

GROUP IDENTITY STRENGTHENING IN THE NSO CULTURE: THE USES OF ORAL ABUSE BY OLDER WOMEN

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This article deals mainly with a particular kind of abuse used by older women in the Nso culture as a means of helping their younger ones adapt better to the harsh milieu of adult life. Viewed from the Brown and Levinson (1987) perspective of politeness strategies, we claim that although these abuses may be classified as bald-on-record, it is of a special kind in that it serves the positive needs of the community for strengthening group identity. In order to corroborate this claim, different circumstances are described in which abuses are used as a redressive positive politeness strategy. Also, we provide some background information to explain why such abuses are accepted by younger women.

Cet article traite essentiellement d'un type particulier d'insultes employées surtout par des femmes âgées à l'égard de leurs cadettes comme moyen d'aider celles-ci à mieux s'intégrer dans le dur milieu de la vie d'adulte. Vu sous l'angle des stratégies de politesse de Brown et Levinson (1987), nous voulons soutenir que ce type d'insultes, bien que dépourvues de tout aménagement à l'endroit de leurs cibles, ont un but qui rejoint les stratégies de la politesse notamment en ce qu'elles servent les besoins positifs de la communauté pour resserrer les liens d'identité du groupe. Cette hypothèse est alors mise en évidence au travers d'une description des différentes situations dans lesquelles ces insultes sont employées comme moyen de stratégie de politesse positive. Pour finir, nous proposons des informations d'arrière plan afin d'expliquer pourquoi ces insultes sont quand même acceptées par ces jeunes femmes.

0. INTRODUCTION

Unlike the mainstream American culture and possibly western cultures in general where positive encouragement is the norm to help siblings and younger people integrate in the society of adults, the African child in general is discouraged from openly expressing his opinions in the presence of adults. Furthermore, in certain circumstances, abuses¹ are used by older people to help the younger adults realise their expected status in the society, notably that they are to show respect for their elders through silence even when they are abused. This use of silence and abuses ultimately aims at strengthening group identity in Nso society: each group member thus knows what place he holds in the society, when he can speak in a meeting, what he is allowed to tell his younger siblings, and which kind of respect he can expect from either the younger or older people of his community. In this article, we would like to explore one type of oral abuse which is mostly used by the older women in the Nso culture,² towards their younger relatives.

In order to establish this claim, we describe in §1 the different circumstances in which abuses are used as a redressive positive politeness strategy; in §2 we provide some background information to explain why such abuses are accepted by younger women; and in §3 we draw the conclusion that, although certain types of abuses employed by the older Nso women are bald-on-record strategies, they rather address the positive face of the addressee to strengthen group identity. Before tackling the first point, however, we need to give a brief explanation of the terms we borrow from

¹This term essentially means 'insults'. We have chosen to use the term because it is the one used in Cameroon for the specific kind of insult which does not aim at hurting the addressee. Our thanks to the JWAL anonymous reviewer and to the JWAL editor, for drawing our attention to the 'unconventional use' of the term abuse in this article.

²The Nso community is located in the North-Western province of Cameroon. The second author of this article belongs to this community, and she has experienced or witnessed most of the events that will be reported in this article. This article was presented as a paper at the 1st CAMCAL (Cameroonian Conference on African Linguistics) held in Yaoundé on April 9–11, 1999. We wish to thank the audience of that conference for their questions and comments.

Brown and Levinson (1987) as background material for our discussion of the ‘abuses’ in this article. They concern the following terms: face threatening act, bald-on-record, negative and positive politeness.

Brown and Levinson argue that, in a given social interaction, the participants seek to maintain each other’s face. FACE means “something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction” (1978:66). Each participant will have a 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”, and a negative face, that is “the rights to territories, freedom of action and freedom from imposition, essentially the want that your actions be not impeded by others”. Since certain actions or utterances necessarily “threaten” the participant’s face, hence FACE THREATENING ACT (FTA), the speaker may choose to ignore the addressee’s face, for example by giving a direct order. Such a face threatening act is said to be BALD-ON-RECORD; in other words, it is a “baldly executed face threatening act without redress”. The speaker may also choose 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”. 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”.

