

The Use of Politeness Principles by Ngõmbe People

Moïse NGONDOMBO LIKUME

Assistant à l'Université de Lisala

Licencié en Lettres et Civilisations Anglaises/ Université de Kisangani

Domaine de Recherche : Sociolinguistique

RESUME

'The Use of Politeness Principle by Ngõmbe People' est le titre de cet article, qui pourrait être traduit en français par « La Pratique des Principes de Politesse chez les Ngõmbe ». Cet article met en exergue la façon dont le peuple Ngõmbe vit la politesse au quotidien, surtout dans leur langage. Il va servir de guide pratique aux anglophones non-Ngõmbe qui pourraient éventuellement entrer en contact avec le peuple Ngõmbe, dans ce monde globalisant, pour les aider à avoir une bonne cohabitation et interaction. Mais aussi aux Ngõmbe eux-mêmes, il pourra servir de répertoire écrit d'un certain nombre des pratiques à pérenniser.

Les Africains sont caractérisés par un fort respect entre ses populations. Liés à leurs cultures, les africains ont beaucoup de respect pour les membres de leurs communautés. L'espace Ngõmbe, faisant partie de la société africaine, est aussi caractérisé par sa notoriété en ce qui concerne la politesse. Beaucoup d'exemples peuvent être donnés pour étayer ce point de vue d'un vieux Ngõmbe. Par exemple, pour agir poliment, un homme ne peut converser face à face avec sa belle-mère, ou un jeune garçon s'adressant à un homme âgé, ne doit pas lui fixé le regard ou le regarder tout simplement dans les yeux, etc.

C'est pour cette raison que cet article va répertorier un certain nombre d'expressions et pratiques de politesse vécues par les Ngõmbe au quotidien.

Mots clés : politesse, principe et usage

Key-words : politeness, principle, and use.

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I. Introduction

Politeness is a foundation of social interaction in communities across the world. Hence Leech¹ defined politeness as a set of practices deployed to 'avoid communicative discord or offence, and maintain communicative concord'.

Competent speakers of a language often identify speech and behavior as being normatively polite or impolite. They also determine this social interactive phenomenon of politeness in terms of subtle and complex activity that is conveyed through verbal and nonverbal (gestural, semiotic) channels that vary across situations and communities.

The reference to appropriate or non-appropriate use of politeness can, positively or negatively, impact on inhabitants' relationship.

Politeness, as one of the social phenomena, has attracted my attention and I focus here on Ngõmbe people.

II. Definition of Concepts

I hereby define some key concepts used in this article so as to help readers comprehend the sense and the meaning of the work.

- **Use:** The action or fact of using something.
- **Politeness:** The quality of being polite, or courtesy
- **Principle:** Moral rule or aspect or guiding belief.

¹Leech, G. *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman. 2006, p.173.

- **Sociolinguistics:** Sociolinguistics is the descriptive study of the effect of any and all aspects of society; including cultural norms, expectations, and context, on the way language is used, and the effects of language use on society.

III. Geo-historical Background of Ngɔmbɛ People

3.1. Historical Situation

About the time of Christ, the migration began as Negro people moved from the central Benue River valley around the present border between Nigeria and Cameroun pushed south and southeast into the forest of the Congo River basin states Robert W. July² (1967:133). These Bantu speakers seem to have been relatively few in number- perhaps only several hundred- but they were able to move quickly through the rain forest via the Congo drainage system until they emerged at the southern fringe of the forest in what is today the Luba country of Northern Katanga. From this point, a lightly wooded area not unlike their original homeland along the Benue, the Bantu apparently developed rapidly in numbers and expanded in all directions- moving southward across the Zambezi to form the civilization which produced Zimbabwe, pushing eastward into the high plains where they fanned out in a complex movement which developed the plateau and the coast of East Africa, and doubling back through the forest to absorb the pygmy people of the Congo. With iron spears they would have been formidable both as hunters and warriors, and their iron implements would have affected a revolution in cultivation, even in East Africa where cereals were probably already known. Thus they were in position both to attract and assimilate other people, imposing upon them their language until the population of Africa South of Equator had been converted substantially into iron-age speakers of Bantu.

