

## Some Reflections on Politeness Strategies among Shona Speaking Couples of Zimbabwe

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**ABSTRACT** Gender equality has been a topical issue internationally with many organizations advocating equality between males and females as crucial for development but, ironically, cases of gender-based violence are on the rise in African societies. Based on the hypothesis that mis-communication is one of the major causes of gender-based violence, this paper explores politeness strategies used by Shona speaking couples. The conflict resolution strategies employed include the use of proverbs, modal verbs, enclitics, tag questions, totems, hedges, silence and the inclusive pronunciation. The researchers seek to demonstrate culture-specific polite strategies that have the potential to curtail aggression between interactional parties, especially how they enhance smooth communication, obviate crisis and disruption and maintain social equilibrium and friendly relations. This paper underscores the importance of communication and recourse to traditional linguistic practices, as strategies for reducing cases of domestic violence involving spouses.

### INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe, since the attainment of political independence from white minority rule in 1980, significant progress has been made towards providing the legislative, planning and implementation frameworks for gender equality in many areas except that of the family. The family has been characterized by conflict, violence and insecurity which in some ways stifle socio-cultural development. Gender-based violence and specifically, domestic violence which involves spouses has been a thorn in the flesh with statistics rising every day. The gender equality discourse has recently taken the toll globally with many international and local organizations calling for the need to ensure that women are protected and not discriminated against. Since 1980, significant progress has been made towards promoting awareness in the areas of Gender in Governance, Education and Training, Productive Resources and Employment, Gender in Health and HIV and AIDS as well as Gender, Environment and Climate Change in Zimbabwe. This progress has, however, not been complemented by peaceful progress in the family domain given the staggering figures on divorce and domestic violence. It is, therefore, crucial to examine why this is happening despite measures that have

been put in place and to find ways to ensure a smooth transformation of the lives of women in post-independent Zimbabwe.

### Objectives

The objectives of this paper are two-fold: firstly, to expand the debate on the causes of domestic violence and identify culturally inappropriate language use in conflict situations as one of the main causes. Secondly, to demonstrate through examples drawn from existing studies on hedging strategies in Shona (Gotosa 2010; Chivero 2012; Mhlanga 2012) that there are politeness strategies within the Shona culture that can be relied on by females in cross-gender interactions to reduce incidences of violence. The politeness strategies are examined using analytical tools from Politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987) and *Africana Womanist* (Hudson-Weems 2009) theories.

### Background on Gender and Domestic Violence

Policies and frameworks have been developed and put in place to ensure and foster peace and equality in the family domain. Statistics on cases of gender-based violence seen particularly in acts of domestic violence involving spouses

interprets discourse patterns in women and men as a reflection of women's subordination to men within the context of patriarchy. Thus women are seen as using language which is powerless and deficient. This perception has led to the thinking that women should change the way they speak and 'speak like men' for them to be effective (Uchida 1992: 550).

Chivero (2012), in a study of discourse in parliament, finds that females speak like men in several parliamentary exchanges. This observation is significant for this study because the researchers maintain the hypothesis that due to the whole-sale embrace of the concept of gender and equality, women may adopt linguistic resources believed to be authoritative and assertive in the workplace, for use in the home setting which often results in conflict. Not all studies on women's language, however, regard women's use of polite strategies such as hedges, tag questions, silence, modal verbs etc. as deficient. Uchida (1992: 2) and Sunderland (2008), for example, criticize Lakoff's regard of women's speech as deficient and ineffective as not being based on a truly neutral standard, but from the male norm and hence not applicable to all situations.

Gotosa (2010) examines the use of tag questions by Shona male and female speakers and notes that they not only signify lack of authority but are multifunctional, serving as facilitative, confrontational, manipulative and confirmation strategies as well depending on the situation. Other scholars have identified linguistic differences between male and female use of language and regard the differences to be a result of cultural variations, due to socialisation (Maltz andorker 1982). This approach emphasizes the idea that women and men are socialized into different socio-linguistic sub-cultures, and so the differences in the linguistic strategies they use should be interpreted as reflecting and maintaining gender specific sub-cultures. So if women use polite resources and men do not, it means men have a different way of communicating that enables them to achieve their own goals. Women and men thus 'learn to do different things with words in conversation' (Uchida 1992: 548). This suggests that men and women's linguistic strategies are different but equally effectiveness.

