

MAINTAINING FACE IN THE NSO CULTURE: A STUDY IN POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN LETTERS BETWEEN SCHOOLGIRLS

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Maintaining face is a constant preoccupation in social interactions for most individuals. Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) have built a theory of politeness based on maintaining face. This article seeks to explore one type of interaction, the written correspondence between school-girl Nso speakers of Cameroon, in order to observe the specific strategies they employ to communicate their emotions, news, or pieces of information. It also aims at giving a more general background on the politeness strategies employed by these young ladies which are exhibited through the written correspondence used in this study.

Le maintien de la face est une préoccupation constante pour beaucoup d'individus dans leurs interactions sociales. Brown et Levinson (1978, 1987) ont justement construit une théorie de la politesse basée sur ce phénomène du maintien de la face. Cet article se propose d'explorer un genre d'interaction, la correspondance écrite en anglais entre des jeunes filles parlant le lamso, une langue du Cameroun, afin de révéler les genres de stratégies qu'elles emploient pour communiquer leurs émotions, nouvelles et informations. Cette étude vise également à donner un arrière-plan des stratégies de politesse employées par ces jeunes filles aptes à expliquer les stratégies spécifiques relevées dans la correspondance écrite, cible de cette étude.

0. INTRODUCTION

This article is organized as follows.¹ In §1, we make explicit the aspects of politeness strategies based on Brown and Levinson (1978). We will use these for interpreting the types of face threatening acts (FTAs) encountered in letters written in English between Nso schoolgirls. In §2, we give an account of the types of FTAs encountered in each letter. In §3, we discuss the interpretations of these politeness strategies by relating them to their context in the Nso culture.

1. ASPECTS OF POLITENESS STRATEGIES

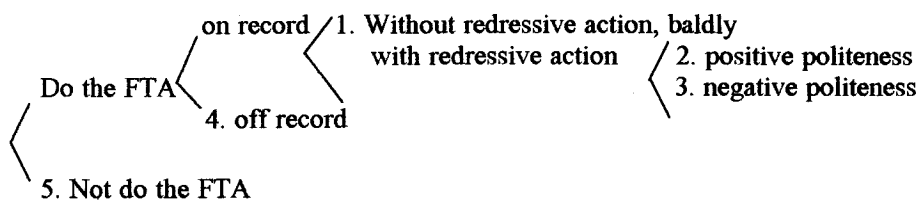
Before making explicit the aspects of politeness strategies that will be used in this study, a word on the choice of our data is in order here.

The ideal ground for studying politeness strategies as in Brown and Levinson (1978), Lakoff (1973, 1977), and Leech (1983) has been through face-to-face encounters, that is, through conversations. Assuming the different interlocutors fully master the language they use to converse, they display the panoply of politeness strategies suggested in Brown and Levinson (1978) to make sure that they successfully convey their message. Although studies on politeness have been based on such conversations, it is not possible to assert that accurate interpretation of the speech acts of the interlocutors is made. What may seem like a bald-on-record utterance devoid of any politeness markers may be mitigated through the use of intonation and the kinds of relationship the interlocutors have, as Schultz (1964) observed. Another problem in conversations is that one is not always able to transcribe the minutest details like eye contact, speech rate, mood of the speakers, etc. which might in fact influence the types of politeness strategies the interlocutors may choose at a given time.

¹We wish to mention that the letters discussed in this article were selected from some forty letters Loveline Lenaka had received over several years, and that the ones we selected are fairly representative in terms of contents and style. Being a Nso speaker and friendship with the addressee were the two criteria that guided our choice, though being a Nso speaker may not be so relevant since much of what we discuss also applies in most parts of Africa and beyond.

Letters offer another ideal type of data one can use for studying the facts of politeness strategies. The writer is alone and communicates silently with an interlocutor whose face he/she must not attack and at the same time he/she feels free to maintain or not his/her own face while writing. Like for the interpretation of the conversation, it might be difficult to interpret the exact message of the writer. In this article, our aim is to get closer to the correct interpretation of the message in that its second author is the addressee in the letters we analyze. She will be able to clarify some of the messages and what she thinks the writer meant in writing them. Like the writers in the letters, she is also a Nso speaker. We believe that her knowledge of the writers and also of her own Nso culture will help us interpret more accurately what politeness strategies are about in the Nso cultural community.²