1. ABUSES AS REDRESSIVE POSITIVE POLITENESS STRATEGY

Normally, when someone talks of abuses, what comes to mind is insulting with the intention of hurting. This is not always the case in the Nso culture because abuses are sometimes used for other purposes such as to correct a child or to instigate someone to speak, write, or phone. They are also used to provoke in order to see a person’s reaction and at times to make a shy person become bold. However, people do abuse at times in order to express anger. The following are typical circumstances in which abuses are used.

1.1 ABUSES THAT DO NOT HURT

Traditional wedding. Abuses are often used during the traditional wedding. The women who belong to the compound where the wedding is taking place are supposed to give the bride a bath. While bathing her, they inspect her very well to see if she is fit for their son. After the bath, they rub her body with *bia* ‘camwood’ and put her on a special chair. At this point, they start abusing her with the intention of seeing if she is capable of withstanding abuses in case she comes into contact with wicked women. At times, it is also to study the reaction of the girl in question, to see if she is good or bad. Normally, a good girl will keep quiet but a bad girl will grumble. The types of abuses used here are about her relationship with her husband. The women can start by asking her questions and then they proceed to abuses like the following: (In the translations, SM = subject marker, OM = object marker, and TM = tense marker.)

- (1) à vinsi bú?kirni fo nsaŋ wo á
with breasts fallen on chest SM
With breasts that have already shrunk,

à yi á yir wón vér i káki
you will TM feed children our with what
what will you be feeding our children with?

- (2) **jín la jáva**
 bride without flesh
 A bride without flesh?
- (3) **shíjájá shí gé? fo wûy wu mo**
 clitoris that sensitive of woman that one
 What a woman with such a sensitive clitoris;
á yon jí lîm bo yo? dzə wu lim
 they say that work but cannot (TM) she work
 when it comes to work she cannot work,
á kûm jí kîkún wu nin lîy ko?
 they say that bed she will jump climb
 but when it comes to sex she is the first to climb up to the bed.

Her breasts may not be necessarily shrunk nor her body without flesh. These abuses are simply meant to test the girl's stamina or ability to withstand inconvenient situations and also to get an insight into her character.

Childbirth. Whenever a woman gives birth to a child, other women organize a birth celebration ceremony known as 'born house' in which they come and greet the child. They always prepare a traditional dish called **ntèè** 'pounded cocoyams eaten with yellow soup' and **egussi** pudding. Before the women start eating and singing, they always abuse the woman who has just given birth. The subject at stake is invariably sex. Since sex is a taboo topic, most women find it difficult to talk about it. They abuse the woman so that when they start singing (songs which are mainly about sex) she will not be shy. The abuses are meant to make her feel at ease with discussions related to sex. Some of the abuses used in such a situation are given in (4)–(8).

- (4) **yén mo wu tíyí**
 see how she stand
 Look at her standing there.
- (5) **à kú kî á dzè moo kò? kîkún í ghém kfôn só**
 you only know to how climb bed and open vagina take
wán
 child
 You only know how to lie on the bed and open your vagina to receive a child.
- (6) **à dzè à naa vífáveyi á àáy**
 can TM you cook food no
 Can you cook? No.
- (7) **à dzè à su ndzèy á àáy**
 can TM you wash dresses no
 Can you wash dresses? No.
- (8) **à kúki à dzè kinénj**
 you only know TM sex
 You only know how to make love.

Also, typical songs they sing at this occasion and which are made up of words considered taboo in the Nso culture are:

- (9) **wúni bó'ti yéè wan**
sex lied mother child
wúni bó'ti táà wan
sex lied father child
Sex took reasoning out of the mother's child, sex took reasoning out of the father's child.
- (10) **wirdzəm kër shwà' fër woá fër fër sho**
everybody has knife creation that create with
Everyone has a knife (penis/vagina) in him that is used in creation.

Sister to sister or friend to friend. There are also situations where a friend or sister can abuse the other one just to instigate her to talk, write, or call her on the phone. She is not really out to annoy her friend or sister but it is a way to try to spur her through threats and warnings (in the form of abuses) to respond to her letters or messages. In such a case, the samples in (11)–(14) are abuses that can be used.

