

## MANAGING 'FACE'<sup>1</sup> IN URBAN PUBLIC TRANSPORT: POLITE REQUEST STRATEGIES IN COMMUTER OMNIBUS DISCOURSE IN HARARE

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### Abstract

*This article examines the request strategies in commuter omnibus discourse involving the bus crew (conductors, touts and drivers) and passengers, in Harare. The present study considers requests in commuter transport as face threatening acts (FTA), hence the need for the commuter crew to strategically shape their communicative actions to achieve their overall discourse goal of getting passengers to perform actions that are in their own interest with minimum resistance or confrontation. The crew present itself by using communicative devices that prompt the passengers to evaluate it positively as warm, friendly, modest and respectful. However, the passengers' responses to the requests range from compliance to resistance depending on their interpretation of the speaker's motive and the probable social consequences.*

### INTRODUCTION

The study explains polite request strategies of commuter drivers, conductors and touts (henceforth the crew) to (potential) passengers and the passengers' responses to these requests in commuter omnibus discourse. This omnibus discourse is of interest and importance for a number of reasons. First, it contributes to knowledge in one rather neglected area of research in sociolinguistics: communication in public transport discourse. While interest in research in the study of spoken discourse within specialized, institutionalized contexts – Christian sermonic discourse (for example, Mashiri, 2000c; Dzameshie, 1995), political discourse (for example, Love, 2000; Barton, 1999; Lu, 1999), television interviews (for example, Owsley and Myers-Scotton, 1984), family discourse (for example, Ervin-Tripp *et al.*, 1984; Blum-Kulka, 1990)

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1 The notion of 'face' is derived from Goffman's (1967) theory of the self as a social/public or interactive construction. As Goffman notes, face is the positive social value a person effectively claims for oneself through what others see him/her do or hears him/her say. Thus, face is one's public self-image that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced. In interaction, it is in every participant's interest to act or speak in ways that do not humiliate or embarrass others or themselves. In discourse, politeness is one speech strategy for maintaining face.

has increased in recent years, discourse in the commuter omnibus speech setting, unique in many parts of Africa, has generally been overlooked. Thus, the information provided by this study about the types of politeness request strategies used in this setting contributes to knowledge on the ethnography of communication in one important social context in Zimbabwean society.

Secondly, this article is important from a theoretical viewpoint. By combining key tenets from Labov and Fanshel's (1977) rules of requests model, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and Myers-Scotton's markedness model, this study shows that "a multiple model of discourse is an effective way of explaining linguistic choices" (Dzameshie, 1995, 192).

Thirdly, one of the challenges that has confronted Zimbabwe since independence in 1980 is the transport crisis, which affects some 60-80% of the 1.5 million workers in Harare<sup>2</sup> who commute daily. The crisis manifests itself in many different forms that include overcrowded commuter transport services and violence and sexual harassment against commuters at the bus ranks and in the vehicles, especially when returning home from work in the evening.

Given these deplorable conditions and the unfriendly relations between the crew and the passengers, the primary research question addressed by this study is: why do the commuter omnibus crew adopt polite or mitigated requests in communication with passengers? As in South Africa (Khosa, 1998, 81) and in other cities in developing countries, the experiences of female commuters in Zimbabwe are different from those of male commuters. Therefore, this study also intends to find out whether or not the requests used for male commuters differ in any way from those used for female commuters, and if they do, what the motivation for the distinction is. As the majority of the users of public transport in Zimbabwe (Harare, in the case of this study) are African, and mainly Shona speaking, Shona is considered as the primary language of commuter omnibus discourse examined in this study.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The primary theoretical framework adopted here is Labov and Fanshel's (1977) request model. The core idea of the request theory is that there are "speech events in which speaker, A, uses verbal means to accomplish

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<sup>2</sup> These estimates were obtained from personal conversation with Dr Odera of the Rural and Urban Planning Department of the University of Zimbabwe. Although the 1997 Inter-censal Demographic Survey Report estimates the population of Harare to be 1 871 943 (Inter-censal Demographic Report, 1997, 23), a significant number of people working in Harare commute from/to Chitungwiza, Norton and Ruwa daily.

the end of getting the listener, B, to do something” (Labov and Fanshel, 1977, 77). All such speech acts are subsumed under a single category called “request for action”.<sup>3</sup> Structurally, requests for action may contain imperatives or mitigated forms and, indexically, solicit information, conformation, attention or approval. In response to a request from the speaker, the listener has various options: s/he may give the speaker the information, conformation, or whatever is requested, or s/he may carry out the action or suggestion, s/he may put off the request with an accounting, or s/he may refuse it, with or without accounting. Labov and Fanshel’s theory limits requests and responses to speech acts. The present study refines it to include extralinguistic behaviour as part of politeness strategies that may be used by either the speaker or the listener.

