

Politeness strategies in handling customers' complaints and conflict management : a case study of the mobile companies in Côte D'Ivoire

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Abstract: The present paper investigates politeness in technological mediated interactions between employees of Moov, Orange and MTN and their customers. Specifically, this research aims to identify the politeness strategies used by employees to handle customers' complaints and to examine the impact of these strategies. The data were collected by recording conversations between the stakeholders. They were then analyzed using the politeness theory developed by P. Brown and S. Levinson (1987). The findings reveal that employees employ both positive and negative politeness strategies to address customer complaints. More interestingly, the results show that there is no significant difference between the companies in terms of their use of politeness strategies.

Keywords: **Politeness, complaints, customer service, employees, Customers**

Résumé: Le présent article examine la politesse dans les interactions à médiation technologique entre les employés de Moov, Orange et MTN et leurs clients. Plus précisément, cette recherche vise à identifier les stratégies de politesse utilisées par les employés pour gérer les plaintes des clients et à analyser l'impact de ces stratégies. Les données ont été collectées en enregistrant les conversations entre les parties prenantes. Elles ont ensuite été analysées à l'aide de la théorie de la politesse développée par P. Brown et S. Levinson (1987). Les résultats révèlent que les employés ont recours à la fois à des stratégies de politesse positive et négative pour traiter les plaintes des clients. Plus intéressant encore, les résultats montrent qu'il n'existe pas de différence significative entre les entreprises en ce qui concerne l'utilisation des stratégies de politesse.

Mots-clés : **employés, plaintes, politesse, service client, clients**

Introduction

The success of any business largely depends on effective communication. In a business context, communication can be broadly categorized into two types: internal and external communication. Internal communication refers to interactions that occur among members within an organization, whereas external communication concerns exchanges between company employees and customers. The latter is predominantly task-oriented, as customers engage with companies to express their needs, concerns, or expectations (J. Holmes and M. Stubbe, 2015).

Customers' concerns vary significantly from an individual to another. While some customers may contact a company to request information, others may do so to lodge complaints. In response, employees are expected to adopt appropriate communicative strategies to ensure that customers feel understood and valued. This effort is crucial for maintaining customer satisfaction and loyalty. Such efforts are reflected not only in the quality of services provided but also in the manner in which employees interact with customers.

Despite these efforts, misunderstandings and conflicts may still arise between stakeholders. It is within this context that the present study investigates politeness strategies in handling customers' complaints and conflict management in mobile companies in Côte d'Ivoire. The rapid development of new technologies has transformed customer–employee interactions. Rather than relying on face-to-face communication, both customers and companies increasingly utilize communication channels such as telephone calls, the internet, and social media platforms.

Although these technologies facilitate faster and more convenient exchanges, they may also lead to misunderstandings due to the absence of socio-cultural cues such as gender, social status, and professional background (O. Ogiermann,2009). In light of this, the study seeks to address the following research problem: To what extent do politeness strategies influence conflict resolution and customer satisfaction?

To answer this question, three research questions are formulated. First, what politeness strategies are used by customer service agents during customer complaints? This question aims to identify the range of politeness strategies employed by agents when addressing customers' concerns. Second, how do these strategies affect conflict resolution between the stakeholders? This question examines the impact of different politeness strategies on the outcome of interactions. Third, are there any similarities and differences in the use of politeness strategies across mobile companies in Côte d'Ivoire?

Based on these research questions, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

- H1: Stakeholders primarily use positive and negative politeness strategies.
- H2: The use of positive politeness strategies contributes to calming customers during interactions.
- H3: All mobile companies in Côte d'Ivoire employ similar politeness strategies in handling customer issues.

This study has two main objectives. First, it aims to identify and analyze the different politeness strategies used by customer service agents in mobile companies in Côte d'Ivoire, namely Moov, Orange, and MTN. Second, it seeks to examine the impact of these strategies on the outcome of customer–employee interactions, particularly in terms of conflict resolution and customer satisfaction.

Methodologically, this research adopts a qualitative approach. Data are collected through recorded interactions between customers and service agents. The participants in this study consist of subscribers of mobile companies in Côte d'Ivoire. The analysis is descriptive in nature. It focuses on the use and effectiveness of politeness strategies in real communicative contexts.

1. Methodological and theoretical framework

1.1. Methodological framework

This paper aims to analyze the politeness strategies utilized by agents of multinational companies in Côte d'Ivoire. In this regard, the data were collected in a natural communication context. To achieve this, the study adopts the data elicitation method proposed by w. Labov (1972), which enables the researcher to gather authentic conversational data in real-life situations.