Scholars such as Fraiser (1990), Holmes (1995), Eelen (2001) and Watts (2007) have approached the issue of gender differentiated lin-

guistic features from a politeness angle and view differences as resulting from differences in the exercise of politeness. They argue that in comparison to male speakers, females are more likely to express positive politeness and to use mitigating strategies in order to avoid or weaken threats to an interlocutor's face (Brown and Levinson 1987). Holmes (1995: 3) is of the opinion that men may not use politeness strategies more because of their tendency to orient towards the 'referential' functions of language (conveying information, facts or content). But, women may use language to show politeness as they are more concerned with the affective rather than the referential aspect of utterances (the use of language to convey feelings and reflect social relationships). Besides, polite behaviour displayed through language should not just be judged as a weakness, until it fails to achieve the speaker's goals but face saving (Fraiser 1990), mitigating strategies (Eelen 2000) and strategic conflict avoidance strategies (Watts 2007).

Yet, other scholars have called for sensitivity to context when analysing language and gender issues. One such scholar is Hudson-Weems (2009) who named and defined the *Africana Womanist* perspective. *Africana Womanism* is an Afro-centric theory with eighteen descriptors which include family centred, self-namer, self-definer, genuine sisterhood, adaptable, respectable, authentic, respectful to elders, spiritual, ambitious, nurturing, mothering, whole, flexible role player, male compatible and strong. The fundamental foundation for this theory is in the African traditional philosophy and values. It is not completely divorced from some of the earlier theories discussed above. Just like the politeness and cultural difference approaches, *Africana Womanism* appreciates the existence of gender differences, but views them positively as emanating from cultural up-bringing. *Africana Womanism* actually contradicts the assumptions of *Deficient* and *Dominance* approaches which seem to suggest that women are somehow disadvantaged, in that they have to use ineffective language and language that reflects their inferiority.

The current paper argues that women may not need to change communication styles in the home, but utilise them as a way of resolving conflicts. Culture may determine who uses what strategy and that has nothing to do with the value of the polite linguistic strategies. The ques-

a suggestion. The tag, which transforms the instruction into a polite suggestion, persuades the husband to comply.

In (2) and (3) the tag serves to soften criticism of the husband. The wife is criticizing or actually accusing or censoring the husband for keeping all the money. The use of the tag, however, changes the direct criticism into something like a suggestion that may be if the husband had not kept all the money some of it would not have been stolen. This way, the tag softens the attack and is likely to disarm the husband hence preventing him from retaliating or defending himself. According to Gotosa (2010), the toned down criticism weakens the hearer who normally is forced to agree with the speaker.

Tag questions thus become soft weapons for women to manoeuvre through the repressive situation (cultural constraints) and achieve their goals. By so doing, a correction is assured through the utterance as well as good relations. For politeness reasons, one has to exercise restraint especially in situations such as the above where, if a direct attack is used, it embarrasses the listener (the husband) and may result in a tense atmosphere. Leech (1983) notes that the use of tag questions is meant to establish and maintain comity. Comity is the ability of participants in a social interaction to engage in an atmosphere of relative harmony. Even though stereotypical thinking would associate the use of polite resources such as tags with women. Gotosa (2010) and Mhlanga (2012) have observed tag questions being used by males in positions of authority for purposes of maintaining harmony with their subordinates. Tag questions, since they are polite forms, may not be authoritative language in terms of locution, but they are authoritative in an embedded way since they are a means of subtly attacking the interlocutor.

#### *Use of Enclitics e.g. -wo and -ka*

The enclitics *-ka* and *-wo* are normally used when speakers want their hearers to know that they (the speakers) have so much confidence that the hearers will agree with them. The use of these enclitics results in the hearers finding it difficult to do anything else but comply. According to Gotosa (2010), speakers often use these forms to persuade hearers to agree with them. The enclitics *-wo* and *-ka* that have been added to the interjectives *handiti* and *nhai* (is that so)

in examples (1), (2) and (3) make the statements more of pleas meant to force agreement. These enclitics go a long way in softening imperatives and commands and preventing a violent response.

#### *Modal Verbs*

According to Mhlanga (2012), modal verbs function as hedges in Shona; serving multiple functions which include toning down imperatives and commands. Mhlanga cites *pamwe* (maybe), and *tinogona*, (we can) as verbs that can be used to avoid the face threatening act of commanding or openly directing someone to do something. Women may use these devices not because they are subordinates, but because they are useful strategies that can also even be used by males to make strong statements tentative. Mhlanga (2012), for example, found out that these strategies are often used by male nurses to ensure compliance from patients.

#### *Inclusive Pronoun ti- (we)*

The woman in example (1) strategically uses the pronoun *to-* in *totonotenga* (we have to go and buy) as a persuasive strategy. It does not necessarily mean they are going to buy together. According to Chivero (2012: 174), the 'we' pronoun can be used to emphasize unity in dealing with issues and stresses the need for doing things together. If a woman emphasizes the fact that as husband and wife they should work together it helps to coerce the partner into agreeing. The principal function of the directive 'we' is to get others to perform an action that is in the speaker's own interest. The wife can tell the husband to buy or tell the husband that she is going to buy what she wants but, like Venar (1994) observes, that does not show value for harmonious relationships as demanded by our culture and may result in conflict which may lead to violence.

