

Research Article

# Im/Politeness in Advertising Herbal Medicines in Cameroon

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## Abstract

The use of politeness and/or impoliteness strategies can hardly be standardized across cultures and communication settings. The present paper aims to examine the pragmatic use and functions of (im) politeness in advertising herbal medicines in Cameroon. Data were collected, mostly on-bus, from twenty-three herbal medicine sellers through recording, observation, interview and note-taking. The elicited discourses are analysed based on the brown-levinsonian politeness theory and Culpeper's taxonomy of impoliteness. The results show that positive politeness (greeting, wish, thanking, and endearment expression), negative politeness (apologising, use of please and indirectness) and bald on record politeness are the main politeness strategies used in the herbal medicine sellers' advertisement discourse. Besides, mock impoliteness speeches like teasing and jocular expression of power over H, and Meta impoliteness strategies including sarcasm are used to draw the attention of the potential customers. A number of interlanguage pragmatic features (like the odd use of apology) are observed in the herbal medicine sellers' discourse. The paper concludes by highlighting the important function of certain impoliteness characteristics that have been identified. However, the impoliteness present in the speech acts of advertisers does not manifest as aggressive or confrontational behaviour, as one might infer from the impoliteness taxonomy. Instead, it is characterized as playful abuse intended to foster a sense of camaraderie.

## Keywords

Advertising, (Im) Politeness, Herbal Medicine, Cameroon, Interlanguage Pragmatics

## 1. Introduction

Politeness is a pragmatic tool that fuels communication and smoothens social interaction. According to Leech, politeness is a type of behaviour that allows communication participants to engage in a social interaction in an atmosphere of relative harmony [13]. What would a communication without harmony look like? The term 'interaction' might be preferable to 'communication' in situations where disharmonious exchanges may occur. In other words, where there is politeness we can talk of communication and where there is impoliteness we preferably talk of interaction, without ignoring that interaction suits both politeness and impoliteness situations. If

politeness permits to engage into harmony (as claims Leech), impoliteness, a term which is said to be the contrary of politeness, would more or less obviously cause disharmony [13]. Impoliteness, to Culpeper "... comes about when: (1) the speaker communicates face-attack intentionally, or (2) the hearer perceives and/or constructs behaviour as intentionally face-attacking, or a combination of (1) and (2)" [6]. Viewing politeness and impoliteness as such, advertisement discourses of herbal medicine sellers in Cameroon display both features of politeness and features of impoliteness. The present study aims to examine the pragmatic use and functions of polite and

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impolite speech acts of the herbal medicine sellers in advertising their products. What type of politeness strategies do the sellers use in advertising their products? What impoliteness strategies do they use? What are the pragmatic functions of politeness and impoliteness in their advertisements? These are the questions the paper seeks to answer. Also, it is imperative for this research to be carried out because it can help identify potential ethical concerns, protect consumers from misleading claims, and ensure responsible marketing practices within the herbal medicine industry, especially given the potential for consumers to misinterpret “natural” claims as inherently safe and effective, even when the evidence may not support this perception. Thus, in addition to this introductory part, this paper has three main parts: (2) theoretical framework and literature review, (3) methodology and (4) data presentation, analysis and discussion of findings.

## 2. Methodology

Data for the current research are collected from herbal medicine sellers through recording, observation, interview and note-taking. Twenty-three advertisement discourses were recorded. The speeches of the herbal medicine sellers are recorded when they are on the bus to advertise their products. At a bus stop, some of the herbal medicine sellers are asked some questions (unstructured interview). Observation is just like a secondary instrument to the interview and recording instruments. When recording, and especially when interviewing the respondents, note-taking was a technique that permitted the researcher to jot some details down. The data were gathered within a period of seven years (November 2014 to January 2022). The data are collected in buses belonging to Touristique Express, Moghamo Express, Guarantee Express, Amour Mezam Express, Vatican Express and Overline travel agencies in Cameroon. In these buses, the herbal medicine sellers use four different languages (Fulfulde, Pidgin English, French and English) depending on the part of the countries where the buses and passengers are found at the moment of the discourse. The discourses (recorded in Fulfulde, Pidgin English and French) are translated into English before analysing. On the Maroua-Garoua-Ngaoundere-Bertoua trajectory, the Fulfulde language is permanently used and French occasionally. On the Yaoundé-Douala and Yaounde-Bafoussam trajectories, the French language is mainly used. On the Douala-Bamenda, Pidgin English is mainly used and English and French are occasionally used. The multilingual and multicultural facet of Cameroon is pictured in the herbal medicine sellers’ discourses. As observed while collecting data, these sellers who are only males have some common factors: they have the same products and the same source of production of the medicines.

