

# Politeness in Digital Communication: A Study of Pragmatics

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**Abstract-** *This study is a cyber-linguistic investigation of politeness principle in selected WhatsApp messages. It aims at examining the use of politeness principle and how it is essential for maintaining social friendliness among WhatsApp users. As such, this research is built upon pragmatic model of politeness. Politeness plays a crucial and significant role in all cultures and societies for keeping relationships and saving faces. Although politeness is common to all cultures and languages but how it is realised is different from one culture to another. This research therefore intends to understudy its applicability on the internet community. The research sourced its data from individual and group platforms. Three chats of twelve conversations were randomly selected and the data were presented and analysed using descriptive quantitative approach. The results of the analysis show that there are several instances of observance and non-observance of the politeness maxims. Findings from the study therefore revealed that in internet/digital communication, interlocutors or participants tend to observe tact maxim more often than the rest of the maxims and they also fail to observe generosity maxim while the agreement maxim is not applicable in the two instances (observed and non-observed maxims).*

**Indexed Terms-** *Language, Pragmatics, Cyber-pragmatics, Politeness Principle, WhatsApp*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Language is a reflection of one's personality, character, and disposition about oneself and others. The words we choose and the manner in which we express ourselves can provide insights into our personality traits. The use of language in a smooth, polite, well-mannered, orderly, and clear way can directly reveal the personality of an individual who is versed at communicating effectively. Conversely, the

utilisation of sarcastic language, slander, ridicule, or harassment serves to portray the individual in a negative light, suggestive of a lack of virtue (Ikabina 2024).

In any form of interactions, both conventional (physical) communication and internet-mediated interaction, politeness is considered essential to achieve the purpose of the communication and preserve social bonding with others. Yus (2011) states that politeness is common and important in internet-mediated communication and it is typically known as netiquette (from internet/net and etiquette). However, interaction conducted via internet-mediated communication or SNSs such as WhatsApp can be challenging. Unlike the conventional communication, verbal communication or face-to-face interaction, which is usually supported by physical setting and certain information about the speaker such as intonation, facial expression, postural and gestural system? Brown and Yule (1996), are of the opinion that the internet-mediated communication lacks physical co-presence and contextual support which can lead to a lack of self-control and parallel lack of linguistic markers of politeness.

It would be unfair to say that technology is responsible for the decline in politeness. However, it can be said that technology has changed the dynamics of communication and affected how people express themselves.

This study therefore aims at examining the use of politeness principle in selected WhatsApp messages. The specific objectives of the study include:

- To examine the politeness strategies used in WhatsApp messages.
- To identify applicability of the politeness principle in WhatsApp chats.

- c. To evaluate how a break in the politeness principle could be viewed on the internet community.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews literatures that are relevant to the study.

### 1. Concept of Pragmatics

Pragmatics has been defined by many scholars: Levinson defines pragmatics as "the study of the relationship between language and its users." He emphasizes how meaning is constructed not just through the words themselves but through the contexts in which they are used, focusing on the social and cultural factors that influence communication. This definition underscores the interactive nature of language and how understanding relies heavily on context (1983).

In another dimension, Yule (1996) describes pragmatics as "the study of how people use context to make sense of meaning." He outlines that pragmatics involves analyzing how listeners and speakers interpret utterances based on situational contexts and prior knowledge. This definition of Yule highlights the role of shared knowledge and situational context in effective communication, stressing that meaning often extends beyond the literal interpretation of words.

According to Cutting and Kenneth (2015), pragmatics is "the study of language in use," focusing on the interactions between speakers and listeners. He emphasizes how context shapes meaning and how communicative intentions are conveyed through language. This broadens the scope of pragmatics to include not just linguistic elements but also the dynamics of social interaction and the pragmatic implications of communication. From the different opinions of the scholars, it could be summarized that pragmatics focuses on what is meant (meaning) not what is being said (utterance).

### 2. Cyber-pragmatics

Elite and Trega (2023) defines cyber-pragmatics as "the study of how contextual factors influence meaning in digital communication environments." He emphasizes the role of technology in shaping

interaction and how users adapt their language and communicative strategies in online contexts. He highlights the importance of understanding digital contexts and the ways in which users navigate meaning-making in an increasingly online world.

In addition, Miriam (2011) in Yus (2011) opines that cyber-pragmatics is "the analysis of how users interpret and produce meaning through digital platforms," focusing on the implications of anonymity, immediacy, and the affordances of technology on communication. This underscores the unique characteristics of digital interactions, such as the lack of non-verbal cues and how these influence pragmatic interpretations.