Having justified our choice of written correspondence as the focus of this article, we would like to make explicit the aspects of politeness strategies based on Brown and Levinson (1978) used in this article. According to these writers, social interactions across cultures are closely intertwined with every interlocutor's concern to maintain "face". Face means "something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (Brown and Levinson (1978:66). There are two kinds of face: "negative face" or the rights to territories, freedom of action, and freedom from imposition; essentially the desire that one's actions not be impeded by others; and "positive face", that is, the positive consistent self-image that people have and want to be appreciated and approved of by at least some other people. As explained by Fasold (1990:161), "the rational actions people take to preserve both kinds of face for themselves and the people they interact with essentially add up to politeness." In a social interaction, whatever an interlocutor says is potentially a face threatening act (FTA) in that it may cause the addressee to "lose his/her negative or positive face." In case the writer says something that causes the hearer to lose his/her face, the other may retaliate. That is why, it is in the interest of interlocutors not to lose face before each other. There are certain speech acts, however, which are FTAs that the writer cannot avoid. Brown and Levinson (1978) propose the following schema that summarises the possible responses which will determine a writer's choice of strategies to deal with such an FTA.



The slashes in this schema indicate the writer's choices. He may do the FTA or not do it. If he does the FTA, he may do it on the record or off the record. If he does it on the record, he may do it without redressive action, that is baldly or with redressive action: in that case, he may use utterances that express positive politeness or negative politeness.

A bald-on-record utterance, that is (1) in the schema, is chosen while the writer speaks in conformity with Grice's maxims (1975). These maxims constitute guidelines for achieving maximally efficient communication. They are:

²We wish to express our gratefulness to Elinor Ochs, the former sociolinguistics professor of Dr. Mutaka at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, for sowing in us the idea of exploiting written correspondence for politeness strategies purposes.

- (a) maxim of quality: be non-spurious, speak the truth, be sincere
- (b) maxim of quantity: do not say less or more than is required
- (c) maxim of relevance: be relevant
- (d) maxim of manner: be perspicuous, avoid ambiguity and obscurity

An utterance is done off record, that is (4) in the schema, if it is done in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act. As explained in Brown and Levinson, "to construct an off-record utterance, one says something that is either more general (contains less information in the sense that it rules out fewer possible states of affairs) or actually different from what one means (intends to be understood). In either case, the hearer must make some inference to recover what was in fact intended."

An utterance is done on record when the speaker chooses to do the face threatening act, but something else is said or done to show concern for the addressee's freedom of action and right not to be imposed upon. This is called the on-record FTA with negative politeness redress, that is (3) in the schema. In case the speaker does the face threatening act by emphasizing in one way or another that he shares the addressee's interests and desires, this is an on-record FTA with positive politeness redress, that is (2) in the schema.

Notice that, unlike face-to-face interactions, written correspondence may not display as great a variety of FTAs because the writer is alone to manage the communicative speech event. Some of the writings will be merely facts that do not seem to be face threatening acts either to the addressee or to the writer. We will be ignoring such facts in our account of the types of FTAs exhibited in the letters. Other writings will clearly be FTAs to the positive or negative face wants of the writer instead of the addressee. As will be pointed out in our account, such FTAs will typically be bald-on-record interspersed with negative or positive politeness markers whose goals are presumably to mitigate the shock they are likely to provoke in the addressee.

In the following section, we will go through the different letters and point out the different strategies employed by the writers to deal with the FTAs they contain.

2. FACE THREATENING ACTS IN WRITTEN CORRESPONDENCE

For each letter, we will first give the data and then point out the different FTAs we detected in it and some brief explanations of the FTAs. In long letters, we will leave out anything not pertinent to the topic on politeness. Further comments on the letters will be given in the third section where we will present a more general background on politeness strategies in the Nso culture.³

- (1) Focuses on feelings of love towards addressee

Darling Love:

Mbiybe Anna⁴

It's really wonderful to say hi to you again after a long, long time without us exchanging facts and interesting events in this world of bad things as I can say.

³All the letters in this article are written in English by female secondary school students whose native language is Lamnso, that is, the language of the Nso speakers, and they are addressed to the female author who is their close friend. This author can identify within their English some specific "interference" from the Nso language. Thanks to Keir Hansford for drawing our attention to this piece of information.

⁴Although this letter is undated, the second author thinks it was written in July 1991, that is, during the summer vacations.

How is life over there my dear. "Ketum"⁵ since you left us we have been so sad until today that we have changed our mines [sic]. Love, since you left the house is just boring. Please, try and come back so that we can be happy.

Love do you know when we fell in love with you? I am sure you can no longer remember, but we know it all in our ["my" is crossed] hearts how it happened. We are really missing you. We love you more than our ["my" is crossed] dimples. We are still as you left us, nothing has changed. The condition is that of agony.

