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Face Threatening Acts and Politeness in Selected Speeches of Governor El-Rufai on Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

In every communicative engagement, people perform certain communicative acts in a bid to achieve their goals in interaction. Political leaders have over time waded into health crises discourses in an attempt to provide directions on best practices in times of such distress. This paper studies face-threatening acts and politeness strategies employed in selected speeches of Governor Nasir El-Rufai of Kaduna State on the COVID-19 pandemic and adherence to safety rules. Out of the two (2) speeches selected by purposive sampling, five (5) excerpts each were used to analyse face-threatening acts and the use of politeness strategies, respectively, adopting face theory of Brown and Levinson as a theoretical framework. For its methodology, the work adopts a qualitative approach and subjects the data to a content analysis to investigate the FTAs and PPs inherent in the speeches. The study finds that political speeches during such pandemics are often laced with subtle face-threatening acts even when they may appear unintended or unplanned. Furthermore, the paper submits that although politeness strategies were employed to a large extent, they did not rule out the FTAs meted out on the listeners. It concludes that politicians would often engage the populace in situations such as health pandemics, but it is recommended that in doing so, they should employ more mitigatory strategies and positive politeness strategies to minimize the effects of face-threatening acts in order to uphold the positive face of their interlocutors and promote self-esteem.

KEYWORDS: Face Threatening Acts, Politeness Strategies, COVID-19.



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Introduction

Language is intricately tied to human communicative existence; it is the vehicle by which messages are encoded and decoded for a better understanding of acts of communication. It has been postulated that the possession of language is closely tied to one's life. The present paper is situated within the domain of pragmatics studies, and pragmatics simply refers to language in use with relation to the context of occurrence. Pragmatics deals with the raw material called utterances; it studies how language is used to produce meaning in context. Stalnaker further affirms that 'pragmatics is the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed' (383).

Like Stalnaker, Margida Bassols Puig maintains that;

"pragmatics focuses on its object of study through consideration of the context and its construction, through recognition of speaker intention and through the establishment of implicit elements which the hearer has to access" (1).

Context constitutes, in part, the place and time in which an event takes place. In pragmatics, it is something personal and dynamic; it is not given at the outset, but rather, it is constructed by interlocutors' utterances.

It is deducible from the foregoing that the interpretation of political talk/speeches is not devoid of contextuality, and it is also characterized by the presence of face-threatening acts and politeness strategies. This is examined closely in this paper.

Ann Hui-Yen Wang avers that 'In every talk-in-interaction, participants not only negotiate meanings but also establish, reinforce, or redefine interpersonal relationships' (1). This is where politeness comes in and sways the way people talk. Politeness, according to Johnstone, "refers to all the ways in which speakers adapt (or decide not to adapt) to the fact that their interlocutors, actual or imagined, have human needs like their own" (124-5).

The year 2020 was marked by the coronavirus pandemic, popularly known as COVID-19 pandemic. During the leadership of the former president Muhammadu Buhari, the period heralded a number of speeches by virtually all the governors as they tried to engage the people, educate, enlighten, and create awareness on best practices and safety measures, calling for total compliance. Two speeches by the then governor, Nasir El-Rufai, have been selected and are used in this paper to examine political speeches of this nature in terms of face-threatening acts and politeness strategies.

Aim And Objectives

This paper broadly aims to investigate face-threatening acts and politeness strategies used in two speeches by the then governor Nasir El-Rufai. It has the following specific objectives:

1. To identify the face-threatening acts in ten excerpts from two speeches of Governor Nasir El-Rufai.
2. To examine the politeness strategies used in the selected speeches of Governor Nasir El-Rufai.

Methodology

The study adopts the qualitative research design to interpret data due to the fact that the qualitative design facilitates an exploration of meanings that individuals or groups make in every human/social engagement. It is concerned with ideas and experiences, and it is equally subjective. The data were selected purposively from speeches by the former governor of Kaduna State, Nasir El-Rufai, on COVID-19 and other issues related to the pandemic within the period of March and June 2020 in Nigeria. The excerpts from the speeches are labelled as texts, and 'text,' according to Halliday and Mathiessen, refers to 'any instance of language that makes sense to someone who knows the language' (3). The population of the study is ten excerpts from five speeches of Governor El-Rufai.