In order to explain the reasons for the commuter omnibus crew’s choice of mitigation strategies in making (their) requests, it has been necessary to adopt Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory. The “kernel idea of the politeness theory is that certain speech acts are intrinsically threatening to face and thus require ‘softening’ by means of politeness strategies (PSs)” (Brown and Levinson, 1987, 24; Mashiri, 2000a, 61-62). The theory focuses on the effects of linguistic choices on the face wants of the hearers, “whether they feel approved of, liked, respected, or otherwise” (Dzameshie, 1995, 193). Thus, the theory is audience-centred and it emphasizes softening of the request as the main purpose for using PSs.

However, the present study redefines the overall motivation for the use of PSs. We argue that in addition to using PSs in order to maintain face, speakers use them to accomplish their overall discourse goal, that is, “what the speaker aspires to achieve in the speech act (Saville-Troike, 1982; Hymes, 1972). This overall-discourse-goal explanation for the use of PSs is made more explicit by integrating the politeness theory with Myers-Scotton’s (1983) markedness model. Unlike the politeness model, Myers-Scotton’s model is speaker-centred. It shows how speakers manage their linguistic choices in order to achieve their discourse goals. This model is based on a number of underlying assumptions, two of which are highlighted here.

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3 Requests are determined by rules for making these requests directly or indirectly. The rules of request show the audience when they are seriously requested to perform an action or not. There are four preconditions for making valid requests; needs, abilities, obligations and rights. These preconditions also provide the major modes of mitigation and aggravation. There are general principles that seem to determine whether or not a form is mitigating or aggravating. Needs and abilities are generally mitigating and rights and obligations, aggravating. In Shona there are morphosyntactic devices for mitigating and aggravating requests.

First, like Labov and Fanshel's model, Myers-Scotton's assumes that "all linguistic code choices are indexical of a set of rights and obligations holding between the participants in a communicative event (Myers-Scotton, 1988a, 152). Secondly, the markedness model assumes that all speakers have implicit social knowledge and facts that guide them in choosing one linguistic variety over the other, as part of their communicative competence. According to Myers-Scotton, all speakers have mental representations of a correlation between code choices and rights and obligations sets. Thus, they tacitly know what code choices constitute the marked or unmarked linguistic realization of "an expected rights and obligations set" (Myers-Scotton, 1988a) between the speaker and the hearers in a specific interaction.<sup>4</sup>

#### DATA COLLECTION

Data were obtained from six ranks, three for commuter buses travelling to high-density suburbs and the other three for those travelling to low-density suburbs. Additional data were collected from the interaction between commuter personnel and passengers on ten different buses equally apportioned to the fore-mentioned destination categories travelling during both peak and non-peak periods. Both the ranks and the buses were randomly selected. But, the rationale of sampling ranks and omnibuses according to destinations and commuting time was to find out whether or not patterns of requests and responses changed with these variables. The data were obtained by different methods.

Participant observation by the present researcher and student research assistants since 1997 was the main method of collecting examples of requests and responses to the requests. All identifiable requests and responses occurring in the chosen settings between sets of participants were systematically written down. Unstructured interviews and informal discussions were made with randomly selected commuter drivers and/or conductors and commuters and recorded to find out their motivation, intentions for and interpretations of the requests and responses that ensued from the interactions on the buses.