According to the Scheutist priests and the British Baptist Missionaries who have evangelized the region of Lisala and its surrounding at the beginning of 1800, but especially based on the works of Leon de Saint Moulin (1978:56), Ngɔmbɛpeople who nowadays occupy the former Equator province and those occupying the former Oriental province as well are part of the very first bantu who lived on the edge of the humid forest and who had adapted in the bush extending towards the south in Cameroon and in Gabon.

According to Leon de saint Moulin (1978:56), after a very long walk, wars against other ethnies living the North of Congo, they reach the basin of Mongala (River), in Lisala, where they have created a real homeland playing the role of a gathering place for several tribes at the beginning of the second half of 19th C. It is here that Ngɔmbɛ people divided into different group and took different directions. Some went down to the southern equator and took the direction of Bongandanga and Basankusu. Some others will appear in the “Cuvette Central” towards 1800 driving away before them, several Mongo groups until they settled at Bolomba where they were obliged to share the same territories with Mongo people.

3.2 Geographical Situation

Ngɔmbɛ people form an important ethnic group within the population of equator province and less important in number in the Oriental Province. They found scattered in several provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Mongala, South Ubangi, and equator province, Ngɔmbɛ live in the territories of Lisala and Bongandanga (Mongala), Libenge (South Ubangi), Basakusu and Bolomba (equator). Quoting Vinck, Mondengo (blog) argued exclusively that Ngɔmbɛ people are very numerous. But we do not know whether they are all the same people or it is only the same name. Ngombe are in the region of Bangala beyond Makanja, Lisala, and Bumba. Some are in the region of Ikelemba, some again near Kisangani (Aketi). There are some Ngɔmbɛ at Lomela. In this area, some village bear the name of Ngɔmbɛ. Those Ngɔmbɛ people living in Lomela do not behave the same way and do not have the same language as the others. They have imitated the manners of other tribes nearby. They speak the languages of those tribes.

IV. Sociolinguistic Situation of Ngɔmbɛ People

Sociolinguistics is the descriptive study of the effect of any and all aspects of society; including cultural norms, expectations, and context, on the way language is used, and the effects of language use on society.

It also studies how language varieties differ between groups separated by certain social variables; e.g; ethnicity, religion, status, gender, level of education, age, etc.

In accordance with the above definition, Ngɔmbɛ or Lingɔmbɛ is a Bantu language spoken by about 150,000 people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. As such, it belongs to the language family of Niger-Congo, Zone C, code 334. ACCT-CERDOTOLA (1983:24), see the chart below:

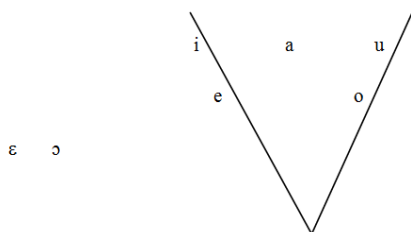
- Language family
Niger-Congo
Atlantic-Congo
- Benue-Congo

²Burssens, *Les Peuplade de l'entre Congo Ubangi*, Musée Royal de Belgique, Turven, 1958, P.219

- Bantoid
 - Bantu (zone C)
 - Buja- Ngɔmbɛ
 - Ngɔmbɛ
- Source: w.w.w. wikipedia.org (2008)

In general, native speakers live on either side of the Congo River and its many tributaries; more specially, the former Equator province.

Lingɔmbɛ is one of Bantu languages such as Lomongo, Bobangi, Kelega, Lingala possessing 7 vocalic phonemes that are:



Source: <http://Encyclopedia Britannica. Co.>

These vowels can be exemplified in the following words:

1. /i/ is close, front and spread
e.g. ibɔ̃- them
/u/ is front, back and rounded
e.g. bulú- night
2. /e/ is front and unrounded
e.g. ediba-source of water
3. /o/ is back and rounded
e.g. eko- leg
4. /ɛ/ is front and spread
e.g. edeye- now
5. /ɔ/ is back and rounded
e.g. ekɔ̃-basket
6. /a/ is central and open low
e.g. balí- women

Semi-vocalic sounds

There are two semi-vowels in Lingɔmbɛ: /w/ and /y/. They are described below according to the place of articulation and laryngeal activity.