- (11) **yén vima vé wó wuna kima ké shuu ke wu kër ki**
look big SM hand and big SM mouth that she has
Look at her big hands and mouth.
- (12) **yo' dze ví nsan ɲwa' fór mu á**
can't TM they write letter to me
Can they not write to me?
- (13) **à kwá' dzí à dze ká**
you think that you are what
What do you think that you are?
- (14) **kú dze la' sán â yén kifá kè̀m yì yì wo**
just TM not write and see what I will do you
fúm í ko'ón
forehead protruding
Don't respond and see what I will do to you. With that protruding forehead.

Grandmother to granddaughter. Another situation conducive to the use of abuses is when family members of different generations live in the same quarters as is the case in many Nso families. When grandparents live together with their sons and grandchildren, the former may often feel the need to reprove the latter, at times using abuses.

At one point, you find the grandmother abusing the child not because she has done something wrong at that particular time but simply because she is scared that she will do it soon especially if she detects some signs of misbehavior. She introduces it in a roundabout way. She can start as if having an ordinary conversation and then she switches to a more reproving register. The second author's grandmother saw her powdering her face and this is what she had to say:

- (15) **a sór á dze ká i sí**
you rub SM TM what on face
What are you rubbing on your face?
- (16) **yá dze páuda**
Granny TM powder
It is powder, Granny.

- (17) à sór br? ká wàn vèn
 You rub for what child this
 Why are you rubbing it, since you are still a child?
- (18) ya myèn jí kí nángsín a sí yém
 Granny I see that it smooths face my
 Granny, I have realized that it smooths my face.
- (19) wú-wu-u dung shu wàn vèn
 oh oh big mouth child this
 Oh oh oh. This is a child with a big mouth.
- (20) sì vèkwàrà mó ví kè?èn ní bèn
 it prostitution that SM start like this
 ghán ghém kfén wóng dzèm
 moving open vagina world over
 It is prostitution that you have started like this, going about and sleeping all over the place.
- (21) a shôr mú wàn vèn
 you disgrace me child this
 You will disgrace me.
- (22) bó Suwún i yò? kí kin
 it Suwún she never knew this
 Suwun never knew this type of thing.
- (23) wuu dze nyán la kí nyú
 she was calm without problem
 She was calm and never caused problems.
- (24) â kun yi mum kinyú kin
 you if ever try thing this
 Suwún kù fó fó sai kím wò
 Suwún come out from grave lash you
 If you ever try such a thing, Suwun will come out of her grave and lash at you.
- (25) msuí ní kém kí mái
 I say my it over
 I have spoken and it is over.

The unmarried mother. The mother of a child begotten out of wedlock is also the target of abuses. When an unmarried girl delivers a child, the older women always decide without her knowledge to organize a meeting in order to talk to her and make her realize how reprehensible her act is for the society. When the women have decided on the venue, they sit down and call for one of the girl's friends who has not got a child. They tell her to go and call the girl in question. When the culprit comes, they abuse her. Such abuses are meant to make her see what she has done and its consequences on her future life. Some of the abuses used at such an occasion are in (26)–(37).

- (26) ro? ká wò wàn vèn
 curse what you child this
 What has cursed you of all people?

- (27) yó? dze à dʒrè-ám nsái bì? ká
cannot TM you sit ground for what
Why can't you sit down calmly?
- (28) à kò? à sày à kò? à sày
you ascend you descend you ascend you descend
You keep going up and down, up and down.
- (29) yùì ká wò wán vèn
doing what you child this
What is wrong with you, young girl?
- (30) ŋkar sé sɪ kɛr mɪtú? mɛ vɪnsí
friends your SM have pointed OM breasts
Your friends have pointed breasts.
- (31) sé á lúmèn yèn wù yà? ì dʒíyì wún
that if man see he tremble and urinate body
If a man sees them, he will tremble and urinate on his body.
- (32) yén mó sésí shwínín à kfòè ná?
see how yours resemble robes cow
Look how your own breasts resemble the string tied to the cow's neck.
- (33) cèrèy á shòr vér
shame you disgrace us
Shame on you; you are a disgrace to us.
- (34) nà? yí sār wír wù nèn yè-éy fó fó kɪbvéshí
cow ever knock someone he will learn from it tomorrow
When a cow knocks someone, he learns from it for tomorrow's sake.
- (35) à kú gó?ní là lúm
you have remained without husband
You will remain without a husband.
- (36) á woomí
you shame
Be ashamed of yourself.
- (37) a-y a-y a-y ver yo? tíy shó
no no no we never belong to
We do not belong to such things.