#### WHY USE POLITENESS STRATEGIES?

The use of direct requests (commands) often creates an active confrontation situation, both on the rank and on the bus. The confrontation

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4 The relative markedness of linguistic choices is interaction-type specific. A salient aspect of Myers-Scotton's markedness model is her negotiation principle (see Myers-Scotton, 1983, 116). In this study, negotiation refers to the making of rational goal-oriented linguistic (and extra-linguistic) choices as a means of achieving a speaker's specific desired discourse goal.

arises from the clash between what the bus crew may perceive as valid requests for action and their prerogative, on the one hand, and what the passengers see as their willingness and rights, on the other hand. As Dzameshie (1995, 206) notes, “within a given discourse, participants’ tacit knowledge of their rights and obligations partly influences their linguistic choices”. If a conductor, for instance, makes a direct request that s/he expects (a) passenger(s) to comply with but receives a negative response or a rejection, s/he may feel challenged or affronted by the response. Invariably, the conductor, in the same discourse or in subsequent contacts may utilize politeness strategies (PSs) to soften his/her requests or to achieve compliance and/or co-operation.

#### TYPES OF POLITENESS STRATEGIES

The most recurrent PS used by commuter crew is the use of morpho-syntactic constructions. In the commission of face threatening actions (FTAs subsequently), the hortative inflection *nga-* ‘let’ together with the inclusive 1st person plural subject pro-form *-ti-* ‘we/us’ occur very frequently as mitigating markers. The use of the hortative marker and the inclusive pro-form is not only meant to encourage the passengers to respond favourably, but to promote cooperation between the speaker and his/her hearers. Consider the following examples:

1. *Mungabatanidzewo here kumashure uko?*  
‘Could you people at the back seat put together your bus fare and pass it forward please?’
2. *Ngatibatanidzei.*  
‘Let us put our bus fare together and pass it forward.’
3. *Ngatisebedzanei, tikwane tose.*  
‘Let us push so that all of us may fit.’  
The meaning of the pro-form *-ti-* would be:  
-Speaker  
But in the interest of the speaker  
+ Addressee

The principle function of the use of *-ti-* is to get others to do an action that is in the speaker’s own interest. In this case, the use of both the hortative marker and the pro-form has a mitigating effect. The interviews that were made with some conductors reveal that this linguistic choice is prompted by previous experiences of rejected requests. In some instances, the mitigation is emphasized either by accounting as in, *tikwane tose* in (3) above, or by ‘style shifting’ (Pearson, 1988, 79). Style shifting includes the marked use of relational terms of address and slang terms, and as Brown and Levinson (1978, 116) claim, by using slang, the speaker evokes all associations and attitudes that he and the hearer share towards the

desired goal. Social distance is reduced. The most commonly used terms are *muface* 'my acquaintance' and *mudhara* 'pal but, lit: old man', in the utterances below:

4. *Pinda tiende muface.*

'Get in, so that we go, my acquaintance.'

5. *Handei kuback seat mudhara.*

'Let us go and sit at the back, pal.'

Young male conductors in addressing male passengers that they perceive as their age-mates invariably use these slang terms. As Lederer (1997, 5) observes, "slang allows us to break the ice and shift into a more casual and friendly gear." In this case, the conductors use slang to evoke solidarity while negotiating their own returns. The slang terms also enable the conductors to invoke and manipulate the traditional assumptions about manhood that are shared by them and the hearers. Men are expected to take risks and to endure pain and rough conditions. Therefore male passengers tend to respond favourably to the requests to travel as standing passengers, squeezed in corners or seating on falling seats, for fear of bringing their masculinity into question. Female conductors do not use the same politeness markers as their male counterparts to refer to male passengers nor do they use any for female passengers. Similarly, male conductors do not use slang terms for mitigating their requests to women passengers. Instead, they use kin terms as relational social honorifics. For example, consider the requests:

4. (a) *Pindai tiende sisi*

'Get in so that we may go, sister.'

5. (a) *Handei kuback seat amai.*

'Let us go and sit at the back, mother.'

Although, denotationally, the terms *sisi* 'sister' and *amai* 'mother' are used to designate family relations among relatives, honorifically, however, they (and others) are used connotationally to maintain and enrich social interaction among both related and unrelated participants. Commenting on the use of relational social honorifics in Jordanian Arabic, Farghal and Shakir (1994, 242) said, "in fact, the best way to get the attention of a stranger on the street is to use an honorific kin term". In the examples of utterances given in 4 (a) and 5 (a), above, the utterances are doubly marked for politeness by using them along with politeness formulas. Kin terms are used as politeness-enhancers. In all the cases that the researcher observed the kin terms being used, the speakers' intended goals were achieved with minimum rejection or huff.