"Ketum" since they are not going to start school on the 21st it will not more happen as we thought. We have just changed our mines [sic], But I am not happy about it. Kila came here today and I had a good time with her, once more she made me happy for that moment.

When will you be going to Banzo? When you go, you greet everybody for me.

Love, Andrew wrote to Mame Peyeché and it was terrible. I will tell you more when I see you. Before I pen off accept greetings from everybody.

Auntie Lilian and Eunice want to hear your lovely voice.

Bye for now and see you sooner or later.

Smile over my mistakes.

With love and care

from Anne Shiyka

Greet Sham, Mary, Yaya boy and everybody for me.

The following politeness markers were detected in letter (1).

Positive politeness:	15
Negative politeness:	1
Off record:	1
Bald-on-record:	2

Positive politeness markers are the most numerous. They are distributed as follows: (The number of instances of politeness markers is indicated between parentheses after each type; e.g., (=2) means "two instances of".)

- Appreciation of the addressee (=4): darling in "darling Love"; "it is really wonderful to say hi to you again"; the use of the nickname Ketum that is used twice in the letter.
- Words of love with "we" as showing that the addressee is appreciated not only by the writer but also by other people (=5): "we have been so sad that we have changed our mines"; "we are really missing you"; "we are still as you left us"; "we love you more than we love our dimples"; "we fell in love with you".
- Greetings that convey the idea that the addressee belongs to a closely knit group (=4): "greet everybody for me"; "accept greetings from everybody"; "L and E want to hear your lovely voice"; "greet S, M, Y boy and everybody for me".

⁵Ketum is the addressee's nickname given her by this writer. It conveys a sign of special love to her. The full Christian name of the addressee is Loveline. Her friends shorten it to Love with the idea that they love her. In other letters, the addressee is called Lin, which is the short form for Limnyuy, her Nso nickname which means God's work, *nyuy* meaning God.

- d. Words expressing love feelings towards addressee (=2): "your lovely voice", "with love and care".

The FTA with redressive negative politeness is in the following: "Love, since you left the house is just boring. Please try to come back so that we can be happy." "Come back" is the core of the FTA as it is a request, almost an order, and it is mitigated by such phrases as "please, try", and the explanation "so that we can be happy".

The off-record FTA is in the sentences: "Love, Andrew wrote to Mame Peyeché and it was terrible. I will tell you more when I see you." The writer is vague on purpose and certainly knows that the addressee will wonder what was so terrible about the letter. She then offers to tell her when she sees the addressee to mitigate her worries over this FTA.

One instance of the bald-on-record FTA is in the sentence "you greet everybody for me". Here, the writer is giving a mitigated order. Notice that, for Nso speakers, this might not be interpreted as an FTA as it is something that the addressee is expected to do anyway. The second instance of bald-on-record is in the sentence "Smile over my mistakes". Obviously this is an FTA which is addressed rather to the writer's positive face want. Similar FTAs that target the writer will be pointed out in the subsequent letters.

- (2) Focuses on giving advice about a problem posed by the addressee

Jenette-Francis N.

K.M.C. Old Town

29/05/95

Hi Lim,

Thanks very much for your letter which met me and everybody in good health. I'm also glad to hear everybody is okay over there at Baff.

Well Lim, life is also very boring here and poverty too is almost killing us.

I did understand every line of your second paragraph which I find very interesting. Well, you know this is the most difficult decision in a girl's life. So it's something (you have to decide for) yourself, without somebody forcing you. And let me tell you that it takes a long time for a girl to say yes I will marry you. Why? Because you know there are so many things you have to think about seriously. First of all you have to look whether both of you are ready in true love, study him deeply for some time, find out whether he is a responsible man, the type of people he mixes with, how he behaves in society. The tribe is also very important. I will not like to hear you are engaged to someone from a different tribe. Your cool feelings towards him are just because you are still confused, not because you don't love him. I know the love is there.

Have in mind that this is something you don't have to hurry over. You can even try this boy by telling him one day that you are pregnant, when you have not accepted in getting married to him. Keep on trying him in different ways so many times, just to see his reactions. Know that you have to be very serious when trying these over men nowadays.

Well, as you said he is a nice boy, hope so in every aspect. I can only tell you to do your research on this guy very well, and at the end you will come out with a positive result on both sides. Then now you have to look and

accept to yourself that you are really ready for getting married. If everything goes well as you want, you will see that you will be pleased, willing and excited to say "yes" to him.

