

POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN TELECOMMUNICATIONS NETWORK PROVIDERS' UNSOLICITED SMS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Telecommunications network providers in Nigeria recognise the patronage power possessed by their customers and subscribers, hence their being politically-correct in their language use in their verbal and non-verbal virtual interactions with them. This study examines the politeness strategies employed by mobile telephone network providers as evident in the unsolicited short message services (SMSs) sent to customers. This is done within Brown and Levinson's Politeness and Arundale's Face Constituting theories. The findings reveal that positive, negative and bald on record politeness strategies are persuasive marketing devices employed by the said network providers to woo and win the hearts of their customers.

1. Background to the Study

Language is a veritable tool corporate organisations employ to get to the heart of their would-be customers and ensure the continued patronage of their goods and services by such customers. Telecommunications network providers in Nigeria, being organisations that rely heavily on persuasive language to keep enjoying unalloyed patronage from their subscribers, have consciously and strategically employed linguistic politeness strategies in their interactions with their teeming customers in the country. During such interactions, they often appeal to the positive and negative faces of their customers. Such was what played out in the scenario that birthed this study. This experience is narrated below.

We once called at the major outlet of one of the telecommunications network providers situated in Ibadan, Nigeria to register our complaint about a SIM card which suddenly stopped functioning. In the course of our close-to-one hour stay in the 'call centre', we noticed the inflow and outflow of many 'angry' Nigerians who had come to complain about the disturbing nature of the several unsolicited messages that the telecommunications company, among others, has been inundating their phones with.

In particular, we saw an old man who raised his voice at one of the employees of the company, accusing the company of sending messages that had often times been expected to be credit alerts from his banks and customers. However, in spite of the arguable ‘incivility’ the elderly man bore his mind at this occasion, what is considered face-threatening, the staff members present kept appealing to the faces of the man and his fellow ‘complainants’, at least linguistically. This gesture caught our attention, especially as it reminded us of the ideological beliefs that customers are always right; and should be treated like kings (and queens). To the best of our knowledge, no linguistic work has given its attention to how network providers in Nigeria employ linguistic politeness strategies to reinforce these ideological beliefs in their short message services, SMSs, to customers.

Particularly, this work examines how these ideologies manifest in the politeness strategies inherent in the unsolicited messages of MTN (Mobile Telephone Network) and Airtel telecommunications network providers in Nigeria. Our choice of these telecommunication network providers in Nigeria is predicated on the fact that these two are two foremost non-indigenous network providers in the country (see Alabi, 1996) who had long enjoyed much patronage from Nigerians before the arrival Globacom, their strongest and only indigenous network provider in the country. We treat, as unsolicited messages in this study, those messages that the subscribers or customers have not requested.

2. From Desk Telephone System to Mobile Telephone System in Nigeria: A General Overview

Before the advent of the mobile communication networks in Nigeria, there had been the desktop telephone system that was brought into the country by the colonial administration. This submission of ours is reinforced by Alabi (1996) who reports telecommunication facilities in Nigeria were first established in 1886 by the colonial administration. However, according to him, what characterised the use of telephone then was the fact that very few individuals, especially the political class could have access to the facility. In fact, to succinctly describe the situation, Gbenga (2006) argues that the situation above resulted in teledensity of about 0.5 telephone lines per 1,000 people. He also says that the telephone network consisted of 121 exchanges of which 116 were of the manual (magneto) type and only 5 were automatic. Through the efforts of the different sectors responsible for the internal network and external telecommunication services in Nigeria such as: the Department of Posts and Telecommunications (P&T) and the Nigerian External Telecommunication (NET), the installed switching capacity at the end of 1985 was about 200,000 lines as against the planned target of about 460,000. All the exchanges were analogue. Telephone penetration remained poor, equalling 1 telephone line to

440 inhabitants, well below the target of 1 telephone line to 100 inhabitants recommended by ITU for developing countries (Aluko, 2007). The quality of service was largely unsatisfactory. The telephone system was unreliable, congested, expensive and not customer friendly.