In this study, this method is used to record interactions between customer service agents and their customers. The participants consist of subscribers from different multinational mobile companies operating in Côte d'Ivoire. In order to obtain a sufficient number of participants, the researcher employed two techniques. First, the researcher explained the objectives of the study to friends and colleagues and asked them to record their conversations whenever they interacted with their mobile service providers online.

Second, the researcher shared the objectives of the study across several WhatsApp groups, inviting members to record and save their interactions with their service providers whenever they engaged with them over the phone.

This approach enabled the researcher to collect a substantial amount of data. In total, 65 conversations were recorded. These conversations were carefully reviewed to identify their themes and the companies involved. The analysis revealed that the interactions covered various topics, including complaints and requests for information.

For the purpose of this study, only complaint-related conversations were selected, resulting in a subset of 25 interactions. However, in order to ensure balanced representation across the different companies, the researcher selected seven conversations per company, yielding a final corpus of 21 conversations for analysis. After data collection, the conversations were transcribed and translated into English for further analysis.

M. Bucholtz (2000) suggests two kinds of transcription, namely denaturalized and naturalized transcription; the former exhibits any features of written language that do not necessarily occur in spoken talks. For example, commas, full stops and paraphrasing are incorporated. The latter preserves the features of oral language such as ‘ums’ and ‘ers’. The present study subscribes to denaturalized transcription method. This type of transcription requires the researcher to carefully listen to the recorded calls, select the most reliable ones and transcribe the message without the features of oral language.

1.2 Theoretical framework

The present study adopts a descriptive approach to analyse the politeness strategies used by agents of multinational mobile companies in Côte d'Ivoire. To achieve this objective, it draws on the politeness theory developed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Their work on linguistic politeness (1978, 1987) is widely regarded as one of the earliest and most comprehensive comparative studies in this field.

P. Brown and S. Levinson's (1987) theory is grounded in the concept of face, which is defined as "the public self-image that every member of society wants to claim for himself" (1987, p. 61). They argue that politeness is a universal phenomenon, present across cultures, and primarily serves to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs) that may arise in social interactions.

According to P. Brown and S. Levinson (1987), speakers employ four main politeness strategies. These strategies include: *bald on-record strategy*, which favors directness. It is used when there is little concern for the hearer's face; *positive politeness strategy* which emphasizes solidarity, closeness, and the need to be liked; *negative politeness strategy*, shows respect for the hearer's desire for autonomy and distance; and *off-record strategies*, relies on indirectness and allow the speaker to avoid explicit responsibility for the utterance.

In the present study, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework is applied to examine how customer service agents use these strategies to manage interactions and mitigate conflicts with customers. This theoretical lens enables the researcher to identify and categorize the linguistic choices made by agents in handling complaint situations within mobile communication contexts.

2.2. Results and discussion

2.1 Results

The present study is based on a corpus of twenty-one (21) conversations collected by the researcher. These interactions were systematically analyzed using the politeness

framework proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) with minor contextual adaptations to better fit the data. The coding process focused on two principal dimensions. First, the data were categorized according to direct and indirect politeness strategies, operationalized through their grammatical realizations. Direct strategies were primarily identified through imperative forms, whereas indirect strategies were associated with interrogative structures.

Second, the analysis incorporated address terms as conceptualized by E. Chaika (1982). These include: Family Name (FN), Title plus Family Name (TFN), Title alone (T), Last Name (LN), and Special Name (SN). The findings reveal an asymmetrical use of both politeness strategies and address terms across the dataset, suggesting variability in interactional patterns among participants. The detailed results are presented in the table below.

Table 1: Address terms by the customers and agents

Interlocutors	Types of address terms					
	T	FN	LN	TLN	N/P	K
Customer	76	15	0	0	0	0
Employees	27			168	0	0
Total	103	15	0	168	0	0

Table 2: Imperative Sentences

Interlocutors	Type of imperative	
	Without please	Please
Customer	33	05
Employees	-	58
Total	10	58

Table 3: *interrogative sentences in calls*

Interlocutors	Type of interrogative strategy		
	CAN	COULD	Other Please
Customer	02	-	05
Employees	09	30	36
Total	11	30	36

3. Discussion

3.1 Politeness strategies used by customers

As stated by the results, the employees' resort to many linguistic strategies to engage with their customers in tense situations. These strategies are: address terms, direct strategies which is symbolized by the use of imperative sentences and indirect strategies, characterized by the use of interrogative sentences. These strategies are used by all the companies under study.

