



**POLITENESS IN NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION:  
A COMMENTARY ON NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION  
IN A LINGUISTICS CLASSROOM CONTEXT IN  
A SELECTED KENYAN UNIVERSITY**

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**Abstract:**

The aim of this article was to explain the effects of politeness as entailed in nonverbal language use in the instructional process. Non-verbal communication skills also known as silent language, include all behaviours performed in the presence of others or perceived either consciously or unconsciously. Nonverbal communication entails; facial expressions, body movements, posture, gestures, eye contact, touch, dressing, space, voice and paying attention to inconsistencies. All these are synchronized to reinforce verbal messages, clarify meaning and create a sense of the speaker's presence and purpose. Thus, instructors in a classroom setting determine whether a message sent has been received majorly through immediate nonverbal feedback. This paper tries to substantiate the pivotal role enhanced by body language and the impression both the teacher and the student draw from using nonverbal language and the politeness issues that are accrued to such usage. The study adopted the qualitative method and used observation and the data collection procedures were observation and focus group discussions. The findings indicated that instructors/lecturers use politeness through diverse nonverbal cues during their linguistics lessons in order to convey the relevant message to students. This enables the students to grasp the major concepts being learned and at times the use of nonverbal consciously or unconsciously posed a threat to both the negative and positive faces of lecturers and students.

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## 1. Introduction

Communication is an ongoing process of sending and receiving messages that enable interlocutors to convey their knowledge, ideas, thoughts, information, feelings, emotions and attitudes. Among the elements of communication, sociocultural competence and strategic competence, communicative competence seems to be an important role to enhance effectiveness in communication (Celce-Murcia, 1995). Sociocultural competence refers to the speaker's knowledge of how to express messages appropriately within the overall social and cultural context of communication, while strategic competence is the ability to use verbal and nonverbal communication strategies in order to overcome problems in the planning and execution stages of reaching a communicative goal.

Interpersonal communication involves relaying messages in an implicit and explicit manner. The information can be passed not just verbally, but also in a non-verbal way. This means that the conversational partners can make meaning of some messages through facial expressions, body language, or even gestures. The teaching process may be described as an interpersonal flow of information or communication which results consecutively in the processing of the information, decision-making and learning which may be cognitive, affective or psychomotor in nature (Mason, 2003).

According to Senowarsito (2013), in communication, verbal and non-verbal behaviours enhance politeness norms. The verbal behaviours of a student to an instructor, for example, 'I am sorry I forgot my assignment' is considered polite if it is supported by nonverbal behaviours such as head bowing and some facial expressions such as, anger, confusion, excitement and disgust that show regret. Therefore, when interacting with others, our body is equipped with dozens of gestures, eye movements and facial expressions which we, sometimes are not aware of the movements. This is a habit we usually do in certain situations meaning that nonverbal behaviours are unconscious.

The process of transmitting knowledge is essentially a communication process, not only in the sense of transmitting knowledge but more particularly as it relates to interpersonal communication behaviours thus non-verbal phenomena become predominant aspects of interpersonal relationships critical for all learning situations. In accordance with politeness, verbal and non-verbal expressions can signal polite or impolite behaviours. Both can maintain harmonious and smooth social interaction and avoid the use of potential threats and even damage to the face.

## **2. Politeness and Non-Verbal Language or Communication**

According to Hickson (2010), there are a number of nonverbal forms of language, however, this paper focuses on the following forms of nonverbal language we use during communication:

### **2.1 Kinesics**

According to Hickson (2010), kinesics include body movements like; gestures, facial expressions, eye behaviours, touching and any other movement of the limbs and the body in general. People tend to gesture more when they are enthusiastic, excited and energized. Facial expressions, for instance, convey a wealth of information. The particular look on a person's face and movements of the person's head by nodding provide reliable cues as to the approval, disapproval or disbelief by turning the head from left to the right. Eyes are also strong non-verbal cues that serve some functions in communication such as paying attention by maintaining eye contact, rolling of the eyes to convey a lack of respect, a long stare to show some level of concentration among others (Hickson, 2010). Touching is a powerful vehicle for conveying such emotions as warmth, comfort, agreements and physical attraction. Generally, the amount and frequency of touching demonstrates closeness, familiarity and degree of liking.