In January 1985, the erstwhile Posts and Telecommunications Department was split into Postal and Telecommunications Divisions. The Postal and Telecommunications Division was later merged with NET to form Nigerian Telecommunications Limited (NITEL). This company was established to harmonise the planning and co-ordination of the internal and external telecommunications services, rationalize investments in telecommunications development and provide accessible, efficient and affordable services (Alabi, 1996).

Since this period of time, NITEL had been enjoying the monopoly of supplying the telecommunication services internally and externally in Nigeria (though with unstable and bad services) until the assumption of office of Former President Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999. The telecommunication sector was totally deregulated, through which the GSM was granted license and NITEL was privatized. This act of deregulation brought in the different service providers such as MTEL, MTN, ECONET (which later metamorphosed to Celtel, Vmobile, Zain and Finally Airtel), GLO and others. Today, mobile telecommunications have taken a new and efficacious dimension; their services are competitive and cheaply available. Many Nigerians now subscribe to the services of these network providers who have had to compete seriously among themselves for relevance and patronage in the Nigerian telecommunication space.

3. Theoretical Framework

This work combines the principles of Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness theory, and Arundale's (2010) Face Constituting theory. This eclectic approach becomes imperative in view of the central focus of the study which revolves round the concepts of politeness and face.


3.1 Politeness Theory of Brown and Levinson (1987)

It is generally believed among language scholars that Brown and Levinson's politeness theory centres on the concept of face which originated from Goffman's (1967) conception of face (Ajayi 2013, 2014). Brown and Levinson's politeness theory has been termed the face-saving phenomenon (Fraser, 1990 cf. Dimitrova-Galaczi, 2005: 7). Brown and Levinson's view on politeness brings connection among three basic views as (a) the view of communication as rational activity, (b) Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and maxims of conversation, and (c) Goffman's (1967) notion of face, that is, the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself. In this

regard, language speakers are culturally endowed with rationality, which is described as 'a precisely definable mode of reasoning from ends to the means that will achieve those ends' (Brown and Levinson, 1978: 63).

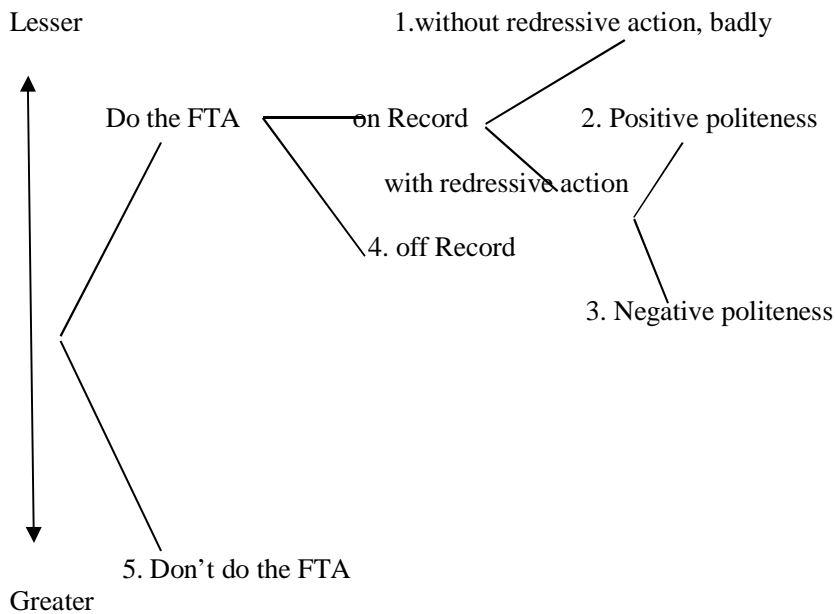
Brown and Levinson (1987) describe *face* as a phenomenon that can exist in two forms, depending on people's wants: positive face and negative face. Positive face implies the want to be approved of by others, while the negative face implies the want to be unimpeded by others; and these face wants are believed to operate in every culture of the world. The scholars opine that face can be threatened, lost, maintained or enhanced in interactions. 'The underlying assumption behind Brown and Levinson's theory is that face is constantly at risk, since any kind of linguistic action (termed a face threatening act or FTA), which has a relational dimension is seen as positing a threat to the interlocutor's face' (Dimitrova-Galaczi, 2005:7). Therefore, these face threatening acts need to be "counterbalanced by appropriate doses of politeness" (Kasper 1994 cf. Dimitrova-Galaczi, 2005: 7).