-Address terms

There are many types of address terms used by the customers when dealing with the complaints of the customers. The employees resort to two kinds of address term namely the address term with title (T) example: *Good morning, sir*. And the address term with title plus last name (TLN). Example *Thank your madam caller A*. These two kinds of address terms are used 271 times in the overall communication. They are distributed as follows: Employees used address terms with title (T) 103 times and address terms with title plus last name is used (TLN) 168 times in the whole database. The use of the address terms with title (T) alone by the employees is very telling. In fact, the use of these address terms show that the stakeholders are in a formal context of communication. It also shows the distance between the employee and the customers. As such, the employees give more power to the customers.

Moreover, in the overall communication, the employees use the address terms with title alone (T) only when they do not know the name of their interlocutors. Once, they know the name of their interlocutors, they resort to title plus first name (TLN). By using title plus first name, the employees want to show that they care for their customers. This makes the customer feel at ease and confident. As example - *Receiver A: good morning, sir please sir, how can I help you?* This sentence is at the beginning of the conversation. The employees resort to the title alone (T) to address his client. the use of these address terms shows respect and politeness towards the addressee namely the customers of (R. Wardhaugh, 2006).

Moreover, the use of these address terms directs the unfamiliarity and power inequality between the speakers. Consequently, by using them, the employees give more power to their customers. This way of showing politeness matches the politeness principle by G. Leech (1983) precisely the maxim of approbation. This politeness principle requires the participant to minimize the dispraise to oneself and maximize praise to others (G. Leech 1983). Thus, by resorting to the above-mentioned address terms, the employees maximize praise to the customers. This finding is in line with the study of K. Armand (2023) who argues that the use of address terms like (T) (TLN) not only favors respect but also shows that the employee speaks on the behalf of the company. Therefore, the use of these address terms put a distance relationship between the stakeholders.

-Imperative sentences with please

Please is used as a linguistic marker to minimize the imposition. In this paper, it has been used in different ways depending on the speaker. Therefore, it has been used as follows. It has been noted that the customers use imperative sentences 10 times in the overall communication. The number of imperative sentences indicates that they are less direct.

However, all imperative sentences used by the customers are *without please* example *take it, don't send me this message again; send it to me by sms*.

According to P. Brown and S. Levinson (1987), imperative sentences are direct strategies that maximize the imposition on the hearer's face. In the study, the employees resort to imperative sentences with *please*. It occurs 58 times in the overall recording.

For instance, *please go to the nearest agency, don't hang up please, please give me your name, please try to do something for me, sir please calm down, please madam do something, let me check*. It also represents 100 % of the imperative used by the customers. In fact, the employees use only the imperative sentence with *please*. One can say that employees use this form of imperative very frequently in order to mitigate the illocution force of their utterances. In this view, all the employees be it male or female use the imperative form with *please*.

Using the imperative sentence alone without politeness markers such as *please excuse me*, sound more direct and ruder. This way of behaving with customers is what B. Beal et al (2006) term as *surface acting*. In fact, surface acting. This is a kind of emotion regulation that involves faking emotions, such as smiling, or expressing cheerfulness, without changing the inner experience of the employee. Accordingly, the use of *please + imperative first name* is to lessen the directive force and thus, sound politer.

The use of *please +imperative* by all the agents regardless of gender, shows that the use of imperative of this kind is not an individual act but rather a standardized communicative practice within the different companies under study. This supports J. J. Holmes (2008) who stresses that workplace discourse is shaped by organizational rules. Therefore, the employees say what the company want them to say in a given situation. In addition, by using expressions such as "sir, please sir calm, employees actively engage in face-saving strategies, which lead them to protect their own face and that of the customers (E. Goffman, 1967).

-Interrogative sentences

In the conversations, it has been noticed that the employees are very keen on using interrogative strategies with modals with 'can' and 'could'. In fact, in the overall conversation the interrogation strategies combined represent 52% of the request made by the employees. The use of the interrogative by the employees is significant. In fact, it shows that the employees avoid to address their interlocutor directly. In this respect, their resort to modals to reduce the illocutionary force of the discourse. Some utterances have been selected from the conversation as examples.

Example 1: *Could you please give your references sir so that I can call you when the product is available?*

In this example, the employee asks for references after giving some information to the clients, the employee needs the contact of the customer in order to call him back later. In this regard, the employee has many linguistic strategies in hand to take the contact of the employee. However, he resorts to a request realized with interrogative and modals. Request of this type have been conventionalized as negative politeness by P. Brown and S. Levinson (1978). In fact, this interrogative sentence is a request for action and as such it can threaten the customer's face. In this sense, the use *could* helps the employees soften the imposition.