Lim, I think we can only sit down face-to-face before we can discuss this important issue. Hope some of my ideas will help you.

As for your INS, we have been missing each other for almost 4 months now. Just because he has been assigned to some work which he cannot leave the place unless the work ever gets finished. We are supposed to wed in July, but as he phoned last week, he told me it will not be possible again, because by then, will not be finished with the work. So you see I feel so bad and worried all this time. He is always phoning every week, but that is not okay for me. I'm only having sleepless nights. Hope you will not find yourself in such a situation.

Lim, I must end here, or else I will find myself looking for another paper.

Accept greetings from everyone at this end.

I will be praying for luck in all your undertakings.

I care.

Bye.

Jane.

The following politeness markers were detected in letter (2).

Positive politeness:	10
Negative politeness:	2
Off record:	1
Bald-on-record:	2

Again, the politeness markers are the most numerous. They are distributed as follows:

- a. Expression of sympathy (= 3): "Thanks very much for your letter"; "your cool feelings towards him are just because you are still confused, not because you don't love him. I know the love is there"; "I care" (end of letter).
- b. Claim of group membership (= 2): "I'm also glad to hear everybody is okay over there"; "Accept greetings from everyone at this end".
- c. Indication of understanding of addressee's wants (= 2): "I did understand every line"; "I find very interesting" (same sentence in line 4).
- d. In-group identity markers (= 1): "As for your INS" (where INS means in-laws, and more specifically brother-in-law.) Note here that the person referred to is rather the writer's fiancé. Strictly speaking, the addressee is not the writer's sister, she is merely a friend. So this word INS might also be interpreted as a marker of group membership in that the writer assumes that the addressee is her sister because she is a very close friend of hers.
- e. Wish of positive outcome for addressee (= 1): "Hope you will not find yourself in such a situation."
- f. Offer and promises for the interest of the addressee (= 1): "I will be praying for luck in all of your undertakings."

The negative politeness markers are expressed as:

- a. Very general piece of advice to addressee (=1): "Have in mind that this is something you don't have to hurry over." If this was said more boldly without redressive negative politeness markers, it would be "do not rush into getting married with this boy".
- b. Limiting addressee's choice of fiancés (=1): "I will not like to hear you are engaged to someone from a different tribe."
- c. Encouragement to use lies (=1): "You can even try this boy by telling him one day that you are pregnant."

The off-record strategy is exhibited in the following sentences: "Well, as you said he is a nice boy, hope so in every aspect. I can only tell you to do your research on this guy very well, and at the end you will come out with a positive result on both sides." It appears to us ambiguous as it gives the impression that the writer does not agree with the addressee that the fiancé is a nice boy. That is why she advises the addressee to do further research on him. At the same time, she states that she hopes the fiancé is a nice boy in every aspect as said by the addressee.

The bald-on-record statements are of the two types. First, most of the pieces of advice the writer gives to the addressee can be considered as bald-on-record statements given in accordance with Grice's maxims. The writer's concern is to deliver a message that is clear, relevant, informative, and so on. Notice however that these statements are interspersed with positive politeness markers, namely whenever the writer gives reasons or relevant explanations to minimize the face threatening acts contained in these pieces of advice. One example is the following: "And let me tell you that it takes a long time for a girl to say yes I will marry you. Why?" This is followed by an explanation: "Because you know...the tribe is also very important." The second type of bald-on-record statements consists of FTAs that are addressed to the writer. One such example is in the paragraph where the writer tells the addressee about her own uncomfortable situation: "...I feel so bad and worried...I'm only having sleepless nights." This second type can also be considered as an FTA addressed to the addressee to solicit her sympathy. It is devoid of politeness markers presumably because the writer is mostly concerned with delivering a clear message about herself to the addressee in accordance with Grice's maxims. Notice also that this specific FTA ends in a redressive positive politeness marker addressed to the addressee presumably because the writer assumes that she and the addressee share the same concerns: "Hope you will not find yourself in such a situation."

- (3) Focuses on the writer telling the addressee about the writer's negative and positive love experiences

10th May 1995

8 p.m.

My dear Lim,

Sister Gladys says she is leaving tomorrow for B'ssam, so I've got to scribble this note. I thought she was going to be here till the weekend and thus I would have much time to reply to your letter.... Lim, please try to understand that I'm so busy with school work I barely have time for myself. I know it is inexcusable that I haven't written for so long, but please try to understand and forgive.