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), there are five strategies that speakers can use in threatening the faces of their interlocutors. These strategies are hierachical, in that they are presented on the basis of the extent to which they threaten the interlocutor's face. Since each individual is endowed with rationality, the crucial assumption is projected that the speaker will choose the best possible strategy before performing a Face Threatening Act. The politeness strategies of Brown and Levinson are arranged hierarchically below:

- don't do the FTA
 - do the FTA
 - do the FTA on record with negative politeness
 - do the FTA on record with positive politeness
 - do the FTA baldly on record
- least threatening
- 
- most threatening

Sunday (2010: 5) schematically presents these strategies below:

Estimation of Risk of Face Loss



The figure shows that the higher the number, the more politeness is achieved. 5 represents no imposition at all on the addressee. 4 obscures the function of the FTA, making the speaker appears unintrusive and uncoercive. 3 and 2 are FTAs which cater for the face wants of the addressee: 3 redresses the negative face, realising negative politeness; 2 redresses the positive face, realising positive politeness. 1 is direct, shows no politeness, and has unpleasant sociological implications (Sunday, 2010: 5-6).

The underlining principles of positive and negative politeness, as spelt out by Brown and Levinson (1987) (and as modified) in this work are stated below:

Positive politeness:

- Strategy 1: Notice. Attend to H (his interests, wants, needs, goods)
- Strategy 2: Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy, to H)
- Strategy 3: Use in group identity markers
- Strategy 4: Intensify interest to H

- Strategy 5: Seek agreement
- Strategy 6: Avoid disagreement
- Strategy 7: Presuppose/ raise / assert common ground
- Strategy 8: Joke
- Strategy 9: Assert or presuppose S's knowledge of and concern for H's wants
- Strategy 10: Offer promise
- Strategy 11: Be optimistic
- Strategy 12: Include both S and H in the activity
- Strategy 13: Give (or ask for) reasons
- Strategy 14: Assume or assert reciprocity
- Strategy 15: Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation).
- Strategy ¹16: Show endearment, courtesy [sic] to H

Negative Politeness

- Strategy 1: Be conventionally indirect
- Strategy 2: Question, hedge
- Strategy 3: Be pessimistic
- Strategy 4: Minimise the imposition
- Strategy 5: Give deference
- Strategy 6: Apologise
- Strategy 7: Impersonalise S and H
- Strategy 8: State the FTA as a general rule
- Strategy 9: Nominalise
- Strategy 10: Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H

3.2 Face Constituting Theory of Arundale (2010)

Arundale's (2010) Face constituting theory (FCT), a reinforcement of his position on face (Arundale, 2006; 2009), is one of the major paradigm shifts in politeness-related studies. It is a theory that 'rests on a model of human communication that explains interpretations of meaning, action, and face as interactionally achieved and conjointly constituted with systems of two or more interdependent persons as they afford and constrain one another's designing and interpreting of utterances and conduct in sequence' (Arundale, 2010:1). One fundamental notion projected in Arundale's FCT is the fact that meaning cannot be achieved solely by considering a speaker's interpretation of an utterance in an interaction, but is and should be arrived at by considering the totality of speakers' interpretations in that interaction. That is, meaning is a product of what two or more individuals contribute to a discourse in a discursive interaction.

¹Introduced to take care of a particular aspect of our data which Brown and Levinson's (1987) positive politeness strategies do not cover

As explained by Arundale (2010), first speaker would design an utterance that allows for some range of provisional *interpretings*; but he or she does not necessarily determine which of the provisional *interpretings* would be operative in the conversation. The adjacent utterance of the second speaker affords another range of provisional *interpreting*, which the first speaker assesses, confirms and links with his/her interpreting of the first utterance.

