An Analysis of Politeness in President Barrack Obama’s Inaugural Address

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ABSTRACT

Most existing studies on political speeches have focused more on impoliteness than politeness. Therefore, this paper, investigated the politeness strategies in President Barrack Obama’s Inaugural Address. The data of this study were purposively selected to reveal the politeness strategies employed by the political leader. The findings revealed that President Obama used the following politeness strategies: Common ground, impersonalising bald on records and a tinge of face threatening acts with the direction of fit towards the faces of enemies of America. Thus, the paper concludes that a polite speech is not just one in which the speaker acknowledges or appeal to the hearers’ positive face but one in which the speaker exploits all possible strategies that seem to offer some benefits to the hearer and enhance the success of a communicative event. Therefore, the paper recommends that African leaders should employ more politeness strategies in their speeches so as to reduce conflictual attitudes and hate speeches that pervade most political speeches in the continent.

Keywords: Politeness Strategies, Impersonalisation, face threatening acts, Politeness, Political Speech.

1. INTRODUCTION

A political speech is an instrument of political thought that serves as a channel through which a leader transfers his or her mind wholly to the citizenry’s thoughts thereby shaping their orientation, perception and behaviour. Thus, a political speech is a vital instrument of governance, effective leadership and creation of peace and development in a society.

Right from classical antiquity, political speeches serve diverse functions. Among others, they serve as the key foundation of relationships between a leader and the citizenry at large; a political leader builds connection with others by revealing his private identities, listens and learns about others, and works out problems by remembering shared history and future plans through communication.

More categorically, Denton and Woodward 1994 P. 47) aver that ‘the achievement of social order depends upon the development of a sense of community among the people’. In order words, social order is a mirage to any society where the leader undermines or fails to exploit politeness strategies in his political speeches.

Nonetheless, several impolite political speeches exist in the world today. One reason for that is the fact many political leaders in the world are desperate for power and are poised to use hate speeches and unmitigated utterances to tarnish the public self- images of their supposed opponents. The Second fundamental reason relatable with the geographical context of this paper is the fact that many political leaders, especially African leaders’ use English as a second language and as such, often lack the required pragmatic competence to fully exploit politeness strategies that could appeal to the hearers’ sense of belonging and promote harmony.

As a result of the foregoing, there exist more studies on impoliteness in political speeches than
on politeness. Studies such as (Erjavec, and Kovačić (2012), Akintola and Ayantayo (2018), Soyombo (2019)) Hence, this paper considering the fact that President Barrack Obama was the first Black American president and the forty fourth American President studied his inaugural lecture with a view to establishing whether he did exploit politeness strategies just as most American President did and the import of such, if any.

2. **POLITENESS PRINCIPLE**
Under the principles of politeness, a human is perceived as someone with a ‘face,’ that is, someone with a public self-image which a speaker must show awareness of. Yule (2006) simply conceptualises politeness an interaction as a means employed by a speaker to simply show awareness of another person’s face. Nwagbara (2020) explicates these means as observance of some acts of etiquette and virtuous acknowledgments of another person’s personality. However, beyond mere acknowledgement of the hearer’s face, Leech 2014, defines politeness as a universal human phenomenon that entails speaking or behaving in such a way as to (appear to) give some benefits not to oneself but to the person one in conversing with. This definition is loaded with meanings as it implies the following: that politeness is a multifarious phenomenon and can be achieved variously outside the use of etiquette and virtuous acknowledgments, that politeness is not just about the speaker regarding his listener’s face but doing so to make his/her message and personality acceptable.

3. **BROWN AND LEVINSON’S POLITENESS MODEL**
Premised on the notion of ‘face’, Brown and Levinson (1978) portend politeness as a deviation from Co-operative Principle Deviation in the sense that a speaker, who intends to be polite must diverge from cooperative principle when communication attempts to lead to conflict. The model is premised on two main subjects: rationality and face. Rationality denotes that a model person (MP) is someone who does not just have the capacity to conceive an idea to communicate with others, but someone who also thinks about the most appropriate means to communicate the intentions without threatening the addressee’s face that is, the addressee’s public self-image which s/he conceives about him or herself and expects anyone conversing with him or her to acknowledge. A speaker’s failure to acknowledge an addressee’s face is known as a ‘face threatening act’, while the acknowledgement of an addressee’s face is known as a ‘face saving act’.