Cyber-pragmatics as explained Yus, is an approach that extends classical pragmatic theories to the domain of digital and online communication. It examines how the key elements of pragmatics—such as speech acts, deixis, implicature, politeness, and context—manifest in digital environments, where communication often lacks face-to-face interaction and is mediated by technology. Yus's cyber pragmatics is an interdisciplinary field that draws upon linguistics, communication studies, and digital media research, providing insights into the nature of human interaction in cyberspace (2011).

### 3. WhatsApp platform

WhatsApp (WA) is one of the most extensively used text messaging applications. WA is a messaging application for Smartphone that can be downloaded from the Playstore or AppStore. WA is a popular messaging application that allows users to send text messages, make voice and video calls, share media files, and engage in group chats. It was created in 2009 by Brian Acton and Jan Koum, and it quickly gained widespread popularity due to its ease of use, cross-platform compatibility, and strong privacy features.

WhatsApp was founded in 2009 by two former Yahoo! employees. In 2014, Facebook bought the app, and it has been under the Facebook umbrella (now called Meta) since then. The service has a huge user base; it reached more than two billion users worldwide in 2020. WhatsApp Messenger In addition to the core

texting service, WhatsApp supports voice calls, video calling, and recorded voice messages.

#### Theoretical Framework

The basic function of theories in pragmatics is to examine explicitly, the nature of meaning in a given utterance or language. This research uses Leech's theory of politeness.

#### Politeness Principle

Regarding politeness, numerous theories have been presented by scholars. This investigation employed Geoffrey Leech's theory on the principles of politeness. This is due to the fact that Leech's theory is more comprehensive and its discussion is more in-depth than other theories of language politeness. Six maxims comprise Leech's politeness principle are the Tact Maxim, the Approbation Maxim, the Generosity Maxim, the Modesty Maxim, the Agreement Maxim, and the Sympathy Maxim (Leech, 93, in Miftahush Shalihah 2023).

##### (a) The Tact Maxim

The Tact maxim states: "Minimize the expression of beliefs which imply cost to other; maximize the expression of beliefs which imply benefit to other".

For example:

1) Maryam: "Can I finish getting dressed, please? Thank you."

Binta: "You're the one who keeps talking about being a manager. All I am saying is, it could be you."

From the conversation above, Maryam employs tact maxim in her utterance since she minimizes the cost to Binta. This can be proved through the indirect utterance used by Maryam to Binta. This indirect utterance shows that Maryam wants Binta to help her, but she makes an utterance as if she doesn't ask Binta to help her wearing the uniform. It seems that she just wants Binta to give more time to her to finish her dressing by herself. Also, the utterance shows that Maryam's utterance does not force Binta to help her. It shows that Maryam is being tactful in the way she places her request to Binta.

##### b. The Approbation maxim

The Approbation maxim states: "Minimize the expression of beliefs which express dispraise of other; maximize the expression of beliefs which express approval of other. For example:

1) Mrs. Badmus: "Lavender! You're very creative."

Marissa: "Thank you, ma'am."

In this conversation, Mrs. Badmus gives a good comment about Marissa's appearance in presenting a bundle of purple orchids with the lavender scent. The utterance uttered by Mrs. Badmus is an expression of admiration. She maximizes the praise to Marissa. Therefore, it can be categorized as approbation maxim.

##### (c) The Generosity Maxim

The Generosity maxim states: 'Minimize the expression of benefit to self: maximize the cost of self'. For example:

1) Caroline: ".....At least let me buy you lunch. After all, we've only got each other to get through this humiliation."

Chris: "the first lunch was a mistake. A second would be complete torture."

Caroline: "Drinks, then?"

The situation in the conversation above is that Caroline wanted Chris to have lunch and drink with her, but Chris rejected all. In offering, actually, Caroline is putting pressure on Chris to comply with her offering. This indicates Caroline's sincerity in having Chris accepts her offer. Since the speaker maximizes the cost and minimizes the benefit to herself, this indicates that she implies generosity maxim in her utterance.

##### (d) The Modesty Maxim

The modesty maxim states: 'Minimize the expression of praise of self: maximize the expression of dispraise of self'. This maxim as well varies enormously in its application from culture to culture (Leech 137).

For example:

1) Victoria: ".....here's the difference between the goddess and me. She's playing games to trick him into wanting her."

Deborah: "And you're what?"

Victoria: "I'm working hard for the money."

The conversation above is categorized as the Modesty maxim since the speaker maximizes dispraise to herself. In this case, Victoria notifies about her lower

position as a maid compared with Deborah, someone in higher position.

(e) The Agreement Maxim

The Agreement maxim runs as follow: 'Minimize the expression of disagreement between self and other; maximize the expression of agreement between self and other'. For example:

2)       Teni : "Hey, Ma, can we go see the penguins? Let's go see penguins."