The consonantal phonemes are:

1. /w/ is voiced and bilabial
e.g. wɛ- you
2. /y/ is voiced and palatal
e.g. Yɛngɛ- party (feast)

Consonant sounds

There existing consonants in Lingɔmbɛ : b, c, d, g, h, k, l, m, n, p, s, t, v, ny, ng,dj

As described above, the following consonants and semi-vowels are to be represented in the chart below, according to their manner of articulation, place of articulation and sound production:

	Sounds	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Nasals	Voiced	m		n	ny	Ng	
Stop or plosives	Voiced	b		d		G	
	Voiceless	p		t		K	
Fricatives	Voiced		v				h
	Voiceless			s			
Lateral	Voiced			l			
	Voiceless						
Affricates	Voiced				c		
	Voiceless						
Semi-vowels	Voiced	w			y		

Source: <http://Encyclopedia Britannica. Co.>

Lingõmbɛ is spread into several dialects (in addition to standard spoken Lingõmbɛ). These are Libwela, Lidoko, Ligenza, najokobo, motembo, liyumba, wiindza-Baali, and Binza (alternatively called Binza, Libindja, or Libirija). The latter is not the same as the Binja/Binza language. Binja dialect is primarily spoken in Oriental Province and Aketi territory and shares about three-quarters of its linguistic characteristics with standard Ngõmbɛ. Maho (2009:367) lists Doko or Lidoko as a distinct language in a separate group.

Although all speak Lingõmbɛ, there we find the linguistic groups that have some prosodic particularities and again the accentuation of the maternal substratum that differentiates them. This is how one finds there: the Yumba, the Mosweya, the Doko, and the Mbenja. Depending on whether they are of the other strand of the Congo stream more close to the Mongo people. It is necessary to say that here; the Lingõmbɛ certainly underwent the linguistic brewing with the passing of the time to live together with other people. Despite their diversity and the distance between the different territories occupied by Ngõmbɛ people, they recognize having all the same origin and have in common almost the same customs and culture, and they keep the same language, “Ngõmbɛ or Lingõmbɛ”; of course with some particular slight differences³.

V. Use of Politeness by Ngõmbɛ People

5.1. Greetings and Farewell

According to Cimwanga (2013) a greeting is a wish of good things. Another interpretation of a greeting is that it expresses a good education, expression of good manners, a respect of oneself and the respect of strict moral sociolinguistic principles. Greeting someone is fulfilling social politeness principles and maxims which minimize one self and maximize others.

Greeting means welcoming someone with particular words or a particular action.

Generally Ngõmbɛ people do not greet by shaking hands with people they do not know well. We greet by just saying ‘odĩ’ or ‘Ndzebe’.

There are two sorts of greetings, formal and informal.

a. Formal Greetings:

This sort of greeting is required in official places and circumstances; it can as well, be applied in informal situations depending on the persona. In Ligõmbɛ, as far as greetings and farewell are concerned, to greet a superior, or stranger one must be polite; that is, he must use formal expressions or words such as:

Kúm’osisoi. = Good morning chief!

Tat’ongzi = Good morning dad!

Yay’odĩ = Good stay (Good morning / afternoon...) (old) brother or sister

Mam’osisoi = Good morning mum

Kúm’odiopélé ? = how are you chief ?

Tat’omadik’opélé = Goodbye dad !

Yay’omáke bopélé = Go well !

Bõnenébi = We shall meet !

b. Informal Greetings :

This particular form is useful among friends, mates, and principally used in sociolect, within private and selected group of individuals, it is a kind of jargon. People need to be switched in order to grasp it. In Lingõmbɛ, informal greetings are used with relatives, friends, or someone close to the speaker or people we know well.

Generally speaking, informal greetings are called unofficial or non-formal. It is not acceptable to use informal in official situations.

Ngõmbɛ people have this way of greeting that is informal:

Eeh, we yõna oh ! = Hey, I see you!

Odĩ oh ! = you are there!

bõní eh ! = how is it?

osisoi oh ! = morning!

oyaní oh ! = you go back!

5.2. Addressing

Ngõmbɛ, like all Bantus, often use one’s profession to address him to show respect, either in formal or informal occasions when their social status is considered to be high or respectful.

e.g.

1. *Kúmú Linaka* = chief Linaka

2. *Mókódja Alakani* = teacher Alakani

3. *Mamá Lilembu* = mum Lilembu

³Wikipedia. Encycl. 2009.