#### *Avoiding Direct Reference*

According to Chivero (2012), using a proper name is the most explicit way of addressing, or referring to a person in a very direct way which often contributes to competitiveness and hence conflict, especially between spouses where the male regards himself as the head. A wife can

the female speaker is considered outrageous and not expected of women. As a result, the woman loses face. Such behaviour often leads to violent responses from male counterparts.

#### *Use of Proverbs*

The use of proverbs which many scholars claim often appeals to members of the culture can be an effective conflict resolution strategy. Shona proverbs such as *mhosva haitongwi nedemo* (a case is not solved by an axe) (Mandova and Chingombe 2013: 106) can be employed to pacify angry husbands instead of fuelling the anger through confrontational language. To be able to prevent irrational behaviour is to be in control of the situation and not to be disempowered. That a woman should use a veiled way to attack even her husband as in (3) is proper in the context of Shona culture where violent language is despised. Contrary to Tom and Musingafi's (2013) claims that men are allowed to beat women, amicable ways of solving conflict are much appraised in the Shona culture where raw displays of power are very much despised (Gelfand, 1999). According to Uchida (1992), females are actually socialized to criticize others in acceptable ways.

### DISCUSSION

Even though Chitau (2002) notes that women in the Shona culture are generally expected to play a submissive role, this submissiveness should not always be negatively interpreted. One does not always have to be dominant in order to be heard. Some people may think that to challenge the power of men who are said to be causing domestic violence, women should, 'identify and transform rules which govern women's behaviour and which brought patriarchal order into existence' (Spender 1980: 89). Women in the Shona culture, however, do not need to change the cultural rules. They have linguistic devices at their disposal, such as tags which can be used to soften attacks or criticisms as well as force the males into compliance. By using the polite linguistic resources, the woman still maintains her position within the gender hierarchy, showing respect for the man yet attacking or criticizing him at the same time while still retaining male companionship.

In example (3), the woman behaves like a man, and yet in Shona people should have *nyadzi*

(shame) and avoid talking about of sexual matters explicitly in public. Besides, interrupting males is a violation of one of the virtues of ideal womanhood which requires women to abstain from dominating men in speech. Thus a woman can lose respect through acting like men and yet, according to Hudson-Weems (2009: 69), women do not need to be irrational and aggressive in order to be heard or achieve intended goals. They do not need 'a separate space to nourish their individual needs and goals' (Hudson-Weems 2009: 69) as seen by many women who opt for divorce than marriage, but to strategically utilize linguistic choices available to them for conflict resolution. Communicative competency should make one realize that direct verbalization of sensitive or taboo issues can unleash violence. What the male speaker said may not be acceptable but that does not justify display of *kushaya unhu* (lack of morals).

According to Chivero (2012), due to cultural considerations women are expected to use language in a manner that reflects *unhu* (good behaviour). It would, therefore, be unexpected of a woman to out rightly attack others especially her spouse in public. Through tagging, women play the dual role of behaving submissively according to the demands of their culture and still communicate their goals in order to fulfil their responsibility as mothers. As Hudson-Weems (2009: 69) observed, the woman considers the responsibility that she has for the family as paramount and so 'she creates a private space for herself' in the midst of 'congestion'. Uchida (1992) claims that women's talk is derided and trivialized by men, in the Shona society as shown in this data, women actually earn themselves respect and power through appropriate use of language in ways that display *unhu* (good behavior). According to Eckert and McConell-Ginet (2003: 92), 'the force of an utterance is not manifest in the utterance itself, but in the ways in which it is received and interpreted' and 'on what people do with it in subsequent interactions. Power is fluid and enacted within discourse not in the semantic value of words chosen.'

In (3) the woman uses a tag as a strategy to solicit information and to provoke conversation. Fishman (1983) says that conversations between the sexes sometimes fail, not because of anything inherent in the way women talk, but because men may not respond. So, women may end up asking questions to try to get men to

While the Shona society is patriarchal it is not homogenous. Patriarchal values are not embraced by everyone the same way. Shona culture possesses much that is worth retaining and preserving. The politeness strategies discussed above are some of the values and sensibilities of the Shona society which, in our view, are worth retaining. Gender has a very specific role to play in our society and so, there is no need for women to scoff at the concept of being a woman, wife and a mother. Women are powerful in their femininity. A good woman knows how to wield her power without challenging the male domain.

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