My dear, soooo much has happened since you left Yaoundé... Talking about Eric!! Hmmm. It is a long story and I can't recount it all now

for lack of time. The long and short of it is that things are at a standstill between us. I haven't broken up yet, but we are at the verge of it... Just to give you highlights... Eric has been cheating on me all along. He has a girlfriend (Bali girl) and when I found out about her, I was raving mad. It was all very interesting drama. Don't worry, when I have time I will sit down and write about it all and send to you... But that doesn't stop me from sharing something very precious with you.

Lim, I have met the man of my dreams. I'm almost floating. I thought I loved Harry but what I feel at present is beyond human understanding... The day this guy finally gathered the courage to kate me, I couldn't believe my ears, though I had been indirectly expecting him to kate for a long time. Anyway, I told him everything about Eric and myself, and guess what? He apologized for kating me, saying Eric was a very good friend of his, and if he had known that I was dating him, he wouldn't have voiced out his feelings. He said when he saw me at Eric's place, he thought I was just a simple friend, not girl friend.

Lim, I felt like screaming. I did not want him to apologize! I wanted him to damn all consequences and insist on going out with me. He didn't. He went back to Duala where he worked and from there he wrote the most beautiful letter I have ever had the honour of reading. He told me that whenever I finally break up with Eric, he will be waiting for me.

Lim, I could go on forever. Just know he is a wonderful guy. He was here about 2 weeks ago and I told him when he re-proposed that I was ready to go out with him. Lim, I have him. We talk about all kinds of things under the sun. He's told me almost everything about himself. He is so concerned about my welfare, especially in the domain of studies. He teaches in.... Lim, I know he loves me. When I went to see him off at Guarantee 2 weeks ago, he wept like a baby. Can you beat that?

Denise's story beats my imagination. Nabbila called me this morning. She asked about you. Ashia for boredom. I don't know whether you had read this novel "Heart wood". Anyway, it does not hurt to read it again. Please you can give Joan this letter to read. I don't have time to write to her separately. I love you all. Tim.

The following politeness markers were detected in letter (3).

Positive politeness:	13
Negative politeness:	2
Off record:	2
Bald-on-record:	2

Positive politeness markers are the most numerous here as well. They are distributed as follows:

- a. Expression of sympathy (= 1): "My dear Lim".
- b. Expression of common ground (= 2): "that doesn't stop me from sharing something very precious with you"; "give Joan this letter to read". Here, the idea of sharing and also giving the writer's letter to a friend of theirs indicates the fact that the different participants share a common ground.
- c. Seeking sympathy from addressee (= 6): e.g., "Lim" as the first word in different paragraphs or in some sentences. About this use of "Lim", it is as if the

writer is aware of Leech's modesty maxim, that is, minimize praise of self and maximize dispraise of self (1983:132) (cf. e.g., "Lim, I know he loves me.") She is doing the opposite of this maxim but she seems to ask the addressee to approve of its violation in order to have the courage to keep on writing about her boyfriend.

- d. Empathy with addressee (= 1): "Ashia for boredom."⁶
- e. In-group membership (= 1): "I love you all."
- f. In-group identity markers (= 2): the use of the verb "to kate" instead of "to date."

The negative politeness markers are manifested as:

- a. Apologies (= 4): "...so I've got to scribble this note"; "Lim, please try to understand that I am so busy with school work"; "I know it is inexcusable that I haven't written for so long, but please try to understand and forgive"; "Talking about Eric! It is a long story and I can't recount it all now for lack of time".
- b. Question (= 1): "Lim, I know he loves me. When I went to see him off...he wept like a baby. Can you beat that?" Here the FTA is in the writer's declaration that her boyfriend loves her. Having said that, she probably feels as if she imposes this on the addressee, thus limiting her freedom of holding a different opinion. The question is a marker of redressive negative politeness to mitigate the effect of the imposition of her opinion.

The off-record statements include the following: "Don't worry, when I have time I will sit down and write about it all and send to you." Here, the writer is aware that she did not give enough information to the addressee about the "interesting drama" she mentions in the previous sentence. That is why she tells her not to worry. Another off-record statement is in "Denise's story beats my imagination". The addressee might wonder why it beats the writer's imagination. But this is probably not an FTA as the addressee shares background knowledge about Denise's story with the writer. This is the kind of statement an addressee is supposed to produce even if she has nothing to say simply to acknowledge the fact that she received the news about Denise. It is part of phatic communication.