If their social statutes are considered to be low, such as fisher, cleaner, technical worker, cook, plumber and most people in service profession, people will often call them “Elia” instead of their occupations to be polite. Ngõmbe may feel unpleasant to be called in such a term by unfamiliar person.

For example, if a girl named “Dorcas Ngondombo Elonga” is called as “Ngondombo” or “Elonga” by an ordinary friend, she will look on it as an insult.

Besides, For Ngõmbe, “little+surname” or “old+surname” is an address to show intimacy but we cannot address foreigners in such a way. The addressing terms used for strangers are also different. Ngõmbe people like to use family terms to address strangers or people elder than them.

For example, children are told to address adults like this:

1. *Nõkõ Egbalá*
2. *Tatá-mwási Bolaka*
3. *Kõkõ Konga*
4. *Mamá Mbombo.*

5.3. Compliments

In their way of expressing compliments, Ngõmbe people use:

Odí mõmi (mwali) e! = *You are a man (woman)!*

Mõmi (mwali) ádaka yo boa! = *that is a man (woman)!*

Edi boa = *that's right!*

5.4. Apologies

Ngõmbe people have some expressions to apologize, namely:

Yee mbí! = $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{I apologize!} \\ \text{Sorry!} \\ \text{Please!} \end{array} \right.$

Íkeani wa! = *Have merci on me!*

Nangí bolimbisi! = *I beg your pardon!*

5.5. Asking permission

For Ngõmbe people when you ask for permission to use something that belongs to someone else you have to do your best to be polite. It is desirable to use such expressions:

Kúmú, ébwani mbí boké? = *Chief, May I go?*

Tát'obalí bo, náyáké? = *Dad, would you mind if I eat?*

Íyáya, nádoé? = *Older brother, could I come?*

5.6. Giving permission

In Lingõmbe:

Eeh! = *Yes!*

Iih! = *Yes, please!*

Édi bõa! = *Yes, indeed!*

pε mojó! = *No problem*

Oboani bokõ! = *Yes, you may (can/ could)!*

Etc.

5.7. Refusing to Give Permission

In Lingõmbe:

pεpε! = *no!*

péka! = *nothing!*

nalõni! = *I refuse!*

Ébwániti! = *it is not possible!*

pε mwεngí! = *no way!*

5.8. Asking the Way

In Lingombe

- *Obwaniti bonedja ní ndjea e gbié?* = couldn't you show me the way to the farm?
- *Okapala obwani botɔndɔ ní ndéngé bōmea tá ngando* = Would you mind telling me the way to the village?
- *Nalisuma lisusu ngêne, ebwaní wɛ bonedja mbí ndjea e bopitalo?* = could you please show me the way to the hospital?

5.9. Taboos

In Ngɔmbɛ traditional culture, there are some expressions and practices considered as taboos. For example, during the fishing period, people forbid to say some words such as “broken” and “death”. They are afraid that these words may take away their whole-year fortune. Some terms that are acceptable among peers or friends, are strictly forbidden to be used in public or in front of elders. Ex. Ndzoka (penis), Ekpéka (vagina), Mohuti (anus), Mabindzi (testicles), etc.

One cannot speak face to face with his mother-in-law, etc.

VI. Conclusion

The article dealt with the use of politeness by Ngɔmbɛ people: A sociolinguistic study. After having defined the key concepts, we have discussed about the geo-historical and sociolinguistic background of Ngɔmbɛ people. Emphasis has been put also on the sociolinguistic aspect of Lingombe. Then we shed light on the way Ngɔmbɛ people use politeness in their everyday life.

As conclusion, we note that Ngɔmbɛ people, like other Africans are characterized by strong respect between their people. Bound to their culture, Africans feel much respect for members of their community. Ngɔmbɛspace, as an area of African society, is characterized by its notoriousness as far as politeness is concerned. For instance, to behave politely, a man cannot talk face to face with his mother-in-law, or when addressing an old man the young boy or girl cannot stare at him in the eyes. Ladies must kneel when they serve men. It is impolite for a woman to pass between men. If they are asked to eat in the same plate with adults, young people must wait until the elder should start eating first, etc.

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