### **2.2 Proxemics**

This is the way people perceive and use space including seating arrangement, physical space or personal distance and conversational space such as sitting too close to somebody can be intimidating. This means that the way the lecturer moves, he or she can give an air of superiority or the feeling of being approachable, open and friendly (Kaps & Voges, 2007).

### **2.3 Paralanguage**

This consists of variations in speech such as voice quality, volume, tempo, pitch, non-fluencies like; uh, um, ah and others, laughing, yawning and the like (Hickson, 2010).

### **2.4 Chronemics**

This is concerned with the use of time such as being early or late, keeping others waiting and other relationships between time and status for instance teacher-student, subordinates-superiors or worker-supervisor relationships (Hickson, 2010).

Therefore, nonverbal behaviours can serve to support, complement, regulate, modify and/or replace verbal messages. The use of verbal messages should be congruent with nonverbal expressions. The way to express a verbal message can be considered polite or impolite depending on gestures, facial expressions or voice quality and volume accompanying the verbal expressions.

An important aspect that attaches or gives politeness value in communication is nonverbal language. Non-verbal messages are essential in determining politeness in an

interactive context thus according to Robert (2007), 7% of communication is determined by the use of words, 38% is based on the tone of voice and 55% is on facial expressions, gestures, postures and other forms of nonverbal communication. In the context of face-to-face communication, nonverbal expressions usually go hand in hand with verbal language. In essence, the impact of nonverbal aspects of politeness is widely felt in communication.

The objective of this paper was to examine the effects of nonverbal communication on politeness in language in the classroom context.

### 3. Theory

Two politeness theories were used to guide this study: politeness theory by Leech (1983) and Brown & Levinson (1987). Politeness, according to Leech (1983: 81), is given two forms: a negative one (Minimize the expression of impolite beliefs), and a positive one (Maximize the expression of polite beliefs). Leech elaborates on his theory of politeness in the light of what he calls the "Tact Maxim." There are two sides of this Tact Maxim (1983:109). a) a negative side: "Minimize the cost to *hearer*", b) a positive side: "Maximize the benefit to *hearer*". In addition to the Tact Maxim, Leech (1983: 132) suggests a number of other maxims dealing with polite behaviour as follows:

- Generosity maxims: a) minimize benefit to *self*, b) maximize cost to *self*.
- Approbation maxims: a) minimize dispraise of *other*, b) maximize praise of *other*.
- Modesty maxims: a) minimize praise of *self*, b) maximize dispraise of *self*.
- Agreement maxims: a) minimize disagreement between *self* and *other*, b) maximize agreement between *self* and *other*.
- Sympathy maxims: a) minimize antipathy between *self* and *other*, b) maximize sympathy between *self* and *other*.

Leech's maxims are coupled with five pragmatic scales that can be used to evaluate the degree of appropriateness of a given speech situation. The first is the **cost-benefit** scale according to which the benefit of the proposed action to the speaker or the hearer is estimated. The second is the **optionality** scale on which illocutions are arranged according to the amount of choice which the speaker allows to the hearer. The third is the **indirectness** scale which measures the distance between the illocutionary act and its illocutionary goal. The **authority** scale measures the degree to which the speaker has the right to impose on the hearer. Finally, the **social distance** scale assesses the degree to which the speaker and the hearer are acquainted, that the extent to which they are socially distant.

Brown & Levinson's (1987) model focuses mainly on the speaker who has the ability to assess the most appropriate politeness strategy to use in a particular communication situation. Brown & Levinson (1987) build on Goffman's (1967) notion of face as the "*public self-image that a person wants for himself*" (p.61). They assume that every individual has two types of face, positive and negative. The positive is the individual's desire that his or her wants be appreciated in social interaction, whereas the negative face

is the desire for freedom of action and freedom for imposition. Thus, the speaker must be able to either avoid the face-threatening nature of the speech act that he or she is about to perform or at least soften or minimize it by choosing an appropriate linguistic strategy.