Widows. Widows also constitute a target for abuses in certain circumstances. A widow is expected to take care of her compound and children. She is not allowed to be going out with other men. If a widow does not comply with this, a meeting is convened. The older women abuse her, using the type of language in (38)–(42).

- (38) a ba-ay wíy vèn
eh eh woman this
dù? kfèn wíy vèn
big vagina woman this
Eh-eh, this woman, this woman with a big vagina.

- (39) **bó? dze á dze-em nyáng á**
cannot TM you sit quietly
Can't you sit quietly.
- (40) **kfóní yûr fô wíy á dze ká?**
vagina itch of woman like what
What a woman with an itching vagina.
- (41) **á woomí**
you shame
Be ashamed of yourself.
- (42) **lúm wò wíy fá fô sái í rò? wò**
husband you will come out from grave and curse you
Your husband will come out of his grave and curse you.

The dead as an instrument of threat. Another type of abuse worth mentioning, not confined to women, is the one that has to do with dead people. In the Nso culture, people believe that the dead are not completely dead. Rather, they are alive, watching over the living. This explains the fact that when abusing a child, the elders can always compare him to the dead, and they sometimes use the dead as an instrument of threat.

Take for example a situation where a child stole and was beaten to death. If another child dares steal, the elders will abuse him, comparing him to the late child and calling on the dead to come and punish him. Examples of such an abuse are in (43)–(51).

- (43) **wú wuu Nso kárí sà mó**
oh oh Nso come help me
Oh oh oh, the people of Nso, come and help me.
- (44) **mdzeemi wán jí vishóng wo mu? kún ke?a**
I bury child because theft another one again start
I lost a child because of stealing, and this one starts again.
- (45) **bô? dze a ye-éy fôr ké mbiykíâ**
cannot TM you learn from the first one
Can't you learn from what had happened?
- (46) **wan shóng vishóng mô dǵwí a**
child steal stealing like dog
A child stealing like a dog.
- (47) **rím wán vən í dzerú shóngâ**
devilish child this was really thief
So this devilish child was really a thief.
- (48) **shúu ku dze wó shong**
mouth is TM that thief
The mouth is really that of a thief.
- (49) **bâ yó? ye-éy fó ké fár wo kíâ**
haven't you learnt from your brother you own
You have not even learnt from your brother's situation.

- (50) **Biner wun Lúkong fǎ semó-oh-oh**
 Benir and Lukong come out help me
 Benir and Lukong come out and help me.³
- (51) **rîm shóng berní jí a kfár á wír**
 devil thief left that you eat man
 Devil, thief, all that is left is for you to eat a human being.

1.2 ABUSES THAT HURT

Those used as a means to scold a child. At times, abuses are meant to hurt. This can be found in a situation where a child does something wrong, and the mother or parents abuse her in order to correct her. In such a situation, the parents use abuses like (52) and (53).

- (52) **wán vən à dze rîm**
 child this you are devil
 This child is a devil.
- (53) **yén shúu mó á tîn wú rùn lán**
 look mouth like when sliced it fill pot
 Look at her mouth which, if sliced, can fill a pot.

Those used to scold an *obange*. Abuses are also meant to hurt when they are directed to an *obange*, that is, a child who, when delivered, dies and is believed to return again to torment the parents. Normally when such a child dies, a traditional witch doctor puts a mark on the child so that if it returns, it will be recognized. The abuses in this situation are meant to hurt and scare the child so that it will no longer return. Typical abuses used in such a situation are in (54)–(58).

- (54) **yén mó wu kí? i bíbí**
 see how she looks ugly
 See how ugly she looks.
- (55) **nyàm**
 beast
 Beast.
- (56) **rîm**
 devil
 Devil.
- (57) **à kùn du wiy wojàn**
 you if go come this world
 Do not dare to come back to this world again.
- (58) **li vi rím vé ví á du shô**
 take evil your OM and go with
 Take your evil ways away.