Literature Review

Covid-19

It is arguably true that one of the world's deadliest health-related issues has, in the recent past, been the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), which causes the coronavirus pandemic and which this work refers to as Covid-19. It is a disease caused by a new strain of coronavirus, formally referred to as the 2019 novel coronavirus. The outbreak of this pandemic welcomed an era of unprecedented campaigns by all stakeholders, including the political class in Nigeria. As affirmed by the National Center for Disease Control (NCDC) on the 6th of February 2022, a total of 253,685 persons were infected by the disease, out of which 3 were confirmed dead. As a result of the severity of the disease and the number of lives claimed by the disease afterwards, there has been a great deal of sensitization and public orientation geared towards providing information and safety rules to curtail further spread of the disease.

The Concept of Face Threatening Acts (FTAs)

The concept of 'face' was introduced by Goffman in 1967, and it is defined as a symbolic front that members in all communities and cultures strive to maintain and uphold in conversation. There are two types of face: (1) Negative face and (2) positive face. Negative face refers to an interlocutor's resistance to outside influence, while positive face, on the other hand, refers to the affirmation of a person as an independent, rational being. Many times, interlocutors try to build up the positive face of their perlocutors without threatening the negative face. Face-threatening acts are those utterances that serve as a likely cause of damage to the self-esteem of a person. According to Brown and Levinson, the concept of face has been described as someone's public self-image or how a person wants to be seen or regarded by others. They opine that the speaker has five options in relation to FTAs. These are:

1. Performing FTAs without redressive actions (Bald-on-record).
2. Performing FTAs on-record without redress using positive politeness.
3. Performing FTAs on-record without redress using negative politeness.
4. Performing FTAs off-record.
5. Not performing FTAs at all.

Redressive options of face threatening acts include;

1. Performing FTAs without redress: This is also referred to as bald-on-record acts. That is when somebody performs a face-threatening act without trying to save the face of the interlocutor.

There are many instances where bald-on-record acts can be performed.

- i. When there is social distance between the interlocutors. For instance, a father tells his son: "Bring me that newspaper!" or, a teacher tells his student: "Get out of my class!"
 - ii. Where the act is of benefit to the perlocutor. Example: "Have some more wine." "Take more water."
 - iii. Where there is danger. "Get out of the house now! The fire is spreading!" or, "You have to stop smoking."
2. Performing FTAs on record without redress using positive politeness: This is a situation where the speaker is trying to get the interlocutor to do something while trying to save the positive face of the person. Example: "Can you lend me your pen?" or, "Can I have a ride, please?"

In these two instances, the speaker is making a request while leaving the interlocutor with the option of either accepting or rejecting.

3. Performing FTAs on-record without redress using negative politeness: This is a situation where the speaker is doing exactly what he says he does not intend to do. For example: "I don't mean to bother you, but can you please escort me to the gate?" or, "I'm sorry to intrude into your privacy, but can you tell me what your childhood was like?" In these cases, the speaker says s/he is sorry to intrude, and claims s/he does not want to bother the interlocutor, but these acts are exactly what s/he does.

4. Performing FTAs off-record: when someone is performing an off-record act, the person is giving a hint of his/her intention without explicitly stating it. In this case, the interlocutor does not have to deal with any face threatening act since there was none in the first place. For example:

A: That food looks yummy. B: It is the seasoning, I guess.

Here, 'A' has politely asked (off-record) to be given a taste of the food without actually saying it, and B has also politely refused to give him/her a taste.

5. Not performing the FTAs: here the speaker does not say anything at all.

Politeness Strategies

Politeness is a social phenomenon that is largely manifested through the use of language. It is closely connected to context because context to a large extent influences the degree of politeness shown by interlocutors in communication. For instance, two brothers or friends who belong to different political parties in the same country are likely to use expressions that show a lesser degree of politeness at each other when they are defending their individual political parties during a public debate on an important national issue. The same persons will relate better and more politely towards each other when discussing the same issue in a private conversation. According to Okoro, context influences the nature or degree of politeness exhibited by interactants (33).

Holmes avers that 'being polite is a complicated business in any language. It is difficult because it involves understanding not just the language but also the social and cultural values of the community (284). Politeness is thus studied in terms of the relationship between language and social behavior. What it therefore means to be polite, as postulated by Geoffrey Leech, is to speak or behave in such a way as to (appear to) give benefit or value not to yourself but to the other person(s), especially the person(s) you are conversing with (3).

