

MAKING REQUESTS IN IGBO

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Requests, as speech acts, are common in conversational exchanges. This study examines request utterances among the Igbo of Nigeria, and observes that fulfillment or denial of a request is governed by social and conversational conventions that obtain among members of the speech community. These conventions reflect status of speaker and addressee as well as the relative politeness and directness of the speech acts independent of their propositional content.

Les demandes en tant qu'actes de la parole abondent dans les échanges de conversation. Notre étude a pour but d'examiner les discours de demande parmi les igbo du Nigéria. Nous constatons que la réalisation ou le rejet d'une demande est gouverné par des conventions sociales et conversationnelles qui existent entre les membres d'une communauté langagière. Ces conventions reflètent le status du locuteur et de l'interlocuteur ainsi que la politesse et la franchise relatives aux actes de la parole indépendamment de leur contenu propositionnel.

0. INTRODUCTION

Appropriate use of speech patterns is essential to a well integrated social life. When conversational exchanges take place, interactants are able to interpret the intention of a given utterance by applying their understanding of what needs to be done, what the utterance is designed to achieve, and what further actions should be performed to ensure conversational cooperation (Nofsinger 1991).

Ability to arrive at these interpretations "would include rules and uses of speech, their implementation and violation and relevant sanctions, positive and negative" (Albert 1972:74) that obtain within the cultural group. This means that as we produce utterances aimed at realizing some goals, we bring to social situations certain expectations about the rules that apply which we ordinarily assume to be shared by others. Therefore, variations in the uses of speech are related to the constituents of cultural patterns, including aspects of the social structure, cultural definitions of the situations of action, cultural value system and philosophy, and their interrelationships.

1. REQUEST UTTERANCES AS SPEECH ACTS

Within the framework of Speech Act theory as propounded by Austin (1962) and expounded by Searle (1969, 1975), in producing utterances we perform speech acts such as making statements, asking questions, issuing commands, making requests, making promises, and so on, as well as referring and predicating. These acts are made possible by and are performed in accordance with certain rules for the use of linguistic elements as recognized by the users of the language. If communication primarily involves linguistic acts, it then means that "the unit of linguistic communication is not, as has generally been supposed, the symbol, word or sentence . . . but rather the production or issuance of the symbol, word or sentence in the performance of the speech act" (Searle 1969:16).

Just as an utterance that conveys a promise is about something, so an utterance must be about something in order to meet the definition of requesting. Since a request is about a future behavior of the recipient (the hearer) rather than of the speaker, the major difference between the speech acts of requesting and promising lies in the propositional content rule. The essential rule for requesting, therefore is that participants must be able to infer that the speaker sincerely wants the recipient to do the future behavior (Nosinger 1991).

Searle (1969) mentions two major conditions that must obtain before a request can be sincere. First, it must not be obvious that the hearer is already doing or is about to do the thing requested, otherwise the request will be defective. Secondly, the requester must believe that it is possible for the hearer to perform the request. (It should, however, be noted that it is possible for the requester to believe that the hearer can

perform a request, considering his position, status, etc., when in actual fact he may be incapable of fulfilling the request.) Searle goes further to add that “wherever there is a psychological state specified in the sincerity condition, the performance of the act counts as an expression of that psychological state” (Searle 1969:65). To make a request, then, counts as an expression of a wish or desire.

In Igbo (as is probably the case in other languages) there are various ways of making requests as long as the request utterance is, by the semantic rules of the language, one that could be used in making requests. Ervin-Tripp (1972, 1976) and Lakoff (1977) point out that different forms of speech acts possible in any particular context are determined by conversational conventions for speaking politely and directly. The use of the polite or directive form is particularly crucial in making requests. For example, the particular form adopted allows the speaker to make or neutralize differences in rank, authority, age, or territoriality and to indicate how serious the request is and whether compliance will be assumed or expected.

This study looks at various request forms in Igbo and discusses their sociocultural implications.

2. POSSIBLE REQUEST FORMS IN IGBO

Making requests in Igbo can take many forms. For ease of exposition, we will discuss the forms in groups although they are not necessarily ordered from the most to the least polite. The examples (1)–(4), though not exhaustive, represent the relative politeness and directness of making requests in Igbo, based on implications conveyed by their literal meanings.