Similarly, the concept of face is 'reconceptualised' in Arundale's (2010: 4) FCT. Accordingly, in FCT, face is seen as the relationship two or more individuals create with one another in a conversational interaction, and as such, contrary to Brown and Levinson's (1987) opinion, no single utterance can be face-saving or face-threatening, as face is conjointly constituted in interaction by participants. This view places premium on the communal face other than the individualistic face projected in Brown and Levinson's (1987) work. Face is therefore, viewed as connectedness and separateness in human relationships (Arundale 2010: 5). In Arundale's (2010: 6) FCT, an individual's interpreting of face-connectedness and separateness is not inherently threatening or supportive. Rather, face threat, face stasis (a notion Arundale incorporates into face discourse), and face support are conceptualised as evaluations that interlocutors make of the *interpreting* of face that arises as they design or interpret utterances (Eelen 2001: 109-133 cf. Arundale (2010: 6).

Doing a critical appraisal of Arundale's FCT, it is obvious that the theory is more of a theory of face than a theory of politeness, and in fact, this position is unambiguous in his statement 'FCT is a theory of face (which centres on action and utterance interpretation), not a theory of politeness (which focuses on saving or attacking one's public self-image) that employs the concept of face as in Brown and Levinson (1987) (Arundale, 2010: 13). However, the theory is considered appropriate in this work considering our argument in our data analysis and discussion that the interpretation of the messages telecommunications network providers is conjointly constituted by the network providers and the subscribers.

4. Methodology

Fifteen unsolicited messages purposively selected from the numerous unsolicited messages from MTN and Airtel constitute the data analysed in this study. They are messages sent between 2015 and 2016. These fifteen purposively selected messages analysed in this study are representative of the numerous unsolicited messages sent by the selected network providers, considering their generic features. Sixty-seven percent (67%) of the messages analysed in this study are from MTN, while the remaining thirty-three percent (33%) are from Airtel. The rationale behind the preponderance of MTN messages in our data is predicated on the fact that, among the network providers in the country, she has the largest number of subscribers (Nigeria

Communications Commission, 2016), hence their constant need to send messages to their customers to keep them in the face of the stiff competition (for customers) among the network providers. The messages are subjected to content analysis, with particular emphasis on politeness and face.

5. Data Presentation and Analysis

5.1 Positive and negative politeness strategies in telecommunications networks' unsolicited SMSs

Positive politeness strategies, according to Brown and Levinson, are employed in language use to appeal to the positive face wants of individuals, while negative politeness strategies are employed to appeal to the negative face wants. These two strategies feature prominently in the selected messages. Positive politeness strategies are in bold prints; while negative politeness strategies are in italics.

Background: Messages on SIM card Registration

A: Excerpt 1.

Dear customer, you have been credited with 1000 naira for local calls, SMS and data. *Kindly RE-REGISTER your line @ any MTN shop to enjoy this offer. Valid for 7 days. Valid ID required. Pls. ignore if you registered in the last 7 days*

Excerpt 2.

Dear customer, *please URGENTLY visit any MTN shop this weekend to update your fingerprint and picture. Valid ID required. Pls. ignore if you registered in the last 7 days.*

Excerpt 3.

Dear Esteemed Customer, *kindly visit any Airtel shop this Sunday from 12 noon for your SIM registration*

Excerpt 4.

Dear customers, our shops are open from 7 am to 10 pm. *Kindly visit any MTN shop with a valid ID to update your fingerprint/picture before JAN 30. Pls ignore if you registered in the last 7 days.*

Excerpt 5. Your recharge of NGN 100.00 was successful. **You have received NGN 10.00 Bonus for calls to all networks.** This is valid for 7 days. To view your bonus, *please dial*

*559*4# VAIN and VEIN sound same but have different meanings. Text WORD to 50050 to learn more words. SMS costs #50/WEEK

Excerpt 6.

Dear Customer, enjoy this special DEAL! Get over 6,000 worth of International and local calls @ 1,500 only. Simply dial *567*1#. Thanks for your patronage.

Excerpt 7.