      Maria: "Five minutes."

From the example above, Maria did not allow her son to go to see the penguins with Teni. However, then she makes a commitment for just five minutes seeing. It shows that Maria minimizes a disagreement on this matter. It is more polite rather than if she strongly disagrees by saying "no" or "you cannot go."

(f) Sympathy Maxim

The sympathy maxim states: "minimize antipathy between self and other; maximize sympathy between the self and other." For example:

3)       Ken : "Sorry, Mark, but you have to."

      Mark : "I understand."

Here, Ken felt sorry to hear that Mark was retired. He expressed his condolences in order to achieve solidarity and to show his sympathy to Mark. In this case, Ken maximizes sympathy to Mark, and therefore, the utterance uttered by Ken in the conversation above can be said to have employed sympathy maxim.

Empirical Review

Several works have been conducted in the area of cyber-pragmatics. However, this paper reviewed just two of them: Suerni Itkes (2019) and Miftahush Shalihah and Tri Winarsi (2023).

To begin with, Itkes Ikabina understudies application of politeness theory in digital communication. The objective of this research is to gather data pertaining to the significance of polite language usage on social media platforms and the influence of impolite language on social media interactions. It employs a qualitative research method that collects data and then analyzes it in a way that produces a complete written work. The source data for this research are obtained from a variety of websites offering related information and a number of published works addressing the same background. The study concluded that there is a notable influence of polite language in the digital

media world and how individuals relate to one another in everyday life.

Futhermore, Miftahush Shalihah and Tri Winarsi (2023) investigated politeness strategies in WhatsApp Text Messaging. The study centres on Lecture-students WhatsApp messages. It research aims to explain and examine the ethics of lecturers when responding to students' text messages using the WhatsApp messaging application. The study was qualitative in nature. The primary data of this research were the screenshots of interactions between instructors and students via the WhatsApp messaging application. The research concluded that not all lecturers consider politeness when responding to students' text messages. The noncompliance when responding to students' messages generally occurs in the form of failing to return greetings, giving short answers, and/or employing fairly demanding language.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This section centres on the research design and procedure used in the study upon which the findings and conclusions of the study are made. The methodology used in this study is the quantitative research approach in which certain variables of importance are analyzed and described. This research data is sourced from WhatsApp online social network. The data are purposively selected and sampled from different individuals and group chats of the WhatsApp users. Purposive sampling is used because it allows the researcher to select variables that have specific characteristics that are relevant to the study, ensuring that the data collected is directly aligned with the research objectives. As the research is limited in terms of space and size, three (3) chats and twelve (12) conversations are selected on different subjects or themes. The research then finds out various instances of violating and observance of politeness principle. The data are labeled and presented in tables (1-3), and are analyzed one after the other.

### IV. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

In this section, the data obtained were presented inform of chat/conversation. The participants are labeled using letters to show sequence of turn taking. The politeness maxims vis-à-vis the conversations are

shown in the table format and are discussed and analyzed based on the theory used.

#### Chat 1

Speaker A: “Good morning Madam Ruth please for attendance list on that Saturday I came but I forget to write can you assist me.”

Speaker B: “After writing names in the attendance we normally use to submit back to then, I don't think it will be possible again, sorry for that”

Speaker A: “Okay thank you”

Observance/non-observance of Politeness Maxims

Conversations	Tact	Approbation	Generosity	Modesty	Agreement	Sympathy
A						Observed
B	Observed					
A	Observed					

The table above shows the chat has three set of conversations from three from two participants. Speaker A actually begins the conversation politely through a warm greeting and by addressing the woman with respect using the words “madam” and “please”. Similarly, this conversation observes sympathy maxim as it minimizes antipathy between self and the other participant. Speakers B and A also observe tact maxim as they both have their conversations in a friendly and smooth manner which is evident in their use of phrases such as “sorry for that”, and “thank you”. However, the chat shows that there is non-observance of any maxim and this is why the conversation ends in quite a short form.

#### Chat 2

Speaker A: “Good morning students, please this is to notify cycle 1 and 3 that are writing test today, that the

time for the test is by 1pm because some of the cycle 3 are writing carry over during cycle 2 exams this morning”

Speaker B: “Always sending messages late”

Speaker C: “Would CM tell me that he doesn't know of this conflicting coincidence before now? Even I that I'm not among the management staff I knew of this traffic jam when. I was watching to see how it will play out.”