Brown & Levinson (1987) postulates three main strategies for performing speech acts that is, positive politeness- supporting or enhancing the addressee's positive face, negative politeness- softening the encroachment on the addressee's freedom of action or freedom of imposition and off-record politeness, these strategies are intended to make the speaker avoid committing a FTA (Face Threatening Act). A FTA is an act that is performed by the speaker either through the use of speech or other acts that pose a threat to hearer's face that is by interfering with the hearer's autonomy or personal space. However, if the speaker has no option but to risk the FTA, he or she has to go on-record that is, (to make the speaker's intention in the utterance explicitly clear) baldly without a redressive action. Thus Brown & Levinson's theory includes a social aspect that entails the assessment of three sociocultural variables of the FTA, the power that the addressee has over the speaker, the social distance between the speaker and hearer and the cultural ranking of the speech act. The latter refers to the extent to which the FTA is perceived to be threatening within a specific culture.

#### **4. Method**

This paper adopted a qualitative approach to understanding how politeness is reflected in nonverbal communication during the instructional process. The researcher conducted a focus group discussion with linguistics lecturers from the linguistics department in the selected university in Kenya, Faculty of Arts Social Sciences and Humanities and some observations during the instructional process for purposes of data triangulation (Creswell, 2009). A special focus was on the linguists because they are experts in language and when teaching language, they focus on many aspects of language use by the learners including the communication done through the nonverbal use of language. 5 lectures of linguistics and 10 third-year B.A Language and communication students were included in the focus group discussions. The census method of sampling was used to arrive at the sample of 15 participants since this sample made up the entire population under study. This is allowed in research because the population under investigation could provide the required or relevant information useful for the study (Powell & Silipigni, 2004). The focus group discussion lasted for 30-45 minutes with 15 participants.

Data analysis was based on politeness concepts: positive, negative, bald on record and off-record politeness strategies as presented by Brown & Levinson (1987). To support the analysis, politeness concepts by Leech (1983) and Watt (2003) such as tact maxim, generosity maxim, agreement and sympathy maxim were incorporated. The analysis focused on the lecturers' or instructors' and the students' use of politeness in their nonverbal classroom interactions. Field notes were also taken to aid the researcher identify and explain the existence of nonverbal signals or aspects in order to gain insights on nonverbal language use in the said set-up. Data was analyzed qualitatively using the

descriptive method in terms of the different non-verbal cues that were realized in various scenarios where the nonverbal language was observed during the lessons. The participants were well informed that the information to be collected was meant for research purposes alternatively, Dooley (2001) states that one can choose to observe subjects in natural occurrences and refrain from informing them if the aspect under investigation does not cause any harm or threat.

## 5. Results and Discussion

The findings from the focus group discussions indicated that both students and lecturers use nonverbal communication to signal politeness in various instances. The first scenario as indicated by the participants was when either a lecturer or students came in late (chronemics), which is late arrivals for the lesson. On one hand, the lecturers indicated that they apologized to the students and explained themselves. This apology could be signaled by the lecturer putting his hands together such body language was to show that he or she is seeking pardon from the learners. On the other, learners could also send some feedback to show that they have accepted the apology by nodding their heads and verbalizing that *'it is okay or apology accepted'*. Such nonverbal use of language is in line with Leech's maxim of generosity (cost-benefit) which implies that the benefit of the proposed action to the speaker or hearer is estimated.

Asking or giving an apology is a FTA to the hearer. Brown & Levinson (1987) state that when speakers apologize, they show averseness to impose on the negative face of the hearer thereby redressing the FTA. There are many ways of apologizing such as admitting the impingement, indicating reluctance, giving overwhelming reasons, begging for forgiveness and so on. When a speaker begs for forgiveness or asks for acquittal, according to Brown & Levinson (1987) it suggests that the hearer should cancel the debt implicit in the FTA, this minimizes imposition. From this observation, it can be deduced that teachers or instructors send and receive signals consciously and unconsciously with a lot of nonverbal message cues (Lunerburg, 2010).