The possibility of the request being granted in a particular situation will depend on any or combinations of several variables which include the following:

- i) if the speaker has the right to make the request,
- ii) if the speaker is imposing on the hearer by making the request,
- iii) if the hearer has the ability to conform to the request,
- iv) if the hearer will commit himself by complying with the request, and
- v) if the hearer is obligated to comply with the request.

These variables which control the form of utterance appropriate in particular situations, are tied to societal norms and expectations. Since any request utterance produced by an individual has to pass through a culturally conditioned and constructed barrier (such as degree of existing relationship, status, power differential, and so on) to get to the hearer, successful scaling of the barrier will enhance the prospects of realizing the speaker's desire. Therefore, the request form an individual chooses must match the above variables as well as the culturally accepted norms and expectations.

3. MAKING REQUESTS

Among the Igbo, the degree of relationship, status, and power differential existing between the interlocutors are among the sociocultural factors that affect, not only the request form to be adopted but also whether or not compliance will be expected.

The speaker's knowledge of the addressee in a given communicative event constrains the way and manner a request is presented. If an individual is addressing a member of the close-knit family, a close friend, a townsman, or a total stranger, there will be different expectations of the sort of utterance which will be produced both with

respect to form and to content. The speaker's experiences within the speech community will help him know what to expect by adopting a particular form both in a general predictive sense (such as the sort of response likely to be received) and in a limited predictive sense which enables him to estimate how the form will be interpreted.

Relations between speaker and addressee also reflect power and status on which the addressee is subordinate, equal, or superior to the speaker, and the dimension called 'solidarity' (Hudson 1980). Solidarity, which distinguishes intimate relations from more distant ones, concerns the social distance between people—how much experience they have shared, how many social characteristics they share, and how far they are prepared to share intimacies. The speaker thus locates his relations with the addressee on these dimensions largely by means of his choice of request form.

In the two examples in (1), the use of preverbal *please* (an element which could also occur in indirect request forms) is generally regarded as indicating politeness. However, a closer look at these examples will reveal that they are rather direct and authoritative, thus restricting their usage.

- (1) **bíko nye m ego**
 'Please give me money.'
bíko chòpọ́ m ego
 'Please find money for me.'

A solicitous request presented in any of these forms to a person of much higher status may be taken as impertinence regardless of the preverbal politeness tag. In order to be taken seriously, it is necessary that the requester take into consideration the conventions for performing request acts and demonstrate knowledge of how such acts will count.

Although the above forms fall short of these considerations, they are not im permissible because they may be tolerated by family members, close friends and equals since the relationships they enjoy permit them to do so. On the other hand, a stranger, a beggar, a subordinate (say, in an office), or a non-intimate may not easily realize his desire by adopting any of these forms especially if the benefactor is not obligated in any way to comply.

It should, however, not be ruled out that in special circumstances, and depending on the disposition of the benefactor, non-intimates (such as beggars) may receive positive replies if they superimpose pleading intonation and assume physical position of submission, strategies that help to dilute sanctions associated with the forms.

Although all the sentences in (2) are questions, and in spite of the absence of the preverbal politeness tag in all but one of them, they are more polite and more acceptable than the forms in (1).

- (2) **bíko ì ga-enyé m ego**
 'Please, will you give me money?'
àmághì m mà ì ga-enyé m ego
 'I am wondering whether you could give me money.'
ì nwere íke inye m ego
 'Could it be possible for you to give me money?'
ì ga-enyé m ego
 'Will you give me money?'
í gaghì enye m ego
 'Wouldn't you give me money?'

Generally speaking, in Igbo discourse questioning is usually unidirectional, i.e., subordinates may not pose questions to superiors unless such questions are genuine inquiries for information the questioner does not already know. The examples in (2) are not violations of the expected cultural mannerism no matter who uses them. This is because apart from the fact that they are questions with neutral polarity in the sense

that they leave open whether the answer is positive or negative, the use of conditional modal auxiliaries and the subjunctive mood morphology makes them more acceptable.