³Benir and Lukong are dead people.

1.3 ABUSES USED AS JOKES

The language of jokes is another fertile ground for using abuses among Nso people, especially the young.⁴ There are times when a person abuses a friend as a joke. He is not out to hurt or advise the friend. This is just a way of joking. For example, if something has been stolen from a friend's house, one of his mates may be accused although the accuser knows fully well that the designated culprit is innocent. The accuser may say something like:

- (59) **Mariá shaá í kí láí**
 Maria pass and it disappears
 Maria passes, and it disappears.⁵
- (60) **ǎ shò? ràpá á ku yèn í muám wô**
 if remove loin it will see in side it
 If your loin is removed, I am sure we'll find it.
- (61) **wô dar fo wan a dze ka**
 hands long for childlike TM what
 What a child with long hands.
- (62) **wú fávní kùrè?**
 she hidden somewhere
 She has hidden it somewhere.
- (63) **ven ghár í wù fár**
 you had and she remove
 Put pressure on her, and she will bring it.
- (64) **shóng**
 thief
 Thief.

Another instance when abuses can be used as a joke is among students who live away from their families. Normally, when one of them dies, the others have to accompany the corpse to the village for burial. They do not pay transport, so most students find it as an opportunity to go home without it costing anything. A friend finds his mate sick and says:

- (65) **m yú jì à wà dzóyì**
 I hear that you are ill
 I hear that you are sick.
- (66) **a yó? ní kpuá**
 you haven't die
 Aren't you dead yet?
- (67) **kú kpu oh ím kó? fó lá? kùsáng**
 just die I go to home empty
 Just die quickly so that I can go home without spending any money.

⁴The abuses used in jokes characterise only young boys and girls, but not the old people.

⁵This is a literal translation of a Nso expression meaning 'when Mary passes, things disappear in her trail'.

Any person can thus be called Mary. To the second author, the whole sentence has to be conceived as a single unit. She actually said that it has to be considered as a compound noun in her language.

- (68) **ńfo wo a dze kishíy ki mo-ón**
 I give you only TM day OM one
 I give you only a single day.
- (69) **lá kibv́shí kíyó? yen wo**
 let tomorrow not see you
 Let tomorrow not meet you alive.
- (70) **à dzé yí á dzè ká í wòghàn**
 what stay do in TM what in world
 What are you even doing in this world?

After describing the different circumstances in which abuses are used, some of the questions raised by such abuses are: why does the Nso community have recourse to such abuses to correct the younger members of their community? What is the attitude of the people who are targeted in such abuses? To answer these questions, we would like to briefly address the role of the woman in the Nso culture so that our interpretation of the abuses in §3 will become more understandable.

2. THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN THE NSO CULTURE

A typical reaction one is likely to have upon reading the abuses described above is that the Nso woman is apparently ill-treated by her elders. What a stranger to this culture might not understand is: why do the women accept such treatment?

According to the second author who belongs to this culture, one simply has to accept it. It is the power of the tradition. There is no way for someone to revolt against such traditions; if one does, one will simply be cast away from the culture. A woman must know that adult life is very harsh. In learning to accept abuses, one learns to endure the trials and tribulations of life. As one woman told us, the best way women cope with these abuses is to adopt a joking attitude towards them. In this way, they no longer feel hurt when they are abused. If they were to take them seriously, they would not be able to endure them. The following remarks translate the role of the woman and her expected behavior in the Nso culture.

First, concerning her behavior, she is expected to be submissive towards her husband and elders even in matters that might be in conflict with her own interests. For example, if her husband dies, she is given to one of the brothers of her deceased husband, even if this one already has another wife. In certain circumstances, if her husband was polygamous and some of his children were already grown up, she can find herself assigned to one of her husband's sons as a wife. When this happens, she is not consulted. At the appropriate time, she simply sees that a man, that is, one of the brothers or one of the sons of her late husband, comes to sleep with her. It is then that she understands that the elders have decided that such a man is her new husband.