Additionally, the model person has two types of faces—the negative and positive face. The former, that is, negative face denotes the addressee’s desire for autonomy and independence, while the positive face represents an addressee’s desire to associate with other persons and be accepted by them. Brown and Levinson have outlined different strategies for achieving the two face types.

3.1 **Positive Face Saving Strategies**
According to Brown and Levinson a hearer’s positive face can be saved if the speaker:

- Attends to the hearer’s interests, needs, wants
  You appear dismayed. Can I help you?
- Uses solidarity terms: Heh, team member, can you lend me a dollar?
- Expresses optimism: I believe you will make it.
- The speaker (S) should include himself and hearer (H) in action
  United we stand, divided we fall.
- Makes an offer or promise: If you ask me for help, I will do it.
- Exaggerates interest in H and his interests: You are the best thing that has happened to me.
- Avoids Disagreement
  Yes, it’s rather long; not short certainly.
- Uses joke Strategy
  Wow, that’s a bulldozer!
- Uses Common Ground Strategy: this entails the speaker sharing a piece or pieces of information common to the hearers/audience. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), common ground in communication is a vital strategy of positive politeness, All this is done to achieve solidarity/friendship with the listeners.

3.2 **Negative Politeness Strategies**
Negative politeness strategies are oriented towards the hearer’s negative face and emphasize avoidance of imposition on the hearer. These strategies envisage that the speaker will be commanding the listener and there will be a higher potential for maladroitness or degradation than in bald on record
strategies and positive politeness strategies. Negative face is the desire to remain autonomous so the speaker is more apt to include an out for the listener, through distancing styles like apologies. Examples from Brown and Levinson include:

- **The indirect Strategy**
  Would you come for the party, if I invite you?
- **Use of hedges or questions Strategy**
  Possibly, she addressed the situation.
- **Pessimism Strategy**
  Could you please listen?
- **Pessimism Strategy**
  You couldn’t edit my article, could you?
- **Minimize the imposition**
  If I am not burdening you, please pass the drinks.
- **Use obviating structures, like nominalizations, passives, or statements of general rules**
  I hope you don’t mind if I use your pen.
- **Apology Strategy**
  I’m sorry, but can you lend me five dollars?
- **Plural pronoun Strategy/Impersonalising**
  Together in harmony we shall rebuild this nation.

The foregoing are the strategies that can help a speaker eliminate imposition and the goal of a set communicative event.

### 3.3 Off-record (indirect)

The final politeness strategy outlined by Brown and Levinson is the indirect strategy; this strategy uses indirect language and removes the speaker from the potential to be imposing. For example, a speaker using the indirect strategy might merely say “But there is light” insinuating that it would be kind if the listener would get up and turn up the air conditioner without directly asking the listener to do so.

### 3.4 Bald On-record

Bald on-record strategies usually do not attempt to minimize the threat to the hearer’s face, although there are ways that bald on-record politeness can be used implicitly to lessen FTAs (Face Threatening Acts). Often using such a strategy will shock or embarrass the addressee, and so this strategy is most often utilised in situations where the speaker has a close relationship with the audience, such as family or close friends. Brown and Levinson outline the points below as the means by which a speaker can use the bald on-record strategy, including:

Instances in which threat minimizing does not occur

1. **Great urgency or desperation**
   Watch out!
2. **Speaking as if great efficiency is necessary**
   Hear me out.
3. **Task-oriented**
   Pass me the syringe.
4. **Little or no desire to maintain someone’s face**
   Don’t forget to take your pills!
5. **Doing the FTA is in the interest of the hearer**
   Your tires are flat!
6. **Instances in which the threat is minimized implicitly**
   Greetings
   7. **Offers:**
      Do not pay, I’ll foot the bill.

### 4. METHODOLOGY

President Barrack Obama’s Inaugural Speech delivered January 20, 2009 constitutes the data of this study. The speech comprises 96 sentences in all. However, the purposive sampling technique was used in selecting specific utterances that typify politeness strategies. The data were analysed qualitatively on a table which indicates the following: the speaker maker, the sample data, and the types of politeness strategies employed by the speaker in the sample or utterance. The analysis ends with deductions on the pragmatic import of the strategies employed by the speaker.
5. DATA ANALYSIS

5.1. Politeness Strategies in the Inaugural Speech.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Barrack Obama And to whom he speaks</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>The used strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Barrack Obama Speaking to the electorates</td>
<td>Forty-Four Americans have now taken the Presidential oath (para 2)</td>
<td>Positive politeness: Common ground strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Barrack Obama Speaking to the Americans</td>
<td>Our nation is at war, against a far reaching network or violence and hatred. (Para 3)</td>
<td>Positive politeness: Common ground strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Barrack Obama Speaking to Americans</td>
<td>Time and time again these men and women struggled and sacrificed and worked till their…. Para</td>
<td>Positive politeness: Common ground strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Barrack Obama Speaking to the Americans</td>
<td>Today. I say to you that the challenges we face are real.</td>
<td>Bald on record and Positive politeness: Impersonalising</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Deductions: Obama claims a lot of grounds with his listeners making reference to events and situations they share in common: the information above is very common knowledge which Obama shares with his listeners. He makes these references to show he is aware of his listeners’ experiences, heartbeats and needs etcetera.