Usually, in presenting a request, the requester gives up his autonomy in regard to deciding the matter while the benefactor retains his. That the benefactor is now the only one to decide to grant or deny the request demonstrates the requester's submission while reassuring the benefactor's 'superiority' in regard to the request. This increases the chances of compliance with the requester's desire. Thus, by deviating from the simple and direct examples in (1), the requester communicates that the omnipresent considerations of politeness are being taken into account in performing the relevant speech act. Irrespective of relationship, status, and power, the examples in (2) are appropriate in any situation, as being indirect is considered an important way of being polite and tactful.

The examples in (3), which could be used in highly restrictive circumstances, are weakly directive ways of getting the recipient to do something.

- (3) **í nwèrè íke inye m ego**
 'You could give me money.'
ím chère na í gà-enyé m ego
 'I think/thought you should/would give me money.'

The restrictive nature of these request forms and their acceptability as being appropriate in a particular situation will presuppose any or all of the following:

- i) that special relationship exists between the interactants, and as a result, the requester is in a position to make the request in such a manner,
- ii) that there must have been a preceding exchange relating to the request,
- iii) that the requester believes or has sufficient access to the ability of the benefactor to perform the requested act, and
- iv) that there must be reason to suppose that the benefactor would not ordinarily perform the request as a matter of course.

In the light of the above, it will be inconceivable for an individual to just casually confront a potential benefactor and make a request in these forms. If it does happen, it is likely that the good will and patience of the benefactor will be meagre and fitful, providing no accommodative response, since the requester has exposed himself to denial and rejection.

The sentences in (4) are rather commands than ways of seeking favor.

- (4) **ím chòrọ ka inye m ego**
 'I want you to give me money.'
í gà-enyé m ego
 'You should give me money.'
chọrọ m ego
 'Find money for me.'
nyé m ego
 'Give me money.'

Igbo has well-defined criteria of rhetoric, logic, poetics as well as requesting, and well-developed ideas about their uses and interrelations. Choice of form, therefore, tends toward the ideal set by a social superior, but realization of the ideal varies predictably with situation, relationship, power, and status. Humbleness and politeness, for example, are often capable of very good approximation with voice and gestures fitting the utterance. The appropriate form for inferiors is attached to roles, situations, and

persons. Hence an intelligent person must measure the character of his interlocutor and select style and content for his speech accordingly. In disregard of the above, it would be an unforgivable blunder for a requester to shout at or command fulfillment of a desire from a superior.

However, circumstances can, of course arise when the use of these forms are acceptable in meeting the suppliant's desire. In a normal situation, a wife can have her desire met by the husband through any of these forms just as children can from their parents. Also, close friends and peers could make requests from each other with these forms. In such cases, the utterances in (4) are not necessarily regarded as commands, and the value to the addressee of performing the request is based, of course, upon the character of the request.

However, it is possible with such request forms that even when the recipient implicitly regards them as commands, he may give a reply granting the request or a reason for postponing or denying it. In case of the latter, such an 'accounted denial' expresses that the requester is right in making the request in that manner and that the person asked is sympathetic to the plea, while holding the ritual implications of the denial in check even though the requester is literally denied. By so acting, the bene factor does not commit himself by complying with the request.

There are, of course, obvious situations where the forms in (4) are 'command' requests. Cases where a superior is addressing a subordinate, a lender confronting a borrower, or even where an individual fails to fulfil his own part of a contract (say, not paying for a service rendered), these forms could be used unapologetically. In situations such as these, the speaker has the backing of 'authority' by obliging the addressee to comply with the request.

4. CONCLUSION

Relationship, status, and power as perceived by members of a speech community are among the variables that constrain request forms. For us to effectively understand the verbal behavior of a particular language group, it will be important to know how participants use their cultural knowledge in selecting utterance patterns.

The requester therefore adopts a request form displaying the shadings and nuances appropriate to the situation as he perceives it.

A request that is directive in form does not take politeness and submissiveness into account. In situations where it is regarded as commands, it imposes compliance on the addressee revealing that there exists a status, authority, or power differential between the interactants.

In summary, and with regard to meeting cultural expectations, request forms could be ordered from most to least polite in the following way:

- i) requests with conditional modal auxiliaries are more polite than those with unconditional modals,
- ii) direct requests with preverbal politeness tags are less preferred to indirect ones without such tags,
- iii) requests strongly implying desire are less polite than those weakly implying desire, and
- iv) hedges and embeddings render imperatives more polite and less direct.

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