

(IM)POLITENESS IN ADVERTISING AMONG HERBAL DRUG SELLERS IN OWERRI METROPOLIS

Khabyr A. Fasasi, Nneka C. Njoku & Oluchi S. Onuabuobi

Department of English Language and Literature
Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri

Abstract

This paper holds that irrespective of the advertising strategies adopted by marketers of goods and services, the choice of language can still make or mar the entire process of advertising. Against this background, the paper investigates the linguistic politeness and impoliteness features in advertisements of herbal drugs around Owerri metropolis in the southeastern part of Nigeria. Six audio recorded advertisements of herbal products, collected from various points in the city, were subjected to descriptive analysis using Brown and Levinson's (1987) face-saving theory of politeness. Analysis reveals that herbal drug advertisements are characterized by a few polite and face-enhancing speech acts which include seeking attention, greetings and dramatic conversation and, a profusion of impolite and face-threatening acts which include direct command (nine times), insults (once), unwarranted question (once) and claim of multiple benefits (fourteen times). The implication of the above is that herbal drug sellers pay a little attention to the face wants of customers and, they often directly command their customers and tell them lies in a desperate bid to woo them. The paper concludes that herbal drug advertisers should carefully select polite utterances and minimize exaggerated expressions.

Keywords: Advertising, herbal drugs, (im)politeness, face-threatening acts, Owerri.

Introduction

Advertising is the soul of every business. It is one of the most prominent powerful and ubiquitous contemporary tools in the hands of an entrepreneur. The modern world is bombarded with all sorts of advertising, from the most sophisticated signage associated with technological advancement employed by the rich corporations to over shadow the developing business. While many have certain understanding of its power over everyday choices of humans, few realize the subtle nuances of advertising that cause it to be so effective. Advertising is a means of communication with the users of products or services. It is a type of marketing communication used to encourage, manipulate and induce an audience to take an action.

Advertising is about creativity. Zomnir in Moriarty, et al (2009: 53) describes advertising as ‘generating big, creative ideas with which people connect ideas that come from having passion for the brand and the business’. McCracken (1986) suggests that advertising is one of the ways in which we get into goods. It is the conduit through which meanings are constantly transferred from the culturally constituted world to the consumer. Therefore, a smart observer will look at advertising as something more than a sales message that occupies the space in and around news stories, magazine feature, and TV programmes. In fact, advertising is a complete form of communication that operates with objectives and strategies leading to various types of impact on consumer thoughts, feelings and actions.

The present-day Nigerian cities and towns have witnessed an aggressive entrepreneurial drive by producers of goods and services. This may not easily be divorced from the competitive nature of goods and service providers. A large number of individuals with certain inventive ability or the other have

developed and designed products and, have resorted to getting their products to the final consumers through aggressive advertisements of such products.

Medicinal products from roots and herbs have especially benefitted from this type of aggressive advertising since producers are seriously willing to convince the public about their efficacy and are willing to make favourable financial rewards on the products. A section of consumers doubt the efficacy of traditional herbal drugs and wonder how a drug can cure a number of ailments. Further, it seems a herculean task to convince buyers to jettison the established medical/pharmaceutical products which had gained popularity over decades. Despite the above however, there are consumers who believe that herbal drugs are preferred alternatives to pharmaceutical products, claiming that herbs cure terminal diseases like cancer, diabetes and leukemia which orthodox medicines cannot combat.

Against this background, the researchers set out to investigate the instances of politeness and impoliteness strategies in the advertisements of herbal drugs in Owerri metropolis. It is our assumption that, against the competitive product advertising which is a constant feature of the city, the proper use of politeness strategies will induce customers' interest in herbal drugs and enhance sales. On the other hand, the deployment of impolite and face-threatening utterances in herbal drug advertisements will put off customers and inhibit sales. This paper is therefore concerned with (im)politeness in advertising among herbal drug producers and sellers in Owerri metropolis.