Dear valued customer, Call 14495 now to get your Extra Credit

In Excerpts A 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7, the network providers appeal to the positive face of their customers with their use of endearment term 'dear' in reference to them. It is a sign of courtesy meant to show how much they value their customers. In other words, they project their customers, irrespective of their ages or status, as individuals that should be respected and revered. In A1 in particular, this endearment term is followed-up with another politeness strategy of 'offer the other gifts' **you have been credited with 1000 naira for local calls, SMS and data** to appeal to the positive face wants of their customers. This phenomenon of 'offer the other gifts' also features in A5 where MTN says the subscriber has been offered a call bonus to call all networks. The negative politeness strategy 'minimise imposition' with the use of 'please' and 'kindly' to redress the threat inherent in her command to the customers to visit the nearest shop to have their SIM registration done features in all excerpts (A1-5). This device is employed to appeal to the negative face of the customers who might consider it a burden leaving their homes and places of work to attend to the request of the network providers (what they might not find convenient to do) to visit the SIM card registration outlets for registration, in particular, and doing their bidding in general.

While the telecommunications companies (providers) want to appeal to the positive and negative face(s) of their clients in these messages, they subtly demonstrate their institutional power to determine what happens to the SIM card of their customers if they fail to act in reaction to the information of the messages sent to them. This is the overall *interpreting* both the sender(s) and the receivers have of the messages. In other words, while the network providers would want to appear courteous to the subscribers in the content of their messages to recognise the power they have as customers (to patronise them or otherwise), they subtly project their institutional control and power over the functionality of the customers' SIM cards or otherwise, so long as they remain with them. This interpreting is conjointly co-constituted by the sender(s), the network providers, and the receivers, the customers. The perlocutionary effect of such messages was witnessed at different telecommunications network

providers' outlets at the period these messages were prevalent. Such outlets saw the presence of many crowds of customers who trooped out to heed the subtle warning of the network providers.

The picture in Excerpt A6 is not in any way different from what obtains in A1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7 discussed above. In this particular excerpt, MTN employs the 'offer the other gifts and exaggerate interest to the other' positive politeness strategies to persuade the subscribers into doing their bidding. This is done to redress the institutional subtle order issued out to them in the message. Ultimately, these politeness strategies are employed by the telecommunications company to massage the ego of their subscribers whom they believe have the 'decision' power to continue to patronize them or not. However, the institutional power of the network provider to make life comfortable for their subscribers as evidenced by the mouth-watering 'offer' she presents to the subscribers is made obvious. These politeness strategies, as employed by the network provider, are interpreted by both the sender and the receivers as persuasive marketing and promo strategies by the network providers. We make this submission since we know the ultimate aim of any profit-making organisation is to promote their services through various marketing strategies, which include politeness strategies; an ideology we believe must have been behind the emanation of such text messages from network providers. And of course, from occasional complaints-cum-comments from subscribers on the frequency of such messages (judging from our interaction with some subscribers), it is obvious they interpret them as marketing strategies by the network providers to keep enjoying their unalloyed patronage.

B: Excerpt 1

Dear customer, *please* visit any MTN Registration point near you from Dec. 26 with valid ID card to update your fingerprint & picture to NCC standard.
Thank you

Excerpt 2.

Yello, **welcome to the network with the widest coverage**. Keep using your phone and watch out for fantastic offers from MTN. **Thank you**

Excerpt 3.

Dear customer, enjoy # 6, 000 worth of Data, international and local calls @ 11, 300 only. Simply text yes to 567 or dial *567*1#. Enjoy international calls to Canada, China, France, Hong Kong, India, Singapore & USA at a discounted rate. **Thank you**.

Excerpt 4:

Hello! **YOU CAN NOW TALK MORE AND TEXT MORE.** Pay N100 & get N250 to call/SMS/browse. Dial *234*100 # now, valid for 24hrs

A critical appraisal of the excerpts above reveals a picture akin to the afore-painted one, with a slight difference. Very much like Excerpt A, Excerpt B1 features elements of positive politeness strategies. The term 'dear' expresses how much the customers are dear to the heart of the said network provider; the word *please* mitigates the face threat inherent in the subtle command to the customer(s) that they should visit any nearby outlet for SIM registration; and ultimately, the network provider appeals to the positive face of the customers with the positive politeness term (expressing courtesy) 'thank you' to further mitigate the overall threat the order-tone of the message might have constituted to their face(s). In Excerpt 2, MTN appeals to the positive face of the customers with an implicit *promise* they are not going to regret their choice of the network, considering the wideness of its coverage. This implies no much communication problem for the customers of MTN. This and the courtesy expression that follows, *thank you*, are employed to redress the face threat in the statement of command that urges the customers to keep using MTN communication facilities. In the two excerpts, MTN demonstrates its institutional power to make communication relatively enjoyable for its subscribers, as well as dictate or give out a subtle order to the subscribers on what to do to keep enjoying their services. In other words, their (the customers') continued enjoyment of MTN's services is predicated on their heeding their instructions. This interpreting is conjointly constituted by both the telecommunications network provider and the customers, as evident in the manner the subscribers visit their outlets to attend to the message of the communications company.