The bald-on-record statements include those where the writer speaks about her unsatisfactory relationships with Eric (her first boyfriend) and the discovery of love with her new boyfriend where she for example writes: "I have met the man of my dreams. I'm almost floating...he wrote the most beautiful letter I have ever had the honour of reading...just know he is a wonderful guy." As we observed earlier, the fact of writing positively about self is somehow an FTA. A possible reaction of the addressee could be that the writer is simply boasting about her love relationship. The writer seems to be aware of this and that is why the bald-on-record statements are interspersed with politeness markers, namely, starting some sentences with "Lim" as if she asks her approval to keep on telling her about her new boyfriend.

⁶The word *ashia* can be translated by "I am sorry". However, it expresses more than regret as in English. It shows great empathy with the addressee for his/her sufferings.

- (4) Focuses on the writer's expression of her need to meet the addressee

2nd April 1993

Hello pretty face,

Guess school work has hooked you. I am sorry for having been negligent enough not to have realized that you have a job at hand. That's why I mercilessly proposed that invaluable visit of mine for next Sunday. I forgot you've got better things to do, not like me who is idling around as a consequence of my rush into the world.

Hey girl do not take this as some sort of jealousy towards you. No, it is in fact bitterness at myself. Very few people have the opportunity to know me in depth. You are one of those I want to open my obscure mind to.

Gentle lady, I admire you a lot and I'm firmly behind you. I wish you success in all your undertakings and your forthcoming test.

Forget the auxiliaries that deter you dear. Plunge deeply into your studies and tomorrow when you're gold I'll be silver.

I love you so much that I hate everybody who is always at your pleasant and merry company. Because you've got to study darling, come over to school tomorrow. I'll call around to see you. Give directions to the deliverer of this letter so that I'll get to you without much heed.

Please choose a place in the vicinity of your school where you know I'm well acquainted with. I've got a beautiful thing to show you. My parents are back home. Sweet dreams. With love from

Solange.

The following politeness markers were detected in letter (4).

Positive politeness:	9
Negative politeness:	4
Off record:	1
Bald-on-record:	1

Positive politeness markers are the most numerous here as well. They are distributed as follows:

- Sympathy and admiration of addressee (= 3): "Hello pretty face"; "Gentle lady"; "With love".
- Wish of success for addressee (= 1): "I wish you success in all your undertakings."
- Encouragement to addressee (= 1): "Forget the auxiliaries that deter you dear."
- Exaggeration of interest in addressee (= 2): "tomorrow when you're gold I will be silver"; "I love you so much that I hate everybody who is always at your pleasant and merry company".
- Fulfilling addressee's wish (= 1): "Sweet dreams."
- Expression of common ground (= 1): "You are one of those I want to open my obscure mind to."

The negative politeness markers are rendered as:

- a. An apology (= 1): "I am sorry for having been negligent...that's why I mercifully proposed that invaluable visit of mine...I forgot you've got better things to do."
- b. Concern to minimize imposition (= 2): "Because you've got to study darling, come over to school tomorrow"; "Please choose a place..."
- c. Promise of something to addressee (= 1): "I've got a beautiful thing to show you." Notice that this statement could be interpreted as a positive politeness marker in that the writer promises to show to the addressee something that will please her positive face want. However, since it comes immediately after the writer's description of the place where she wants the addressee to meet her, we interpret it as a negative politeness marker whose aim is to mitigate the imposition of telling the addressee to meet the writer at a specific place.

The off-record statement is rendered by the following: "Guess school work has hooked you." This statement is obviously an FTA because the writer is telling the addressee that she has not been taking care of her. At the same time, she says it in an indirect way while giving the impression that it is a good thing for the addressee because it shows that she is very concentrated in her school work.

The bald-on-record statements are rendered by the following sentences in which the writer blames herself (= 2): "...not like me who is idling around as a consequence of my rush into the world"; "do not take this as some sort of jealousy towards you. No, it is in fact bitterness at myself":

- (5) Focuses on encouraging the addressee's friend to write back (This letter was written as an appendix to the letter addressed to Lim. Presumably, the author intended her to read it first before handing it to Anna.)

Anna,

A ker shuu moo wo na?. Ha.a.a... [your mouth is like that of a cow. A big mouth is then drawn underneath.] Wonderful. So how is it now Anne? I hope everything is fine. I also hope you have reduced your rate of talking because it will do you no good. I don't want to hear that our child (Lim) has been spoilt by you. Nyam. Bye - Bye.

It's been Shee No 1 reporting from Ashing.

The following politeness markers were detected in letter (5).

Positive politeness:	1
Negative politeness:	0
Off record:	2
Bald-on-record:	3

The politeness marker is rendered by a claim for in-group membership: "I hope everything is fine." Although the author seemingly insults the addressee, this question shows that she is her friend for whom she wishes good things.