The second scenario was indicated to be during the instructional process, while teaching, the five lecturers indicated that they vary their methodology depending on the concept to be learned, some chose even to change the sitting arrangement and form groups for discussion or even pairing up the learners. An example was cited of using nonverbal communication during the lesson in a phonetics class whereby the lecturer demonstrated the shapes that the oral cavity assumes in the articulation of various phonemes. The course lecturer explained aspects of rounded and unrounded vowels nonverbally (the lecturer demonstrates and asks the learners to look at the behavior of the upper and lower lips and the shape of the mouth) that is, the contact of the upper and lower lips, spreading of lips could be demonstrated using a smile, pointing at the various speech organs and their exact location in the oral cavity, the positions the tongue takes when articulating various sounds and many others. The use of nonverbal cues during such lessons enabled students to identify the right places of articulation and manner of

articulation of different sounds and even the speech organs involved thus aiding the comprehension of the lessons' content. These findings are in tandem with (Brown 2002) sentiments that nonverbal language is the support and supplement of teaching that occupies an ideal teaching position and has a strong psychological effect on the learner. These sentiments are also in agreement with Leech (1983)'s maxim of generosity which states that "*minimize benefit to self but maximize cost to self*". Therefore, from the foregoing, using nonverbal cues enhances politeness use, for instance, when students comprehend the content through such usage it means their needs have been attended to thus an aspect of positive politeness.

Further still, the findings also indicated that lecturers also made use of space while the lessons were ongoing for instance, the lecturer moving closer to the learners when explaining concepts, sometimes making use of touch thus narrowing the space between him or her and the students (an aspect of proxemics). Learners were also involved in the instructional process in the form of group presentations and discussions in that the lecturer could be part of the groups in class, thus a way of nonverbal communication. According to (Jasim & Aziz, 2010 in Senowarsito, 2013) the distance between interlocutors that is, instructors standing at different positions at the appropriate distance could make students to be attentive and thoughtful, enhanced positive politeness. In his argument (Senowarsito, 2013:5), states that "*politeness is influenced by intimacy, closeness, relationships, the social distance between the speaker and the hearer and existing conditions in social interactions as well*". It can be deduced from these findings that the sitting arrangement in the form of group discussions while the lesson is ongoing was an indication that the instructors try to minimize the social distance between them and their students thus giving them a chance to converse freely and share ideas leading to comprehension of content taught at the same time enhancing fostering fruitful lecturer-student interactions. It is also a way of lessening an imposition on the students thus enhancing the use of positive politeness. However, to some extent, the use of proxemics in terms of space whereby lecturers moved close to the students revealed an aspect of negative politeness which could be interpreted as imposition and according to Leech, it is a sign of authority (the speaker has a right to impose on the hearer).

The third scenario as indicated by the students where nonverbal communication was used, is the aspect of lecturers walking around the room, smiling and at times tapping their backs or touching their shoulders (the use of kinesics) while the lecture was in progress. According to the lecturers, it was a way of associating with their learners in order to narrow the social distance between them thus illustrating positive politeness. Learners indicated that the lecturer or instructor's teaching position led to some comfort that is, most students were comfortable when the lecturer maintained his or her position in front of the class rather than moving closer to them or walking around. The closer the lecturer came, the more the learners felt intimidated or their privacy being intruded or their personal space being invaded thus affecting their negative face of wanting to remain autonomous.

According to Leech (1983)'s maxim of agreement which states "*minimize disagreement with self and others but maximize agreement with self and others, thus from the findings, social distance or space as a nonverbal cue could lead to inefficiencies in communication*". Even though the lecturer's intention of moving closer to the learners was to minimize imposition as the instructor on the hearers (students) thus aiming at the realization of solidarity, to the students it was not the case because the closer the lecturer was to the students, they felt intimidated. These sentiments are echoed by Brown & Levinson (1987) in the sense that negative politeness strategies are politeness strategies oriented mainly to satisfy the hearer's negative face, its basic want is to claim territory and self-determination. In other words, this strategy has the desire to remain autonomous so the speaker is more apt to include the hearer. These include requests, not showing off and being formal and restraining him or herself as a speaker. The use of this strategy might cause some social distance or awareness in the interaction which is the case when the learners felt that their personal space was being invaded.