## 3. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The present paper is guided by Blum-Kulka politeness theory and Culpeper’s taxonomy of impoliteness. Each of these theories is presented in turn below, before the review of some works [4].

### 3.1. The Brown-Levinsonian Face-Saving Theory

Blum-Kulka face saving is one of the earliest and most influential theories of pragmatic analysis of politeness [4]. This theory aims to explain how individuals maintain and negotiate face-threatening acts (FTAs) while engaging in social interactions. Face, in this context, refers to an individual’s public self-image or desired social identity.

The theory proposes that individuals have two types of face needs: positive face and negative face. Positive face is the desire to be appreciated, approved, and respected by others, while negative face is the desire for autonomy, freedom of action, and the absence of imposition. When an FTA occurs, it poses a threat to these face wants.

Blum-Kulka suggests that individuals employ the following politeness strategies to mitigate the potential threat to face [4].

- 1) Bald on-record politeness strategy: This strategy involves direct performance of the FTA without any attempt to mitigate face threat. It is typically used in situations where the cost of politeness is low, such as when the relationship between the participants is strong or when urgency requires directness.
- 2) Positive politeness strategy: This strategy aims to affirm and enhance the positive face of the hearer. It involves using compliments, expressions of solidarity, and showing friendliness to reduce the face threat.
- 3) Negative politeness strategy: it focuses on respecting and addressing the negative face of the hearer. It involves using indirect language, hedging, and politeness markers to minimize the imposition and maintain the hearer’s autonomy or freedom of action.
- 4) Off-record strategy: Off-record strategy is all about using hints or implying the desired meaning without explicitly stating it. It allows individuals to avoid direct confrontation and maintain plausible deniability.
- 5) There is another politeness strategy, less commonly used: the No FTA politeness strategy. This strategy consists in not saying a word (not saying the Face Threatening Act). It is the most polite strategy but there is less chance of attaining the objective or getting the intention fulfilled.

The choice of politeness strategy depends on various factors, including social distance between participants, power dynamics, severity of the FTA, cultural norms, and context of interaction.

### 3.2. Culpeper's Taxonomy of Impoliteness

The taxonomy of impoliteness developed by Culpeper (a) and Culpeper (b), takes its origin from the face-saving politeness theory propounded by Blum-Kulka [5, 6, 4]. As presented in the preceding section, politeness theory stipulates that there are five politeness super-strategies (e.g. bald on record politeness, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record politeness and No FTA politeness). Culpeper (a) and Culpeper (b), leans on this framework to propose that impoliteness can also be addressed through similar taxonomy that addresses acts of impoliteness, Faissam & Etapa forthcoming) [5, 6, 8]. The taxonomy of impoliteness by is grounded by Culpeper (a) in pragmatic principles that are presented below [5]. Before presenting the impoliteness taxonomy, it is important to note that Culpeper (b) identifies some Meta strategies of impoliteness which include sarcasm or mock politeness [6].

- 1) Bald-on-record impoliteness: the impolite act is performed in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way in situations where face is not irrelevant or minimised. This is intentional attack to the hearer's face.
- 2) Positive impoliteness: the use of linguistic or non-linguistic strategies that intend to damage the addressee's positive face wants. We can cite acts as ignoring, snubbing the addressee, excluding the addressee from an activity, dissociating from the addressee, being disinterested, making feel uncomfortable, using inappropriate identity markers, seeking disagreement, calling the other names (using derogatory nominations).
- 3) Negative impoliteness: the use of strategies intended to damage the negative politeness face wants. According to Culpeper (a), negative impoliteness acts include frightening (instilling a belief that an action detrimental to the other will occur), condescending, scorning or ridiculing (emphasizing one's power), being contemptuous, not treating the other seriously, belittling the other, invading the other's space, associating the other with negative aspect, putting the other's indebtedness on record, interrupting [5].
- 4) Off-record impoliteness: this impoliteness strategy can only be identified through the interpretation of the intended meaning in an act. The act is performed by means of an implicature.
- 5) Withhold politeness: withholding politeness refusing to show politeness in a situation where politeness is obviously expected [7].

### 3.3. Review of Relevant Works

Since the publication of the influential politeness-related book by Blum-Kulka, an elaboration and extension of the work they published in 1978, works in the domain of pragmatic politeness proliferated [4].

