay with us for dinner tonight.

B: No, thanks, please don't bother.

A:—

In the above invitation, the utterance seems to embody an impositive side because in uttering it the speaker does not make a lot of effort to minimize threat on the hearer's face (Bald on record strategy) probably because they all have the same social and professional status. But in the reply, the utterer uses the negative politeness strategy to disagree with the speaker. The words 'thanks' and 'please' are used just as way of disagreeing politely. Unlike English people, Havu people use quite different illocutions to invite others as it can be seen hereafter:

A: Ínj'óyíj'ókúbúhyà bwàni 'Please, do come to my wedding tomorrow.'

B: Wámber'óbónjó búlá njó ntàkàbònekà 'You are going to forgive me because I won't be available tomorrow.'

In the above utterance, intonation voice is extremely important to make the invitation courteous. As for the response, the hearer instead of agreeing or declining the invitation simply apologizes to justify his unavailability to the person who invited. This way of responding to invitation typical to Havu culture does not consonant with the English way. Thus, communication can break down if an English person invites a Havu person and the former hears the latter apologizing.

### 3.3.5 COMPLIMENTS AND THEIR REPLIES

There are several ways that English and Havu people use to exchange compliments in their language among themselves. It is practically impossible to present them all; however a sample of them is presented in the illocutions that follow:

(1) →A: That dress suits you beautiful/I like your dress!

B: Thank you.

(2) →A: Èyófúlém'ékwiriré wà 'That is a beautiful dress'

B: Nàngà màni 'No, please' or 'You praise me too much.'

-wábéhyà yékwiriròkúyàwè? 'You tell me lies. Is it more beautiful than yours?'

From the above sample complimentary phrases, we clearly see that while uttering them, approbation and modesty maxims are upheld but the difference lies in the responses provided. In utterance (1) according to the English culture, people thank others whenever they are complimented but in the Havu culture as shown in (2) people react in different ways. Some think they do not deserve much praise for reasons of modesty and others indirectly decline a compliment by comparing the things for which they have been complimented with those of the person who complemented. In view of these differences, there can be a serious cross-cultural communication problem in case a Kihavu native speaker interferes the way people reply to compliments in his/her culture while talking to English native speakers in their language.

## 4 CONCLUSION

The framework that has been elaborated in this investigation is much more concentrated on the comparison and contrast of English and Havu polite illocutionary forms employed in different situations and having different interpretations. It has advocated the fact that the pragmatic utilization of a principle of politeness and the maxims upheld wherein can facilitate or hamper smooth conversation in the context of cross-cultural communication. In addition, it has shown how the English differential behavior totally adheres to Brown and Levinson's model of politeness while Havu differential behavior partially adheres to that model. Moreover, it has shown that both English and Havu people have their own strategies of politeness they use to infer meaning. Throughout the comparison, the results have revealed that it is by mastering the cultural characteristics of the language being used that pragmatic failure can be avoided in conversational exchanges. Further, it has been demonstrated that in English culture people resort to formal, informal or even neutral situations before choosing a polite illocution to use whereas in Havu culture such references are not often made. In greeting authorities for instance, Havu people are known for high phatic communion. Finally, this work has tried to enhance an understanding of pragmatic resourcefulness of English and Havu illocutionary forms, an understanding which can enable smooth conversation and allow interactants to attain the effect of communication.

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