In addition to this, Oskouhi (2013) points out that the use of proxemics by instructors can impact the learning process in that students draw some impressions from the way the teacher moves. He or she can give an air of superiority or the feeling of being approachable, open and friendly. Thus, responsive teachers move among students to enhance a friendly learning atmosphere and encourage active participation from the learners in order to reduce the social distance which is an act of politeness. The fourth scenario that this article presents in terms of politeness in nonverbal language, is the use of facial expressions such as; a smile, frowning and eye contact among others.

The lecturers maintained eye contact with their students so as to focus the students' attention on illustrated concepts. Basically, eye contact during the instructional process was meant to enhance the learners' concentration on the lesson's content. This enabled instructors to create rapport with the learners at the same time receive varied feedback from their facial expressions thus leading to positive politeness. On the other hand, negative politeness was noted when both the student and lecturer would have a prolonged eye contact this conveyed some mixed feelings thus being perceived as a Face Threatening Act to both the speaker and the hearer. Still further, lecturers also indicated that they used this nonverbal communication to survey the class by calling on the students to pay close attention to aspects being explained and even asking learners questions so as to identify those who could like to respond to those questions.

Another nonverbal form of communication was the use of a smile, this was used in contexts when making a joke or using humour during the lecture at times to kill the monotony of the presentation or to make fun of a given concept or situation. Therefore, the linguistics lecturers made use of this non-verbal cue to create a conducive learning atmosphere and make the students relax so as to comprehend the content of the lesson, enjoy the learning process and reduce the social distance between them and students. Such usage was also meant to lighten the moments of learning enabling them to understand difficult concepts in a tense environment. Oskouhi (2013) observes that facial expressions such as a smile can conquest students' mind, it not only builds teacher-



student interaction, and creates a harmonious classroom atmosphere, but also conveys the feeling of what cannot be expressed verbally. Thus, the use of nonverbal language builds a good teacher-student relationship. It also acts as a bridge between teachers and students' communication in that it lessens the social distance thus leading to positive politeness. From the foregoing and the findings, it can be concluded that the use of facial expression as a form of nonverbal communication by the interlocutors, can enhance aspects of politeness.

The dressing is an aspect of nonverbal communication that was considered, during the focus group discussion it was evident that the dressing code of both the students revealed aspects of politeness or impoliteness. The lecturers indicated that they were uncomfortable with the dressing code of the learners since most of their attires were not only indecent but also reflected a lack of self-respect. The dressing also illustrated an aspect of their unbecoming behaviours thus posing a threat to their face and the lecturers. The choice of their attire could lead to interruption of lessons especially when some students came in late for lessons, it caught the eyes of others thus shifting their attention to the individuals thus welcoming some nonverbal (whistling) remarks from the listeners which was a threat to the positive faces of the listeners. Lecturers explained that in some instances they were forced to exit such students whose dressing was not decent from class to go dress up well and resume the lesson while others could proceed with the lesson without minding the nonverbal messages sent through such forms of attire. The lecturers indicated that such forms of dressing were face-threatening both to them and the students because of creating unnecessary distractions in class. The same students whose attires were not appropriate especially the females when reprimanded, felt embarrassed and their nonverbal expressions like fixing eyes on the floor while fidgeting on their seats and adjusting their attires were an indication that a FTA had been performed.

Brown (2002: 367) espouses nonverbal forms of communication as being paramount in the teaching profession. He explains that teaching by example is better than words. Teaching by example of a teacher is reflected in many ways and body language is part of teaching by example. In the communication between teachers and students, all of the attitude, feelings and self-cultivation are displayed through the instruments; facial expressions, gestures, glances and even clothing and hairstyle have far-reaching implications for students. This article agrees with Brown's findings in that these forms of nonverbal communication determined the delivery of instructors in a classroom set-up thus going a long way in affecting the comprehension of the lesson's content. Therefore, non-verbal language especially dressing can divert the students' attention thus affecting the learning process which means that appearance as a form of nonverbal language that enhances positive politeness, should be just within the demeanor and temperature of formality. Thus, creating a conducive atmosphere for studying.