To explain this submissiveness, women allege that they are treated like children. In fact, a woman entirely depends on her husband financially although most often she is the actual breadwinner. Since the main occupation of women is farming, she is the one who clears the farms, works, plants, weeds and harvests the crops which she carries back to the house. On market days, she again carries the crops to the market to sell, and after selling, she brings the money and gives it to her husband. When the husband gets the money, it is up to him to decide what to do with it and whether to give some to her. If she is unlucky, such a husband might use a great portion of her cash to entertain his friends with local drinks and she is expected not to raise any complaint. If she does, she will simply be considered a bad woman.

Another indication that she is treated like a child is for example in formal gatherings where some serious matter concerning the running of the community is treated. At no point is she allowed to voice her opinion unless she has been asked to. Her influence on the affairs of the community is rather indirect. Most often, women do lead a normal life with their husbands inside their compounds. It is in such circumstances that the woman can voice her point of view and eventually influence her husband, suggesting to him what to say in public.

In comparison to her husband, she is expected to live a very busy life. As the breadwinner of the family, her activities include: farming and selling produce in the market, taking care of the house and children, serving her husband, and so on. She usually plays a major role in the preparation of big events in that she is the one to do the cooking, fetch water, tidy up the meetingplace, serve people, and so on.

Her behavior is regulated by a number of unwritten rules that she is expected to strictly abide by. Such rules are for example the following:

- a. Women do not drink in public places. This is strictly a male privilege.
- b. Women must not stay away too long. Their place is at home. In fact, their main role is to beget children and take care of them. It is also to take care of their husbands, and they are therefore expected to stay at home to constantly look after the house unless they are at the market or in the farm. In case a woman pays a visit to a friend, e.g., for borrowing some salt at a neighbor's, she should come back as quickly as possible. Otherwise, she will be considered as prone to lying as is the case for women who are believed to be talkative.
- c. A woman should not expect her husband to help her in any household chores. She should not complain when doing any of her duties, otherwise, she will be considered as not fit to be called a Nso woman. In fact, a fit woman is one who has many farms and children.
- d. The woman should not call her husband by name. She should rather use the name of one of his children if he has one; e.g., Lim's father. Where they do not have a child, the woman calls him *bā wò mù lāw* 'father of my house'. She can also call him: *tár á wóní* 'father of my children' or *táh lāw wón* 'master of my house' if talking about her husband to another person. Just from the names she calls her husband, one clearly sees the type of respect the Nso woman has for her husband. Note that the husband also does not use his wife's name; he calls her *yìy à wón véw* 'mother of my children' when talking directly to his wife. But if he speaks about her to other people, he calls her *mame Lim* 'Lim's mother' (if Lim is her child).
- e. It is equally forbidden for a woman to openly express her love feelings towards her husband such as embracing him in the presence of her children or friends. If she does this, she will be regarded as a wanton and careless woman. Such love feelings can only be shown within the confines of her room.⁶
- f. During their menstruation, women are considered dirty and bearers of ill luck. They are therefore forbidden to sleep with their husbands and they are even expected not to look their husbands in the eye. As one woman told us, one of the reasons some Nso men are polygamous is because of their need to have other wives available for their sexual needs when their first women have their menstrual period.⁷ Because menstruation is also a taboo topic, a woman cannot

⁶The same interdict can be said to apply to men as well. However, if a man shows his love feelings to a woman in public, he will not be condemned.

⁷One day, the second author asked her grandfather why he had so many wives. He answered, "If I had one single wife, do you expect me to be putting my hands between my thighs when your grandmother is not

outrightly tell her husband that she is menstruating. What happens is that the woman no longer looks at her husband and sends her children with his food which is prepared either by her older children or relatives living with her. She also sits at a specific place in the corner of the house. This is a place that children are trained to avoid. Usually there is a small calabash full of water in which salt is regularly thrown.

- g. Women should not use vulgar language. They are expected to use euphemistic expressions when naming certain objects which are considered taboos in the Nso culture. Chief among these are the words related to sex.⁸ Sex is generally considered taboo, and interestingly enough, many abuses are related to sex as was shown above in §1.