In Fraser's paper, one of the earliest politeness studies after Blum-Kulka examines the relationship between deference and

linguistic forms [11, 6]. These researchers argue that linguistic forms can convey deference or politeness in different contexts, providing insights into the connection between language and politeness. According to Leech, based on Blum-Kulka's theory, he explores politeness and proposes a politeness principle that incorporates both positive and negative politeness strategies and claims that politeness has a role to play in different speech acts and social contexts [13, 4]. According to Ide, cultural and social contexts are of paramount importance in understanding politeness [12]. She introduces the concepts of "formal forms" and "discernment" as key aspects of politeness that are often overlooked in cross-cultural studies. Socio-biological factors like gender and age also have significant impact on the way politeness is framed in communication. In this line, Mills examines the intersection of gender and politeness [14]. She investigates how gender norms and expectations influence politeness behaviours and the ways in which politeness is enacted differently by men and women. Mills concludes that, though they can also be extremely impolite in some contexts, women are generally more polite than men [14]. As the field of linguistic politeness witnesses a series of substantial publications, Watts sees the necessity of establishing a comprehensive overview of politeness theories, including an examination of Blum-Kulka's framework [18, 4]. He expands on their ideas and introduces other influential theories, such as the concept of positive and negative politeness strategies and politic behaviour.

Other scholars believe that it is biased to focus only on politeness without giving a little importance to its counterpart, impoliteness. In this respect, Culpeper (a), delved into the study of impoliteness as a separate concept from politeness [5]. He argues that impoliteness is not simply the absence of politeness but rather a distinct communicative strategy. His publication has contributed to the development of a more nuanced understanding of interpersonal communication. Ide looked in the same direction and addressed "Impoliteness in Interaction" [12]. He explores impoliteness as a distinct communicative phenomenon, examining various forms of impoliteness, such as teasing, sarcasm, and aggression (what Culpeper (a) refers to as meta impoliteness acts), and analyzes how they function in different social contexts [5]. According to Brown, impoliteness is not just impoliteness as could be merely observed but has other linguistic functions that go beyond the mere interpretation [2]. In this vein, Faissam & Etapa (Forthcoming) asserts that "impolite acts do not always aim at building conflict between S and H but, in some contexts, building social harmony and climates of joyfulness" [8]. This supports Faissam's claim that there are impolite politeness and polite impoliteness [9].

Politeness varies according to culture and according to the area where it is studied, taking into consideration the varied contexts of communication. Many scholars have carried out research on politeness in different cultures Mulo, Tabe and Faissam and others across cultures Blum-Kulka and Ogiermann [15, 17, 10, 4, 16].

## 4. Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The data elicited for the purpose of the current study show that there are both politeness and impoliteness in the herbal medicine sellers' speech acts. However, impoliteness is not as frequently used as politeness. The main super strategies that are observed in the discourses are the bald-on record politeness, positive politeness, negative politeness and less frequently impoliteness. Let us consider the illustrations below.

- (1) Ladies and gentlemen, here is the product, please stop by at the counter. (Bald on record politeness)
- (2) Hello dear travellers, welcome to Bafoussam our town your town. (positive politeness)
- (3) Please sir can you tell us if this product is good or not?

(negative politeness)

- (4) Please don't go and talk beside your neighbour and he starts crying making you think that his father has passed away; but not knowing it is your stinking mouth that makes him cry. (Impoliteness)

The main characteristic of bald on record politeness in herbal medicine sellers' discourse is the use of imperative forms like *stop...* as in (1) above. The second illustration, (2), represents positive politeness, the third, (3), negative politeness and the fourth, (4), impoliteness. These super strategies occur at varied frequencies. The following table presents the frequencies of politeness and impoliteness super strategies in the speech acts of the respondents of the present investigation (the herbal medicine sellers).

**Table 1.** *Politeness and impoliteness strategies in the advertisement speeches of the herbal medicine sellers.*

Strategies	Bald-on record politeness	Positive politeness	Negative politeness	Impoliteness	Total
Number	22	40	22	8	92
Percentages	23.91	43.48	23.91	8.70	100

The table above displays that positive politeness is the most frequent strategy in the herbal medicine selling advertisement with a frequency of 43.48%. Positive politeness aims to make the hearer feel close, loved, familiar and appreciated [4]. Using this distance breaking strategy in advertising allows the herbal medicine sellers to access their hearers (customers) who will not be reluctant in communicating with them.