Finally, in the use of mobile phones in a lecture room, an observation was made that some students were chatting on phones while lectures were ongoing. This nonverbal gesture could be interpreted that they are disinterested in the content being delivered or

they are bored with the presentation thus opting to interact with their phones. Consequently, the instructors' reactions towards this behavior entailed for example; reprimanding the students and warning them against using phones in class since such a practice was face-threatening and affected the negative face of the lecturers or instructors. The use of phones made learners assume different sitting postures like slouching positions which could send a lot of signals that were face-threatening to the instructors. The tone of voice such as low, high, harsh and friendly tone can also reflect psychological arousal, emotion and mood. It may also carry social information as in a sarcastic, superior or submissive manner of speaking.

It can be concluded from the findings that nonverbal language use is reflected in various ways in the instructional process which is meant to illustrate some kind of politeness both to the learners and the instructors thus enhancing different effects. For instance, the use of nonverbal language aimed at the realization of solidarity, lessening power and distance between the lecturers and students, enhancing harmonious and peaceful coexistence among themselves and at times posed face threats that affected their relations.

## 6. Conclusion

First, from the findings of this study, it can be concluded that nonverbal behaviours can serve to support, regulate, modify and/ or replace verbal messages thus demonstrating aspects of politeness that are realized in gestures, facial expressions, voice quality, space, body language, dressing among others.

Second, nonverbal language in terms of proxemics that is space. Space lead to inefficiencies in communication in that, the closer the lecturer moved to the learners, the more they felt intimidated thus posing a threat to their negative face. The learners felt that their basic want to claim territory and self-determination had been intruded. Thus, they could not remain autonomous. It is recommended that lecturers/ instructors should be in a position to study the learners' nonverbal feedback so as to avoid posing a threat to their negative face.

Third is the use of facial expressions such as smile, eye contact, frowning among others. Lecturers maintained eye contact with their learners, this was meant to notice and attend to the learners' needs. In return, the instructors received varied nonverbal feedback indicating comprehension of aspects by the learners or students. This enabled both interlocutors to create rapport leading to positive politeness. Negative politeness was noted when either a student or Instructor had some prolonged eye contact which resulted to mixed feelings indicating a form of FTA. However, for the lecturers the prolonged eye contact was meant to survey the class thus calling for the learners' attention. Still further, the findings indicated that a smile was used to create light moments when making a joke or using some humour. All these were meant to break the monotony of the lesson enabling the comprehension of difficult concepts at the same time reducing the social distance. It was therefore recommended that the use of nonverbal

cues builds a good teacher-student relationship and bridges the social gap thus enhancing positive politeness.

Fourth, it can be concluded that lecturers made use of space as a nonverbal cue to interact with students by arranging them into groups. This made them to closely interact with the students by even tapping them on their backs. This close interaction lessened imposition on the students thus enhancing positive politeness. Therefore, politeness is influenced by intimacy, closeness and social distance between the speaker and the hearer and other existing conditions in social interactions.

Finally, asking or giving an apology was also signaled using nonverbal cues. Lecturers used such nonverbal language to show averseness to impose on the negative face of the hearer thus redressing the FTA. The use of this nonverbal cue of putting hands together to indicate an aspect of asking for or begging for an apology is in line with Leech's maxim of generosity that is, the benefit of the proposed action to the hearer is estimated.

Besides verbal communication, nonverbal gestures transmit a potent message. The body language, eye contact, physical appearance and tone of voice provide meaningful information to the audience. Nonverbal messages are deemed more reliable since in them is entailed a number of politeness aspects thus giving support to the verbal message. Thus, nonverbal language helps students to comprehend class content, shortens the distance between the lecturer and student, and stirs interest in learning. Further, still, the use of politeness can be entailed in nonverbal communication by the instructors narrowing the gap between them and making their relationship more harmonious thus creating a good learning environment.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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