Given these restrictions, one might wonder why women never revolt against their lot. Notice that there are traditional forces of law and order such as **Nwerong**, **Ngiri** and also compound heads called **Shufais** and **Fais** who make sure that women respect the traditions of their culture. In addition, traditional beliefs coupled with threats in case one breaks the law also help enforce women's obedience. Examples of such beliefs are the following: if a woman looks at her husband while she has her periods, or if she bathes in warm water during her menstruation periods, these periods will last indefinitely; if a woman keeps going out to drink in local bars, her children will be wayward; if a woman brings another man who is not her husband to her bed, her husband will die if he later sleeps on that same bed. Also, there are extraordinary feats that the elders perform, like walking on the electrical cable without being electrocuted, uprooting a big tree singlehandedly. The second author actually saw this when her grandfather died. This feat was performed by a juju, a masked person with magical powers.

Despite all these restrictions, the woman is nevertheless allowed to belong to women's societies where she apparently feels free to express herself. One such organization is called **Chong**. However, even in such a society, she is expected to respect her elders and to speak politely and humbly to these elders. For example, she must stoop to greet her elders on such occasions just as she would stoop for greeting men.

The other occasion where she mostly feels free to express herself is during the ceremony for birth celebration called 'born house'. Although it is not forbidden for men to attend this ceremony, husbands usually avoid it because, in that ceremony, women are bold in teasing husbands, asking them how they got the baby. Abusive language is addressed to the woman who has given birth as we described in §1.1.

To a certain extent, Nso women seem to be united in their misfortunes of being so ill-treated by their community.⁹ The use of abuses can be interpreted as their way of accepting their treatment, but also as laughing at it. As was pointed out above, a woman with a good character will remain silent when she is abused. In other words, she will act as if the abuses are not really directed at her. Viewed from the Brown and Levinson perspective, although the abuses described above are bald-on-record

available?" What he meant is that whenever his wife would menstruate, he would then be able to have sex with another wife.

⁸If talking about the sexual act, the woman refers to it as *lá vilú* 'licking honey'. She calls breasts *nsang* 'chest', and when referring to the penis, she will say *wún vilúm* which means 'the male body'; if it is the vagina, she will talk of *wún vikiy* 'the female body'.

⁹We would like to point out that, nowadays, young girls vehemently oppose these restrictions placed on the Nso woman and are, therefore, perceived by the traditional Nso community as rebellious, disobedient, and recalcitrant. These young girls are not prepared to go through what their mothers have. They want a change and they want to be given the chance to do what they want with their money. They no longer want to be bossed around as their mothers were by their husbands.

strategies devoid of any politeness, their impact on the addressee is less virulent because the latter knows that the primary aim of the Nso community is to use them to strengthen group identity.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Given this background on the role and the expected behavior of the Nso women, we propose that the various types of abuses described in §1.1 can be viewed as essentially inviting 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 older women invite the younger ones in particular to behave more like the rest of the group.

Assuming the Brown and Levinson (1978) model of politeness strategies, the various uses of abuses that have been described are bald-on-record face threatening acts. The addressor uses a type of language that is apparently meant to hurt the addressee. But these face threatening acts are of a special kind in that they are not necessarily meant to hurt or to make the addressee lose face but to correct her or to test her level of endurance to withstand inconvenient situations. Put differently, both abusers and the person abused know that the ultimate purpose of such abuses is some expression of friendliness and common ground.

One might also think about Lakoff's rules of politeness, notably (a) formality: don't impose/remains aloof, (b) hesitancy: give the addressee his options, (c) equality or camaraderie: act as though you and the addressee were equal/make him feel good (see Fasold 1990:159), and argue that the primary aim of abuses is to achieve the opposite effects of the third rule. Yet, the abuses described in this article are not of this type. They are also the expression of friendliness because they can be initiated by an addressor who is familiar with the addressee and whose ultimate aim is to help the addressee behave better for the common interest of the Nso community.

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 face threatening acts for the addressee used in ceremonies should be added. By ceremonies we mean the kinds of circumstances we described in §1.1 and in which the younger women were invariably abused by the older women (e.g., born house ceremony, the unmarried girl who gives birth, or the widow). One thing we pointed out is that a good woman will in general remain silent. Most often, she will not get angry because of these abuses. Our interpretation of this behavior is that, like the abusers, she also knows that those abuses are not meant to hurt her but to promote the strengthening of her relations with her community. These types of abuses should therefore be classified as 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 older women and their younger relatives.

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