Bald-on record politeness and negative politeness, as it can be observed in the table above, occur at equivalent rates viz. 23.91%. Whilst bald-on record politeness is used in situations where face threat can be minimised (low degree of politeness needed), negative politeness is used in situations that require high reverence and respect (high degree of politeness needed). This notwithstanding, there are situational variabilities and individual variabilities that may impose the use of different strategies of politeness in the same context of communication [4]. Herbal medicine sellers may feel that there are hearers who like being given honour (from the first contact) and others prefer being treated as friends (in the same context) and thus change their communication strategies accordingly. Therefore, the balanced rate of bald on record politeness and negative politeness strategies can be accounted for by speakers' pragmatic preferences in conveying their ideas and also their pragmatic flexibility in changing strategies according to whom they are talking to.

Impoliteness is the least frequent pragmatic strategy used (8.70%) in the herbal medicine advertisement in Cameroon. If Culpeper (c) refers to impoliteness as conscious face attack, then it is not adequate to have up to 8.70% of impolite acts from

the advertisers [7]. Nonetheless, these are rather peculiar linguistic behaviours that have to be taken into consideration under interlanguage pragmatics. In Cameroon, jocular abuses, distance breaking teases, etc. are frequently used to create familiar ambiance between pragmatically distant interactants or people who meet for the first time. This is what Faissam (a) refers to as polite impoliteness [9]. In the same vein, as stated above, Faissam & Etapa (Forthcoming) points out that "impolite acts do not always aim at building conflict between S and H but, in some contexts, building social harmony and climates of joyfulness" [8]. Thus, these 8.70% of impoliteness-like acts are fake linguistic bullets that aim to create closeness between S and H. In general, what is referred to as impoliteness in the present study includes mock impoliteness speeches like teasing and jocular expression of power over H and meta impoliteness strategies including sarcasm that herbal medicine sellers use to draw the attention of the potential customers.

Let us consider the following utterances:

- (5) Please don't go and talk beside your neighbour and he starts crying making you think that his father has passed away. But not knowing it is your stinking mouth that makes him cry.

The negative description of the hearer's mouth as stinking is an impoliteness. However, since it is not true that there is a precise hearer who has a stinking mouth among the audience; this can be considered as mock impoliteness, because, instead of feeling embarrassed by the utterance, in reaction to that, the hearers burst out of laughter.

Positive politeness and negative politeness have sub strategies. For this reason, they are further discussed below.



#### 4.1. Sub-Strategies of Positive Politeness

The positive politeness strategies used by the respondents

of this study include greeting, expression of good wishes, thanking and the use of endearment terms. The frequencies of use of each sub strategy are presented in the table below.

**Table 2.** Sub-strategies of positive politeness.

Positive Strategies	Greeting	Wish	Thanking	Endearment	Total
Number	8	10	11	11	40
Percentages	20	25	27.5	27.5	100

Thanks giving and the use of endearment terms are the most frequently used sub strategies of positive politeness in the data elicited from the herbal medicine sellers. Each of these sub strategies make 27.5% of the negative politeness sub strategies as displayed in the table above. As far as greeting is concerned, it is generally used to introduce communication, in order not to brisk a hearer. With regards to the endearment terms, they are mostly used to create closeness or minimise distance between socially distant interactants. Let us observe the following instances:

(6) I'm sorry for the delay. I could have been here earlier but given the fact that there were some delays and too many demands I just boarded a car and by the way good afternoon to everyone and at the same time wish happy new week and above all wish safe journey! [...] I am Tata Guillaume, I am an advertising and sales agent for some herbal products.

(7) Good morning to everyone and welcome to Bafoussam. Time holds us by the throat and for that I will be quick. I'm here for those who feel pain in the rectum, in the anus.

(8) Medicine seller: Good afternoon to everyone and at the same time happy new week and above all safe journey!

Listeners: *no reply!*

Medicine seller: no answer? So! Thank you so much dear brothers and sisters and welcome to Touristique express Garoua.

In utterance (6) above, the greeting act is not used to introduce communication as it is traditionally supposed to be. The speaker greets after having made a long speech. As it can be observed, the speaker uses *greeting* to introduce himself or introduce his products to the audience. This does not meet the traditional needs of politeness. In this situation greeting is used for intentional politic purposes, to make people be in-

duced into listening to the advertisement. Although it has the same purpose, the use of greeting in (7) introduces the communication (as traditionally used) and occupies the normal pragma-syntactic position, at the beginning of the utterance.

The use of the endearment term *dear* in utterance (8) is very peculiar and specific to some contexts as that of advertising. First of all, the speaker calls his listeners *dear* whereas he does not know them. Secondly, the most intriguing aspect of the communication is that the hearers did not even mind to respond to his greeting and good wishes, but he could still have the zeal of referring to them as *dear brothers and sisters*. The politeness the speaker uses is a contextually-purposed politeness: all roads lead to Rome. This is mock politeness (the use polite words not for politeness sake).