Speaker D: “He needs to understand that most persons are not having a Smartphone, on that note they are not on Whatsapp. Please try reach out to those not on Whatsapp”

Observance/ Non- observance of Maxims

Conversation	Tact	Approbation	Generosity	Modesty	Agreement	Sympathy
A	Observed					
B		not observed				
C			not observed			
D			not observed			

From the chat above, it is found that the opening conversation observes tact maxim by expressing beliefs which imply benefit to other. Aside that, the conversation is also presented in a simple and polite language. Conversation B does not observe approbation maxim in that it maximizes the expression of disbeliefs which express disapproval of other (the co-speaker, A). Participant C also fails to observe generosity maxim. This is owing to the fact that the conversation maximizes the expression of benefit to self and the expression of cost to other, in this case the subject of the discussion, who happens to be a principal officer in the centre and deserves to be talked to/about in a warm manner. More so, conversation D equally does not observe generosity maxim for he does

not politely pass the message as the maxim demands-maximize the expression of benefit to other.

Chat 3

A: "Good Evening everyone! How are we doing today? I have msg for you guys."

B: "You know how we are doing already. Stop asking and make your point."

C: "Let's be civil please. Who can tell this info might help."

A: "I think you have family problem and you intend to transfer your wahala on everybody."

D: "Please everyone should know that life is dealing with us in diff ways. This should not be complicated."

Observance/non- observance of Politeness Maxims

Conv ersati on	Tact	Appro bation	Gener osity	Mod esty	Agre ement	Sym path y
A	obser ved					
B				obse rved		
C			Not obser ved			
A	Not obser ved					
D	obser ved					

The data above shows that the chat contains five conversations: Speaker A observes tact maxim as the conversation begins with a warm greeting. Speaker B does not observe modesty maxim for maximizing the expression of dispraise of other while C observes generosity maxim in that it gives an expression which maximizes the benefit to others and minimize cost to self. Speaker A fails to observe tact maxim for how he puts the message which can be said in another way with same meaning but with the least effect on the hearer's part. Therefore, A does maximize the expression of beliefs which imply cost to other. Finally, D observes tack maxim as he is able to deal with the tensed situation tactically without saying it in

such a manner that the hearers will become upset or annoyed.

Discussion of Findings

This section discusses the analysed data. In the course of this discussion, the researcher looks at the results of each of the data in separate tables:

Table 1

Observed Maxims

Cha t	Tact	Appr obati on	Gen eros ity	Mo dest y	Agr eem ent	Symp athy
1	2	-	-	-	-	1
2	3	1	1	-	-	-
3	1	-	-	-	-	-
4	2	-	-	-	-	-
5	2	1	5	-	-	-
6	2	-	-	1	-	-
Tot al	12	2	2	1	0	1

The above table reveals that Tact maxim (12) is more observed than the rest the maxims: Approbation maxim (1), Generosity (2), Modesty (1), sympathy (1) and agreement (nil). This therefore demonstrates the extent at which WhatsApp users communicate amongst one another trying to be careful of not saying or doing something that could provoke or upset others.

Table 2

Unobserved Maxims

C ha t	Tact	Appro bation	Gene rosit y	Modest y	Agr eem ent	Sympat hy
1	-	-	-	-	-	-
2	-	-	1	1	-	-
3	-	1	2	-	-	-
4	-	-	1	-	-	1
5	2	-	-	-	-	-
6	1	-	1	-	-	-
T ot al	3	1	5	1	0	1

It is observed from this table that the most non-observed maxim is the generosity, followed by tact while approbation, modesty and sympathy are the least non-observed maxims. The result also shows that agreement maxim is not applicable in the two ways (observed and non-observed) and in all the chats.

#### V. CONCLUSION AND CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

In any human communication, politeness is very essential: it is a key point for enhancing the interpersonal relationship and communication. The Politeness Principle plays an important role in human communication. If people can obey this principle, they can make their expression more tactful; whereas, if people violate the Politeness Principle, they may not make the hearers feel good. Upon the findings, this paper recommends to that it is not polite for a speaker or hearer to flout a maxim just because a previous speaker does not observe the maxim. This, to some extent will keep regenerating a flout amongst the co-participants and thereby making a meaningful conversation unachievable.

Therefore, the data obtained shows that politeness should not be lopsided or one-way traffic as it is observed that in cyber/digital communications, social status among participants often determines how polite each should be. This implies that the participant's responses to a particular message should not be based on familiarity. That is, not until one knows who's chatting with before one puts politeness at work; it should be a natural phenomenon that should be applied in all circumstances.

Finally, this work is considered significant for the specialists and analysts in the field of pragmatics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics and conversational analysis whose interest is in the area of politeness: The work will help netizens to understand what is termed netiquette and how it is used in strengthening social bond. This can also go a long to mitigate digital violence or conflict. The use of polite language is indicative of emotional stability. Therefore this research would be considered as a vital resource material for clinical/psycholinguistic study.

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