In B3, MTN employs 'offer the other gift' politeness strategy to appeal to the positive face of the subscribers, making their proposition more of an offer of gift than a service the subscribers have to pay for. This strategy is employed to veil the threat inherent in this 'promo' message. Although the message comes in form of a polite offer, the interpreting of the message as a 'promo' text rather than a statement of offer of gift is conjointly constituted by both MTN and the subscribers.

The picture painted in B4 Airtel is akin to the one in B3. Airtel employs this 'offer the other gifts' positive politeness strategy to persuade and manipulate the subscribers into falling for their coated order which constitutes a threat to the negative face of the subscribers. In fact, to make this sound more like an offer than an order, she resorts to presenting the 'offer' in capital letters. However, she expresses her subtle power, as an institution, over the offer with the caveat it has to be accessed within 24 hours after which the company will withhold it. Both Airtel and subscribers, no doubt, conjointly interpret the

message as a strategy to promote the sales of the company rather than an offer of a gift, after all 'a gift is a thing given willingly without payment'.

5.2 Bald on record without redress

C: Excerpt 1.

Knowledge of business conduct or lack of it can make or mar your business, *send ethics to 50033 now for just 50/week to get daily tips on business conduct!*

Excerpt 2.

Experience how strange your voice can sound to your friends with MAGIC VOICE, *dial 717, 50 naira/week to enjoy this service.*

Excerpt 3.

Do you know that forests help to protect our planet? As we mark the international day of forests, *plant a tree today!* From the Federal Ministry of Environment

Excerpt 4.

Send your song ID to F&F via SMS, Facebook, BBM, etc. & increase your chances to win a record deal with Universal Records & 5m in Airtel TRACE Music Star season 2.

In the excerpts above, telecommunications providers project their subtle institutional power in their *unredressed* command to the subscribers. In C1, the message paints MTN as an institution that equips their subscribers with the knowledge and information needed to bring about successful business, thereby making life comfortable for them. Perhaps, this 'power of information or knowledge' informs the bald on record politeness strategy inherent in the message. In C2, Airtel sees herself as a body that can help the subscribers manipulate their voice(s) to sound unique to their friends through Magic Voice software. In C3, MTN threatens the negative face of the subscribers *unredressed* in their command to them to plant a tree. This practice of MTN is predicated on their piece of information, which projects their relative power, she has just equipped the subscribers with. MTN projects herself as an authority on information on how to maintain and keep our planet, earth, safe; an interpreting she wants her subscribers to allude to. In C4, Airtel issues an *unredressed* directive to the subscribers with the understanding that she is doing them a favour with the piece of information embedded in the statement. This act further reinforces the position argued for in this paper that telecommunications companies often practice subtle display of power in their unsolicited messages. The operative *interpreting* of this message as one that requires the (interested) subscribers to perform an action that comes with a cost

and not a cost-free one is jointly constituted by both Airtel and the subscribers, especially considering the past experiences of the subscribers on related and similar messages.

6. Conclusion

This work has attempted a critical discussion of politeness strategies and institutional power inherent in the unsolicited short message services (SMSs) as sent by telecommunications network providers in Nigeria, with the example of MTN and Airtel. It submits that telecommunications network providers in Nigeria recognise the patronage power possessed by their customers and subscribers, hence their being politically-correct in their language use in their verbal and non-verbal virtual interactions with them. The *interpreting* of the various unsolicited SMSs from these network providers as 'promo'-cum-marketing strategies rather than offer of gifts is co-constituted by the network providers and customers within the affordances of their interactional context. The institutional power of the network providers is subtly projected in their virtual interaction with customers.

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