5.2. Analysis of the Bald on Records

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barrack Obama And to whom he speaks</th>
<th>Types of Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barrack Obama Speaking to Americans</td>
<td>Bald on Record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our nation is badly weakened. (Sentence 11)</td>
<td>Bald on Record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our health care fail too costly (Sentence 12)</td>
<td>Bald on Record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our school fall too many. (Sentence 13).</td>
<td>Bald on Record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Today, I say to you that the challenges we face are real. They are serious and they are many. (Sentence 15-17)</td>
<td>Bald on Record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our nation is at war, against a far reaching network or violence and hatred. (Para 3)</td>
<td>Bald on Record</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Deductions:
With these bald on records, the Obama achieves the following:
1. He enlists pressure on his listeners
2. He raises an alarm
3. He gets credit for honesty and outspokenness.

5.3. Analysis of the Impersonalising Strategies

In the inaugural speech, Obama uses inclusive terms which enable him to impersonalize. They are evident in the extracts below:
And to whom he speaks

**Barrack Obama** Speaking to the electorates/ Americans

Data

- I stand here today humble by the task before ‘us’ (sentence 1)
- We the people have remained faithful to the ideals of our forebears (sentence 6)
- On this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear (sentence 17)
- The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit to choose our better history
- We will build roads and bridges…(sentence 37)

**Politeness strategy:** Impersonalizing

**Strategies Used**

Deductions: the face saving strategies enable Obama to include himself as a participant of the request he makes. Hence, threat to the negative face of the listeners is mitigated; imposition is eliminated and persuasion is enhanced.

**Analysis of the Face Threatening Acts:** The blunt face threatening acts. The table below presents the blunt face threatening acts in Obama’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barrack Obama Speaking to the electorates/ Americans</th>
<th>We will not apologise for our way of life, nor will we wave in its defence and for those who seek to advice their aims – by inducing terms and slaughtering innocent</th>
<th>Face threatening act</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Barrack Obama Speaking to the Americans</strong></td>
<td>you cannot outlast us; and we will defeat you.</td>
<td>The faces of supposed enemies if America</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conversely also, Obama used the face threatening acts to pose threats to the faces of the supposed enemies America. The combination of these strategies revealed that Obamas pragmatically used language by all means to appear to give some benefits to the listening audience and the American citizenry in entirety.

**6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

From the analysis it was evident that Obama’s inaugural speech employed the following politeness strategies. Positive politeness: impersonalising, common ground, bald on records and face threatening acts. The president used the positive politeness to endear himself with his audience, the electorate and his supporters. However, he employed the bald on records to present the imminent challenges confronting the nation.

**7. CONCLUSION**

This paper investigated politeness strategies in President Barrack Obama’s speech Inaugural speech. The analysis revealed that Obama’s inaugural speech is fraught with the following positive politeness: impersonalising, common ground, bald on records and face threatening acts, which the President used to confront the supposed
enemies of American, who also are the supposed enemies of the audience/listeners. 

The paper concludes that in spite the use of bald on records and face threatening acts by Obama in his inaugural address, the speech is absolutely polite, because all strategies were intentionally used in the interest of the hearers. Consequently, this paper submits that politeness is not mere acknowledgement of the hearers’ faces but as postulated by Leech 2014 it entails speaking or behaving in such a way as to (appear to) give some benefits not to oneself but to the person one in conversing with. Therefore, a polite speech is not one that merely contains positive politeness strategies but one that may comprise face threatening acts oriented towards benefitting the hearers.

Therefore, this paper recommends that African political leaders should learn to be more polite and pragmatic in their speeches such that their speeches in spite being pungent will promote peace and harmony.

8. REFERENCES


[5]. Harris, S. (2001), Being Politically Impolite; Extending politeness theory to adversarial political discourse. Discourse & Society, 12,451-472.