Example 2: *Can you please go the nearest agency?*

In the sentence above the employee asks his client to go to the nearest agency to solve his problem. In order to sound politer to her aggrieved customer, the employee resorts to the modal 'can' with 'please' to reduce the illocutionary force of the utterance. Furthermore, if the utterance is said directly it can be sound like an order the employee is giving to the customer. On top of that, the use of the interrogative

sentence to invite the customer to the agency helps the employee avoid giving order to his customer. Through the use of the imperative strategy, one can say that the companies resort to the complaining behavior of a customer by adopting surface acting strategies J. Wessel and D. Steiner, (2014)

Although the results in this study shows that directness, a feature of positive politeness appears to have a strong impact on customer satisfaction , The findings support studies like J. Thomas (1995), which suggests that indirectness which is considered as a feature of negative politeness is the most effective strategy in institutional discourse.

3.2 the Roles of the Politeness strategies by the employees

- Positive and bald on record strategies

The imperative sentences are considered as a bald on record strategy as they do nothing to reduce the imposition on the listeners' face P. Brown and S. Levinson (1987). However, in this study the result as shown that the imperative sentences are not used alone, they are combined with *please*. This combination allows the employee to go straight to the point and be polite at the same time. Also, the fact of using please suggests that the employee wants to mitigate the face threats carried by the imperative sentences P. Brown and S. Levinson (1987).

The imperative sentences used between the stakeholders favor directness. P. Brown and S. Levinson (1987) assigns directness to positive bald on record strategy and positive politeness. In their lines, positive politeness is used between people who know each other fairly well. In fact, it proves that speakers are cooperators and claim a common ground. This finding goes and in hand with that of M. Locher and J.Watts (2005) who consider politeness as a relational work where speakers actively negotiate social harmony The present study support this view, in the sense that the role of the argents are twofold in this study; first, find positive politeness to sound friendly. Second, they adapt their language langue to the emotional state of the customers.

- Negative politeness strategies

The address terms which are used most by the employees are little (T) and title plus last name (TLN). In fact, these kinds of address terms indicate that they are in a formal communication setting such as meeting, workplace etc. As such, it is used to show the imbalance power between the speaker and the addressee. *Mr. Caller C are you still online, Mr. Caller C, could you please go. I can see on your account Mr. Caller C .MR Caller B don't hang up please*

The above utterances testify the respect the employee pays to his clients. By behaving that way, the employees are using the maxim of approbation which requires the participant to minimize the dispraise to oneself and maximize praise to others (G. Leech 1983). This maxim is considered by P. Brown and S. Levinson (1987) as a negative politeness strategy.

In the overall conversation observed in this study, customers resort to modalized interrogative sentences in all their requests. Example *can you give me the code to change my profile?* A request of this type is conventionalized as polite.

It is conventionalized by P. Brown and S. Levinson (1987) as off record strategy. In fact, the off-record strategy consists in using indirectness to address people. In the above example, the client uses the modalized interrogative sentence with can to reduce the illocutionary force of the utterance. Interrogative sentences are considered as indirect speech acts (N. Ruytebeek, 2017). Therefore, they permit the speaker to reduce the illocutionary force of the utterance.

The findings are also in line with the politeness principle by G. Leech (1983), mainly the approbation principle which encourages speakers to minimize dispraise and maximize respect towards others. Therefore, modal verbs like could, can serve as pragmatic politeness markers that weaken the illocutionary force of the utterance. In this study, the use of these modals, allows the agents suggest solutions to the customers without being demanding.

Conclusion

This research paper has been conducted in order to figure out the politeness strategies used by the employees of the mobile companies in Cote d'Ivoire to handle the complaints of their customers. The result shows that the employees use many politeness strategies to handle the complaints of their customers. These strategies are: positive politeness, negative politeness and off record strategy and bald on record strategy.

The use of these politeness strategies is very beneficial for the companies. In fact, each strategy plays a precise role. Bald on record strategy and positive politeness strategy help the employees establish a friendly relationship and closeness. Off record strategy and negative politeness strategies help the employees opt for a distance relationship and a respectful atmosphere by prioritizing indirect speech act and the use of address terms with title. More interestingly, it has been found that there is no difference between the different companies as far as the use of politeness strategies is concerned. Based on the result, one can say that the objectives of this research paper have been reached. Also, its hypotheses have been verified.

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