Politeness strategies include all of the mitigatory techniques employed by language users to make their conversations more acceptable and less harmful to their interlocutor's positive face. They are; positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record. Leech has also written that; the characteristics of politeness would include the following;

1. It is not obligatory
2. It has varying gradations of polite and impolite behavior
3. It often has a sense of what is normal
4. Occurrence of politeness will depend on the situation
5. There is a reciprocal asymmetry in polite behavior
6. Involves some kind of transacting of value
7. It has tendency to preserve balance (6-8)

Politeness maxims would also include the maxims of tact (minimize cost to other: Maximize benefit to other), agreement (Minimize disagreement between self and other: Maximize agreement between self and other), generosity (Minimize benefit to self: Maximize cost to self), approbation (Minimize dispraise of other: Maximize praise of other), Modesty (Minimize praise of self: Maximize dispraise of self), and sympathy (Maximize sympathy between self and other: Minimize antipathy between self and other). The concept of politeness is both a linguistic Phenomenon and a social/cultural phenomenon subsumed under the subdomains of pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics.

Theoretical Framework

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is adopted as the theoretical basis for the present study because the concept of face cannot be discussed outside politeness. They developed the notion from Erving Goffman's (1967) concept of face and that of the English-folk term. Brown and Levinson assume that a participant in an exchange (interaction) is a model person (MP) who is a fluent speaker of a natural language and is endowed with two kinds of face. They are the positive and negative face. This theory is an aspect of the systemic functional grammar, and it becomes important as foundation on which this work is built because it allows the researchers to impose the data on the key notions of face threats and mitigatory strategies.

Analysis of FTAs in Governor El-Rufai's Speeches

Text 1

Let me put on record our gratitude to those religious leaders who complied with the restriction on large gatherings and have spoken up to support the preventive measures. Over the weekend, we also sadly observed shocking levels of complacency as some people ignored their responsibility to uphold preventive measures. We received reports of congregations in some churches and mosques, as well as large crowds in weddings and other social activities.

Analysis

The speech begins with S appreciating some religious leaders who did not only obey the restriction order against large gatherings in churches and mosques but also spoke up in support of the actions of the state government in its fight against COVID-19 in Kaduna State. On the other hand, S, who is Governor Nasir El-Rufai, also does an FTA by accusing some residents of his state of complacency and of ignoring their responsibility to adhere to the restriction measures. He accuses some Christian and Muslim congregations of disobeying the measures put in place by the government to contain the coronavirus in the state. He also states that his government had received reports of large crowds in weddings and other social gatherings, which go against the guidelines put in place to fight the virus. By this, S threatens the positive face want of those addressed; he does acts of accusation and disapproval here. He clearly shows that he does not like their action, for he expects them to act in the interest of the state.

Text 2

I want to urge all citizens who returned from travel overseas to please self-isolate for at least fourteen 14 days. Any symptoms of cough, fever or difficulty in breathing should be reported to the following numbers: 08025088304, 08032401473, 08035871662 and 08037808191.

Further to this necessity to minimize movement, the Kaduna State Government is directing civil servants from level 12 and below to remain at home for the next 30 days, effective from Tuesday, 24th March 2020. Workers providing essential services, especially in the health, security and emergency service sectors are exempt from this directive. We urge every other person to stay at home and avoid unnecessary travel.

Analysis

The speaker encourages those citizens who just returned from overseas travel to the state to self-isolate for a number of days and then report any symptoms of the coronavirus they have to the appropriate authorities. He does acts which threaten the negative face want of the addressees and this shows that he does not intend to stop impeding on the addressees' freedom of action, for he puts pressure on H to carry out certain actions.

Text 3

In conclusion, our dear citizens of Kaduna State, your government has done all it can to protect you so far. We have been maligned and abused by many that are simply ignorant of the dangers of COVID-19. Others that know better are driven by political considerations, envy, internal sabotage by persons within our government and massive failure of security agencies. As a government, we are grateful that our COVID-19 related deaths are low, relative to other states. The rest of the journey to stay safe from COVID-19 is now up to you.

Analysis

The speaker here presents his government in good light by stating its achievements in protecting the people from the coronavirus disease; he brings good news about his government, and by this act, he tries to save political face. But on the other hand, he threatens the positive face want of the addressees. He accuses them of maligning and sabotaging the efforts of the government in fighting the pandemic. 'S' does acts of accusation, criticism, and disapproval. He disapproves of the said actions of the addressees, whom he describes as persons within his own government and members of the security agencies. He then goes on to state that such persons are driven by political considerations and envy. Thus, threatening the positive face want of the hearers.