The off-record statements are rendered by:

- a. A general piece of advice (= 1): "I also hope you have reduced your rate of talking because it will do you no good." The addressee is left in the dark as to the reason why she has to reduce her rate of talking.

- b. Ironical comment (= 1): "Wonderful." The author writes wonderful when she has just drawn a big mouth that will not certainly please the addressee. It is an ironical comment.

The bald-on-record statements are rendered in the form of:

- a. Abuses (= 2): "your mouth is like that of a cow" (including the drawing of a big mouth); *nyam* 'beast'.
- b. Threat (= 1): "I don't want to hear that our child (Lim) has been spoilt by you."

About these bald-on-record statements, we would like to observe that what we call abuses here might also be interpreted as merely jokes by the addressee. In this case, they are rather a marker of negative politeness in that they simply show that the writer and the addressee share common views about the significance of such abuses. We will elaborate more on these abuses in the following section as we address the issue of politeness from a more general background of the Nso cultural community.

3. GENERAL BACKGROUND ON POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN THE NSO CULTURE.

When looking at the different tables of politeness markers in the previous section, one realizes that positive politeness strategies are the most numerous in every letter, except the last one. Another point is that what we identified as bald-on-record statements are of two kinds: either they are statements that contain the main message for the addressee and where Grice's maxims are followed, or they are statements in which the face threatening acts are rather addressed to the writer. In general, the tables also indicate that the negative politeness markers are rather disfavored, just like the off-record statements when compared with positive politeness markers. The question now is: what explains this distribution of politeness markers in these letters?

With respect to the prevalence of positive politeness markers in these letters this is primarily due to the nature of the data and the participants involved. Letters are primarily written by friends who prefer to emphasize the positive face wants among them. In these letters, all the writers are female belonging to the same age group as the addressee and consequently sharing a number of attitudes and opinions. In the Nso cultural community, such friends consider themselves as sisters to one another. This explains the apparent mistake that the writer of letter (1) makes when she writes: "We am really missing you." In her letter, she uses "we", apparently including her other friends although she is primarily writing from her own point of view; e.g., when she writes: "We love you more than our dimples." Concerning these dimples, it is true that the addressee and the writer have dimples but in the group there are other people who do not have them and who are nevertheless presumably included in this "we". Another mistake revealing that she is speaking about herself is when she writes: "We know it all in our ["my" is crossed] hearts how it happened." At first, she had written "my" heart and later changed it into "our" to respect the grammatical use of "we" that starts the sentence.

We would also like to observe that positive politeness strategies are often used by Nso speakers as a pre-request. The second author of this article observes that her mother usually calls her *Yâ*, that is the name of her grandmother to whom she is emotionally attached. To call her *Yâ* is a way for her mother to tell her that she loves her very much. But at the same time, she also knows that her mother calls her *Yâ*

when she intends to ask a service of her.⁷ One such use of this positive politeness strategy is in letter (4) where the writer uses such words as: "Gentle lady", "Pretty face", and also the love declaration "I love you so much that I hate everybody who is always at your pleasant and merry company" before she finally reveals to her the central request, namely, to ask her to meet her at school.

Some features of a letter also lend themselves to positive politeness markers. For example, the salutation will start by "Dear Lim" and the conclusion of the letter ends with "bye for now". Notice that we have not computed what we feel to be stereotyped formulas in our politeness markers. We have not counted such phrases as: "hi", "bye bye", "yours". What we have counted for politeness markers are formulas that are laden with emotional feelings like: "Darling", "With love", "Gentle lady", etc. Not any writer will include such formulas in a letter if she is not really your very close friend. On the other hand, if a very close friend should simply write "Dear Lim," this could be interpreted as an FTA because, it would convey to the addressee the feelings that she is not really a very close friend of the writer. This is different from "My dear Lim" where the use of "my" renders it more emotional and gives the addressee a sense of belonging to the same emotional group as the writer.

As for the negative politeness markers, notice that they are used in letter (4) as the counterpart of bald-on-record statements in other letters, when the writer needs to tell the addressee the real motives for her writing. In this letter, the writer wants the addressee to meet her at a convenient place. But, she does not say it directly. She uses negative politeness markers to mitigate the imposition of her request.