In some utterances, sub-strategies of politeness are combined in a super strategy. Let us consider the following utterance in which *greeting sub strategy* and *the use of endearment term* are associated to convey positive politeness.

(9) Hello *dear* travellers, welcome to Bafoussam our town your town.

Utterances that contain more politeness sub strategies are more polite. This lengthens the structure of the utterance. With regard to long structures, Faissam (a) claims that the longer a structure the politer [9].

#### 4.2. Sub Strategies of Negative Politeness

With the same frequency as bald on record politeness (as shown in Table 1 above), negative politeness is (in a dead heat) the second most recurrent politeness strategy used by the herbal medicine sellers in Cameroon. Three main sub strategies of negative politeness are observed in the elicited data. These sub strategies are presented in the table below.

**Table 3.** Sub strategies of negative politeness.

Negative Strategies	Apologising	Use of Please	Indirectness	Total
Number	4	14	4	22

Negative Strategies	Apologising	Use of Please	Indirectness	Total
Percentages	18.18	63.64	18.18	100

The use of please is the most frequent sub strategy of negative politeness in the data elicited for the purpose of the present investigation. Generally, *please* is combined with other negative politeness sub strategies. In the following utterance, for instance, the negative politeness device *please* is associated with the honorific term *sir* and the indirectness that modifies the whole utterance.

(10) Please sir can you tell us if this product is good or not?

The most peculiar sub strategy in the data elicited from the herbal medicine sellers is apologising. The speakers apologise when people (the hearers) are not expecting any apology. In utterances (11) and (12), S is not being awaited, but intrudes himself and, surprisingly, apologises for the delay.

(11) Your traditional doctor is here again. I am sorry for the delay. So many people are really exhausted. I will relieve you a little.

(12) I'm sorry for the delay. I could have been here earlier but given the fact that there were some delays and too many demands, I just boarded a car and by the way good afternoon to everyone and at the same time happy new week and above all wish safe journey!

The comical use of apology in both (11) and (12) above has as a goal: to create a conducive environment for the advertisement discourse. Therefore, it is a purposed non-polite polite act.

Unlike what the literature on politeness and impoliteness shows, impolite acts from herbal medicine sellers do not aim at attacking the face of the hearer or the addressee. The features of impoliteness in the current study move beyond Culpeper (b) taxonomy of impoliteness [6]. Thus, this study is peculiar and different from previous works including Bousfield, Culpeper (b), Faissam & Etapa in the sense that it demonstrates that both politeness and impoliteness in advertisers' speech acts have the same goal: creating jocular mood and conviviality to maintain smooth interactions [1, 6-8].

## 5. Conclusion

This paper aimed at examining the pragmatic use and the pragmatic functions of polite and impolite speech acts of advertisement used by the herbal medicine sellers in Cameroon. The face saving view of politeness by Brown and the taxonomy of impoliteness by Culpeper (a) are used to guide the analysis of the data in this research [2, 5]. The data elicited from twenty-three herbal medicine on-bus sellers show that bald on record, positive and negative politeness strategies are recurrently used. Whilst positive politeness aims to create a friendly ambiance between the herbal medicine sellers and the potential customers, the negative politeness has as objective

to minimise the possible face threat the hearer may undergo in the course of interaction. Apologising is the most peculiar sub strategy of politeness in the speech acts of the herbal medicine sellers as the speakers utter them when they are not expected to at all. Some impoliteness traits are also identified. Nonetheless, impoliteness in the advertisers' speech acts does not serve as aggressive or attacking acts (as the impoliteness taxonomy could suggest) but rather as jocular abuse acts that aim to create conviviality.

The current study has some limitations. It does not address the non-verbal acts that communicate politeness or impoliteness in the interactions. Besides, it does not consider the speech acts of herbal medicine customers. Otherwise, the reactions of the customers could be also analysed to evaluate how polite or impolite they are vis-à-vis the vendors. These aspects could be dealt with in further research endeavours.

## Abbreviations

FTA	Face Threatening Acts
S	Speaker
H	Hearer

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Appendix

Some questions of the unstructured interview

- 1) Good morning! I am Marcelline. I would like to find out more on your products if you can allow me.
- 2) Where do you get your products from?
- 3) Suppose there are people who do not travel, where can we find the herbal medicines in different parts of the country?
- 4) Do you have anything in common with other sellers of similar products, because we have encountered some other people who had similar products?
- 5) Why is it that only men (and not women) are involved in selling herbal medicines on-bus?

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