Text 4

The state government will impose a state-wide curfew should that become the only way to enforce compliance and make everyone understand the collective danger that we face. The emphasis on prevention is the only logical thing to do because our health system cannot cope with an outbreak of COVID-19. It is better to impose restriction and save lives, than to be complacent and bury victims. Countries that have hesitated to impose extraordinary measures to contain coronavirus are now regretting. We have a chance to avoid such mistakes

Analysis

S threatens the negative face want of H—the people of Kaduna State. He warns that his government will have to impose a curfew on the state if it becomes the last option left to ensure total compliance with the COVID-19 preventive measures put in place by the government. He goes on record to do the face threat baldly without any redress, with maximum efficiency because he does not intend to impede on the addressees' freedom of action. Governor El-Rufai, who is S, also states that the intended action is for the wellbeing of the people and goes on to explain that the state health system cannot cope with an outbreak of the virus in the state. In other words, they do not have the facilities needed to tackle the disease in the case of its outbreak. He goes further to explain the benefit of a lockdown over the demerit and equally informs the people that countries that hesitated to impose lockdowns now regret their inaction.

Text 5

Your government acknowledges the perseverance of the vast majority of our people who have endured inconveniences and several challenges in this period. I urge you all to regard this as part of our contribution to protecting public health and saving lives in circumstances created by a new deadly and highly infectious virus. Your government has no option but to take decisive action at the end of March 2020 to enable us protect our people and save lives.

Analysis

Governor El-Rufai, who is S, informs the people that his government knows/acknowledges their perseverance in the face of the challenges which came as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown in the state. He presents his government in good light by identifying with the suffering or the plight of the people. So he employed the positive politeness strategy here. S used pronouns such as 'our,' 'us,' 'we,' and 'your' to emphasize a common ground with the people and to show closeness or solidarity with them. The statements: 'your government,' 'our people,' and 'our contribution' portray the strategy.

Furthermore, the governor threatens the negative face want of the addressees by urging them to regard their compliance to the lockdown measures in the state as part of their contribution 'to protecting public health.'

Text 6

My dear people of Kaduna State,

It is fitting and proper I begin this address by paying tribute to the good people of Kaduna State amidst considerable danger and uncertainty created by the arrival of a new virus. The people of our state have in the mean, understood and support the firm measures the state and government took to protect them from COVID-19. Our people have made immense sacrifices in the last two and half months as containment measures against COVID-19 were implemented.

Analysis

Governor El-Rufai, who is S, employs the Approbation maxim here, which states that speakers should "minimize dispraise of others but maximize praise of others." In the text, S commends the people of Kaduna State for understanding with the government by supporting the COVID-19 measures his government put in place to protect the citizens from the virus. He states that the people have made immense sacrifices in the last two and half months. By this statement, S maximized the praise of the addressees, pointing out their huge sacrifices in the face of the challenges brought about by the measures put in place to curb the spread of COVID-19 in the state. Politeness is exemplified in S's utterance.

Text 7

I am sad to announce that so far, we have recorded 11 deaths arising from complications of COVID-19 in the state. Two of the deaths are fatalities that arose after admission to the isolation centre and they died after their samples were taken. All the others had their samples taken after they died. In essence, they came with advanced symptoms, and before they could be treated, they died. Seven out of the deaths were in patients older than 65, two were aged above 80. All the older persons we lost presented their symptoms very late; they came to the treatment centre when the disease had advanced, and some had diabetes, hypertension, bronchitis, and cancer. So I can say that so far, only 2 patients who tested positive and were admitted to our treatment centre died. One of them was over 80 years old. The point here, citizens of Kaduna State, is that our Ministry of Health and our health institutions have a very high success rate in treating this disease.

Analysis

The Sympathy maxim seems to be observed in the text; S says he is sad to announce the number of deaths recorded in Kaduna State from COVID-19 complications. He sympathizes with the people and goes into detail explaining the health background/history of the victims. Also, the Approbation maxim is observed in the speech because of the praises showered by S concerning the successes recorded by the state health institutions in the bid to contain the spread of the virus. S shows politeness in his speech by identifying with the bereaved and equally does so by showering praises on the health institutions.

On the other hand, he flouts the Modesty maxim by maximizing the praise of the Ministry of Health and other health institutions in the state. He rates the success of these institutions very high. S, as the number one citizen in Kaduna State may be referred to as the head of these institutions.