Again, this lack of preference for negative politeness markers might be due to the fact that, in the Nso culture, young people avoid asking difficult questions of their elders. Although the different writers of these letters belong to the addressee's age group, they did consider her as their elder because she was at the university while they were still in secondary school. In face-to-face interactions, this power difference does not seem to play, but it sometimes re-emerges once a writer is alone before a sheet of paper, writing. This became particularly obvious when the author read the following in one of the letters written by Solange Kinyuy, the author of letter (4): "Heh! Lim what about a stable boy. I hope you are not growing into a future spinster. A graduate must have a fiancé my dear. Well, everything has its own time. Keep cool then." She wrote this as a post scriptum to the letter. This indicated to the author that it is a question she always wanted to ask but could not bring herself to ask it baldly. Notice that she uses an off-record strategy in the first part of the statement "what about a stable boy". She is not directly saying that the addressee needs a stable boyfriend as a fiancé. The second sentence makes use of negative politeness markers: "A graduate must have a fiancé my dear." Here she states the FTA, notably the need for the addressee to have a fiancé, as a general rule. The last two sentences reflect positive politeness: "Well, everything has its own time. Keep cool then." In fact, she seems to indicate that she is still optimistic for her, that she will find a fiancé and that she should not worry. This is a positive politeness strategy as suggested in Brown and Levinson (1978).

As for the bald-on-record statements, we have pointed out that they are mostly used when the FTAs are addressed to the writer in these letters. Incidentally, this confirms the four politeness maxims of Leech (1983), namely:

⁷The Bamileke people of Cameroon have a similar use of nicknames that husbands usually give to their spouses whenever they intend to ask special favours of them.

Tact maxim:	Minimize cost to <i>other</i> . Maximize benefit to <i>other</i> .
Generosity maxim:	Minimize benefit to <i>self</i> . Maximize cost to <i>self</i> .
Approbation maxim:	Minimize dispraise of <i>other</i> . Maximize praise of <i>other</i> .
Modesty maxim:	Minimize praise of <i>self</i> . Maximize dispraise of <i>self</i> .

In the context of letter writing, one can easily understand that the writer will more easily write baldly about facts that concern her even if these are FTAs. Because the writer is alone, she will not "lose" face in front of the paper. At the same time, we noticed that, in some of the letters, such bald-on-record statements were interspersed with positive politeness markers, such as starting sentences with "Lim" in letter (3) to give the impression that she asks the addressee's approbation to violate Leech's maxim of modesty.

Letter (5) contains a disproportionate number of bald-on-record statements of which the contents are abuses. This is most unusual in a letter between friends. The second author maintains that such abuses are rather cultural and that they do not constitute real face threatening acts. As pointed out in Mutaka and Lenaka (2000; see this volume), abuses in the Nso culture may be used to invite the addressee to behave as the other members of the group. They are not to be interpreted at their face value. They rather presuppose a positive outcome for the addressee in that the writer invites her to behave more like the rest of the group.

Although Brown and Levinson (1987) do not make a distinction between various types of bald-on-record statements, we believe that some qualification for the bald-on-record statements which are FTAs for the addressee used in letters should be added. They should be FTAs that appeal to the positive face wants of the addressee. In other words, they should be FTAs whose goal is to further strengthen unity, common ground between writer and addressee as is meant for the bald-on-record FTAs in letter (5).

We also interpret the use of the bald-on-record FTAs in letter (4) where the writer blames herself as a way of appealing to the positive face want of the addressee. When the writer declares "Do not take this as some sort of jealousy towards you; it is in fact bitterness at myself", the addressee will feel empathy towards her. As pointed out in Brown and Levinson (1987:107), claiming empathy is a marker of positive politeness. It is a strategy used by Nso people in order to gain favors from their friends or their parents.⁸

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, our analysis of politeness strategies in written correspondence has revealed that there is great preference for the use of positive politeness due to several reasons. First, the nature of letter writing which is a communicative event between friends is prone to emphasize positive politeness because the writer prefers to target the addressee's positive face wants. Secondly, wording in letters like the salutation and the endings require that positive politeness markers be used. Thirdly, positive politeness markers may be used as a pre-request cultural feature as is the case in the Nso culture. Our analysis has also revealed that bald-on-record FTAs are used either to state facts clearly in accordance with Grice's maxims or as FTAs that are rather directed towards the writer. Bald-on-record FTAs directed to the addressee have been found to also appeal to her positive face in that they are not meant to hurt her or make her lose face but to strengthen her belonging to the same group as the writer

⁸This strategy is probably crosscultural. Elinor Ochs (personal communication) told us about it also being used in Japan for gaining favours from peers or people vested with some power.

with whom she shares similar opinions and attitudes; in short such FTAs aim at establishing a common ground for addressee and writer.

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