The commuter crew also softens their requests by using other slang terms that connote a higher status for the people so addressed. The term *varungu* 'lit: white people' is used to refer to both female and male

passengers, but *shasha*, ‘prominent person’, *bigaz*, ‘lit: big’ and *mudhara*, ‘lit: old man’ refer to men only. The following are examples of requests in which these slang words are used:

6. *Farirai mota yenyu varungu. Ngatipindei tibva tasimuka. Parirenyatwa, Avondale neGreencroft zvose. Zvamatouya kudayi zvatonaka varungu. Tatoraramaso. One asara! Pinda tichienda shasha. Ngatisebedzaneika bigaz.*

‘Get onto your bus happily our employers. Let’s get on so that we leave immediately. All those who go to Parirenyatwa, Avondale and Greencroft please get in. We are happy to see you our employers. We depend on you for survival. One last person! Jump in so that we leave immediately pal. Lets push so that we all fit, big one.’

7. [At a rank in the city centre: a young male tout – to a well-dressed elderly man who appears to be a regular patron] *Maswera sei mudhara? Mava kumbonozororaka? Mirai zvenyu ipapo mugokwira iri kuuya iyo.* [To the conductor of an approaching bus] *Kumberi kune munhu kudhara Masvingo.* [To the regular patron] *Pindai mberi mudhara.* [The man sits on the front seat and the tout hangs around chatting to him. The man gives the tout a twenty-dollar note and he disappears quickly to control the other passengers].

[At a rank in the city centre: a young male tout – to a well dressed elderly man who appears to be a regular patron] ‘How was your day old man? I see you are now returning home, aren’t you? You may wait for a while then you will get onto that bus coming after this one. [To the conductor of the approaching bus] The front seat is reserved for someone, hey Masvingo. [To the regular patron] Take the front seat old man.

Mawadza (2000b, 95) rightly observes that,

Passengers on a commuter bus are often referred to as *varungu*, because they are regarded as employers. This stems from the fact that white people were, for the most part, the employers in the colonial period. Thus, without ‘varungu’ on the commuter bus, there would be no business. The term *murungu* ‘lit: white person’ is sometimes also used to flatter an individual in order to elicit favours. Those who use the term in this manner expect that the person referred to will feel flattered enough to offer a big tip for the service rendered. This is because, in the colonial period, the term was associated with the popular image of the white person as being wealthy and powerful, and, therefore, likely to give generous tips . . .

The utterances in (6) and (7) function as formal casual requests, while those in (4) and (5) function in informal requests. The formality parameter is often governed by extralinguistic factors; for example, the uttering of (6) or (7) is usually prompted by the fact that the addressee is well-dressed and assumes an air of importance, thus deserving the term

*murungu, shasha, bigaz* or *mudhara*, instead of *muface*. The terms *bigaz, shasha* and *mudhara* raise the hearer to a status where complaining, overtly rejecting the tout's request or failing to offer him a tip embarrasses or belittles the hearer. Thus, the use of these terms, in addition to evoking politeness, guarantees compliance and accommodation.

In addition to style shifting, the commuter crew uses direct imperatives qualified by accounted statements as a politeness device. Consider examples 8-10 below where the account is in bold in each case.

8. *Musamire pamusiwo, driver haazoona zvakanaka.*

'Do not stand on the door way because you will obstruct the driver.'

9. *Sebedzanai, vamwe vakwanewo.*

'Please, push backwards so that there is space for other people.'

10. *Vari kudzika paPolice fambai muuye mberi, vamwe vanonoka kubasa.*

'Those disembarking at the Police bus stop, move forward please to avoid delays that make others late for work.'

Three forms of responses were observed. To the requests in (8)-(10), silence was the most common form of putting off the request if the bus was full and was obvious that there was nowhere to move to. Simpson (1989, 171) and Labov and Fanshel (1977, 63) concur that silence is one form of resisting expressing agreement and disagreement with the speaker. Interviews conducted with both male and female passengers revealed that silence is motivated, either by the desire to avoid dispute with the crew or the fear of being attacked or embarrassed if the dispute degenerates into a verbal or physical fight. Sometimes, if a conductor, for example, is annoyed by the noncompliance, he may either repeat the request or challenge the passenger(s) concerned to drop off the bus at the point of dispute. To avoid the latter, passengers may reinforce their refusal with an accounting as in (11)-(13), in bold.

