Politeness Strategies In Nigerian English Versus British English

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Abstract
Politeness strategies constitute a central concern in pragmatic studies because they shape interpersonal communication and reflect sociocultural norms. This study undertakes a comparative pragmatic analysis of politeness strategies in Nigerian English (NigE) and British English (BrE). Anchored in Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory and supported by insights from Leech's Politeness Principle, the study examines how speakers of Nigerian English and British English deploy linguistic strategies to manage face, power, and social distance. Using qualitative data drawn from naturally occurring conversations, interviews, and selected media discourse, the study identifies both shared and divergent politeness norms in the two varieties. Findings reveal that while British English privileges indirectness, mitigation, and negative politeness, Nigerian English foregrounds solidarity, respect for hierarchy, and positive politeness strategies, often influenced by indigenous sociocultural values. The study concludes that pragmatic differences between Nigerian English and British English can lead to cross-cultural misinterpretation if not properly understood, thereby underscoring the need for pragmatic competence in second-language use.

Keywords: *Politeness strategies, Nigerian English, British English, pragmatics, cross-cultural communication*

I.   Introduction

English, as a global language, manifests in diverse sociolinguistic and pragmatic forms across different speech communities. Nigerian English and British English represent two significant varieties shaped by distinct cultural, historical, and social experiences. While British English serves as the traditional reference variety, Nigerian English has evolved as a localized form influenced by indigenous languages and cultural norms (Bamgbose, 1995; Schneider, 2007).

Politeness strategies play a crucial role in everyday communication by regulating social relationships and preventing conflict. However, politeness is not universal; it is culturally constructed and context-dependent. What is perceived as polite in British English may be interpreted differently in Nigerian English, and vice versa. This study therefore examines how politeness strategies are realized in Nigerian English in comparison with British English, with a view to highlighting pragmatic similarities and differences.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the widespread use of English in Nigeria, pragmatic misunderstandings frequently arise in interactions between Nigerian English speakers and native speakers of British English. Such misunderstandings are often rooted in differences in politeness norms, indirectness, and sociocultural expectations. Many Nigerian English speakers, though grammatically competent, may be pragmatically misinterpreted as overly direct or deferential in British contexts, while British speakers may be perceived as distant or evasive in Nigerian settings. There is therefore a need for systematic comparative studies that examine politeness strategies in both varieties to enhance cross-cultural communicative competence.

Objectives of the Study
The objectives of this study are to:
1, Identify politeness strategies commonly used in Nigerian English.
2. Examine politeness strategies characteristic of British English.
3. Compare similarities and differences in politeness realization in both varieties.
4. Highlight the sociocultural factors influencing politeness choices in Nigerian and British English.

Research Questions
1. What politeness strategies are predominant in Nigerian English?
2. What politeness strategies characterize British English?
3. How do politeness strategies in Nigerian English differ from those in British English?
4. What sociocultural factors account for these differences?

Theoretical Framework
Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory
Brown and Levinson (1987) propose that politeness strategies are employed to mitigate Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs). They identify two types of face: positive face, the desire to be approved of, and negative face, the desire to be free from imposition. The strategies include bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. This theory provides a useful framework for comparing how Nigerian and British English speakers manage face in interaction.

Leech's Politeness Principle
Leech (2014) extends politeness analysis by emphasizing social goals and interpersonal harmony through maxims such as tact, generosity, approbation, and modesty. This principle complements Brown and Levinson's model by accounting for cultural variation in politeness norms, particularly relevant in a comparative study of Nigerian and British English.

II.   Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach. Data were drawn from:
- Naturally occurring conversations among Nigerian and British English speakers,
- Semi-structured interviews,
- Selected television and radio discourse from Nigeria and the United Kingdom.

The data were analyzed using pragmatic analysis, focusing on request forms, greetings, apologies, and address terms.

Politeness Strategies in British English
British English politeness is largely characterized by indirectness and mitigation, reflecting a strong orientation toward negative politeness. Speakers often employ modal verbs, hedges, and tentative expressions such as could, would, perhaps, and I was wondering if… to minimize imposition (Holmes, 2013).

For example:
Could you possibly open the window, if you don't mind?
Such expressions signal respect for personal autonomy and social distance. Apologies and gratitude are also frequently used to maintain interpersonal harmony, even in minimal interactions.

Politeness Strategies in Nigerian English
Nigerian English politeness strategies are heavily influenced by indigenous cultural norms that emphasize respect, hierarchy, and communal solidarity. Positive politeness strategies, such as expressions of goodwill, honorifics, and kinship terms (sir, madam, brother, aunty), are commonly used even in formal contexts (Adegbija, 2004).

For example:
Sir, please help me check this document.
While such usage may appear overly deferential in British English, it functions as a marker of respect and social harmony in Nigerian English. Directness is also more acceptable, especially when accompanied by politeness markers such as please or respectful address forms.

Comparative Analysis

Feature	Nigerian English	British English
Dominant strategy	Positive politeness	Negative politeness
Use of titles	Very frequent	Limited
Indirectness	Moderate	High
Cultural orientation	Communal and hierarchical	Individualistic
Interpretation of directness	Normal/respectful	Potentially impolite

The comparison reveals that politeness in Nigerian English is relationship-oriented, while British English prioritizes individual autonomy. These differences can result in pragmatic failure in intercultural communication.

Implications of the Study

The findings have implications for:

• English language teaching, particularly in pragmatics and communicative competence,
• Intercultural communication, especially in diplomacy, education, and international business,
• Curriculum development, encouraging the inclusion of World Englishes and pragmatic awareness.

III.   Conclusion

This study demonstrates that politeness strategies in Nigerian English and British English, though sharing a common linguistic base, are pragmatically distinct due to differing sociocultural norms. While British English emphasizes indirectness and negative politeness, Nigerian English foregrounds respect, solidarity, and positive politeness. Awareness of these differences is essential for effective cross-cultural communication and for reducing pragmatic misunderstanding in global English use.

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