Text 8

As the two weeks' extension expires today, I wish to tell citizens of Kaduna State your sacrifices have not being in vain. Your compliance with the Quarantine Order has helped to ensure that our state has been spared the hundreds of unexplained deaths recorded in other states in the containment of COVID-19. For this, I thank you and pray Almighty God to bless you, our state, and our country. Enforcing the Quarantine Order allowed us the needed time to improve the readiness of our health system and prevent it from being overwhelmed by an early wave of huge infections. Our state health system is certainly strongly positioned now than it was three months ago.

Analysis

By commending the citizens of Kaduna State for complying with the Quarantine Order put in place by his government to contain the spread of the coronavirus in the state, S upholds the Approbation maxim. He maximizes the praise of others—the citizens of Kaduna State. He commends their actions, which helped to prevent hundreds of deaths, and thanks them and equally asks God to bless the people. Another maxim observed by Governor El-Rufai, who is S, is that of modesty. He minimized the praise of self here by openly stating how “Enforcing the Quarantine Order” gave his government enough “time to improve the readiness” of the state health system and helped prevent it from being overwhelmed by an early wave of the coronavirus infections. He provides a humble explanation of the state of Kaduna health system at the time. S portrays politeness in his utterance by commending the action(s) of the addressees.

Text 9

Regrettably, certain persons surly seemed determined all the good will our health workers have attracted by the untimely threat of a strike action amidst the pandemic. The reckless action is a clear violation of the hypocritical Trade Union Essential Service Act and our Public Services rules with regards to our education sector. Our team has worked to meet the needs of learners who have had the school term truncated by the imposition of quarantine. Lessons have been delivered on radio and television; our tertiary institutions are also set to begin delivering lectures online to ensure the impact of the pandemic on education is minimized. Markets are significant sources of spread of COVID-19 infections.

Analysis

Rather than uphold the Approbation and Modesty maxims here, S violates them. S maximizes the dispraise of the addressees in the text instead of minimizing it as it concerns Approbation. He accused ‘certain persons’ of undertaking or carrying out industrial action during the pandemic in his state and describes their action as reckless and “a clear violation of the hypocritical Trade Union Essential Service Act...” and that of the “Public Service rules” as it concerns the education sector in the state.

Also, the Modesty maxim is flouted here. Instead of minimizing the praise of self to show politeness, S maximizes it by outlining in detail the achievements made by the COVID-19 team set up by his government.

Text 10

This Kaduna State government is closely observing the implementation of these measures and the evolving global picture and will not hesitate to impose a lockdown of the entire state if events degenerate. This will be done with every effort to take care of the poor and the vulnerable.

Analysis

Governor El-Rufai, who is S, observes the generosity maxim in the speech. He states that the poor and vulnerable persons in Kaduna State will be taken care of by his government in the event of a lockdown that may be imposed on the state in order to contain the coronavirus disease. He maximizes cost to self by promising to cater for such category of persons who will be faced with challenges during lockdown.

On the other hand, he flouts the Tact maxim by threatening to impose a lockdown on the state if the people fail to strictly observe the COVID-19 measures put in place by his government. He maximizes cost to the addressees here instead of minimizing it; he presents his intended action to be of good benefit to the people.

Findings

Based on the analysis, the study found that quite a number of acts were performed in the speeches. Using Brown and Levinson’s face theory, the study reveals that the governor performed FTAs and also tried to save face. The data analysed also shows that some of those acts threaten the positive face of the hearer. For example, ‘and will not hesitate to impose a lockdown of the entire state if events degenerate.’ This direct threat to impose lockdown on the people threatens the positive face of the addressees with no obvious mitigation of the inherent FTA.

Worthy of note also is the fact that the speaker used the identified speech acts because of the happenings at the time. That is, during the heat of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 in Nigeria. His utterances reveal that the events happened during a time of emergency so as to show the urgency of the issues or situation.

Conclusion

It is evident from the foregoing that political leaders in and outside Nigeria perform certain acts when they address the people in times of emergencies such as a pandemic, crisis, or natural disaster. Excerpts from the utterances of ex-governor El-Rufai were analysed in a bid to identify face-saving and face-threatening acts carried out by the then governor in the course of delivering his speeches, and the study found although face-threatening acts were made, some mitigatory strategies were employed at some point to avert obvious loss of face. In some other instances, the speaker performed baldly without any redressive action so as to signal the urgency and seriousness of the situation at hand.

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