11. *Hapana kwokuenda, bhazi rakazara.*

'There is nowhere to move to since the bus is already full.'

12. *Tichisebedzana tichienda kupi iro bhazi risingatamuke?*

'There is nowhere to push to because the bus doesn't stretch, does it?'

13. *Handikwanise kufamba, ndine mwana mukuwasha.*

'I cannot move (while the bus is moving) because I have a small child with me, sir.'

When a conductor isolates an individual whom he perceives as threatening his status and rights by maintaining the challenge, the conductor may counter the challenge by exercising his power to order the passenger to get off the bus. The present researcher witnessed several incidences where either a passenger, (male or female) refuses to obey the conductor's order to get off the bus and vicious insults are exchanged



all the way to the passenger's destination, or the conductor stops the bus in order to physically drag the passenger off the bus. In five such cases observed by the present researcher, three of them involved intervention by the rest of the passengers to defend the passenger(s) implicated. In each case, the conductor succumbed to the 'mass' protest, which ranged from questioning his action, perceived as threatening the negative 'face' of the passengers, to threats of performing a citizen's arrest. This act of solidarity by commuters is most common where the implicated passenger is a woman, an elderly person or one in the company of friends or relatives.

Further, polite questions are widely used as requests by bus commuter conductors, as seen in (14) below.

(14a) *Tabhadhara tose here?*

(Have we all paid our fares?)

(14b) *Pane vasina matiketi here?*

(Is there anyone who has no bus ticket?)

(14c) *Mungaitewo here mari yakachinjika?*

(Would you please have small denominations?)

The utterances in (14) above function as a polite reminder and a polite question, respectively. For instance, a conductor to an absent-minded passenger, thus reminding her/him to pay the bus fare may utter (14a) and (14b). Interviews with some conductors revealed that many passengers tend to present large bills, e.g. a \$100 note when paying for a trip costing only \$20. While passengers believe that the bus crew is obliged to find change for whatever amount is presented, the latter insist on the correct fare or small denominators. This conflict of obligations and expectations often result in confrontations, hence the need to use polite questions as in (14c) as a PS.

## CONCLUSION

The findings and explanations presented in this article revealed the predominance of polite requests as a speech act in commuter omnibus discourse in Harare. This analysis reaffirms the usefulness of a multi-dimensional model of discourse in which a speaker's intent is primary. The intent may derive from, among other things, more static situational and relational constraints. In the commuter bus setting in Harare the interactional relations between the commuter crew and passengers is very volatile, hence requests tend to be FTAs. In dealing with passengers the commuter crew negotiates both co-operation (solidarity) and compliance by adopting PSs.

The importance of PSs in requests is explainable in terms of the illocution. First, the commuter crew considers them the most effective

communicative acts needed to make passengers perform or not perform certain actions. In seeking a favourable hearing for its requests, the crew employs various linguistic forms that include inclusive proforms, relational terms and style shifting. However, other factors such as the perceived age, social class and gender of the addressee(s), the sex of the conductor, especially, and the cultural norms also determine the linguistic choices relating to requests and the responses to these requests.

Second, the conflict between the commuter crew and the passengers on perceived rights and obligations also set the tone for politeness in commuter bus discourse. By forgoing their inherent rights and privileges associated with their role as transport 'managers' the commuter crew strengthens their negotiation power, preserves face, averts altercations with passengers, maintains their clientele and achieve their discourse goal.

Since the emphasis here has been on FTA-related PSs, face preservation is an important motivation for the use of PSs by the commuter omnibus crew. However, the present research also recognizes that as rational goal-oriented speakers, the commuter crew uses PSs primarily as strategic linguistic choices that they "skillfully manipulate in attempts to achieve their discourse goal" (Pearson, 1988, 71) of gaining favourable responses to their messages. In other words, face preservation is only a means to an end: the attainment of the speakers' discourse goal.

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