Herbal Medicine, Advertising Strategies and (Im)Politeness

According to the World Health Organization (WHO 1977) 'a herb or medicinal plant is any plant which in one or

more of its organs contains substances that can be used for the therapeutic purpose or which are precursors for the synthesis of useful drugs'. Herbal medicine has a long history in the treatment of several kinds of diseases (Holm, et al, 1998). Their use for the treatment of diseases has been practised by man for many years and is still being widely practised till today (Kokwaro, 1993). Herbal medicine is a common means of treating ailments in most of the developing countries. People from different cultural backgrounds have used different herbal plants, plant extracts, animal products and mineral substance as the means to care, cure and treat-ill-health (Addae-Mensah, 1992; Curtis & Taket, et al, 1996) since pre-historic times.

WHO describes traditional medicine as diverse health practices, approaches knowledge and beliefs incorporating plants, animals, and or mineral-based medicines, spiritual therapies, manual techniques and exercises applied singularly or in combination to maintain well-being as well as to treat, diagnose or prevent illness (WHO, 2000). There has been intense debate on public health issues associated with traditional medicine in many parts of the world. While some countries have policies that discourage traditional medicine, others embrace policies that are supportive of traditional medicine while most other countries do not have official policies and have simply left traditional medicine to individuals to decide.

In the past, herbal medicine had been seen as a fetish way of curing diseases. It is believed that poor and illiterate individuals are the patronisers of herbal medicine, a thought buttressed by the fact that most of its practitioners were regarded as witch doctors who took care of their patients with occult powers. Practitioners of herbal medicine were not in any way seen as doctors; even the western trained doctors saw them as a

threat to the well being of their patients. Therefore, the influx of herbal remedies into the Nigerian market, with some meeting and some not meeting the requirements set by the Standard Organization of Nigeria (SON) and the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and control (NAFDAC) have generated concerns regarding the safety and efficiency of the drugs, and responsibility of practitioners of the traditional remedies.

In view of the above, herbal drug sellers need to invent convincing advertising strategies in order to achieve their objectives. Advertising strategy, simply put, is a plan to reach and persuade a customer to buy certain goods and services. It could also be said to be a statement which provides information on the target market, competitive framework and messages to be used in an advertising campaign for a specific product or service. There are two widely recognized advertising strategies: the emotional strategy and rational strategy (Golden & Johnson, 1983; Laskey, et al, 1995; Stanford & Day, 1995). The emotional strategy is to stir consumers' feelings and emotions through fulfilling their self-esteem, subconscious and ego and, related impulses (Kotler & Armstrong, 1994) while the rational strategy is to inform consumers of one or more key benefits of a product that are perceived to be highly functional or important to them (Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Laskey, et al, 1995). Irrespective of the strategy employed however, the success or otherwise of the advertising enterprise depends largely on the linguistic choice made by the advertiser. While the linguistic appeal in the words and expressions can induce customers' interest in the products, uninteresting, strait-jacketed and impolite expressions may mar the success of the advertisement.

Several research works have concerned themselves with the relationships between language and politeness in advertising. Some of such works include Simpson (2001), Wenzhong and Jingyi (2013) and, Abuarrah and Istetih (2016). There is however paucity of research on the nature of linguistic politeness in advertisements of herbal products. This work therefore investigates the linguistic politeness features in advertisements of herbal drugs around Owerri in the southeastern part of Nigeria. Specifically, the work investigates both the polite and face-enhancing acts as well as the impolite and face-threatening acts in the data. Further, the work investigates the politeness functions of the acts to the customers' face, and by extension, to the overall achievement of the goals of advertising.

Theoretical Consideration

We review Brown and Levinson's face-saving politeness theory (1987) as the theoretical background for this research work. Penelope Brown and Steven Levinson perceive politeness as a function of interactants' need to maintain what they call 'face' or public esteem or public social self in interactions. The authors split the notion of face into positive and negative. According to them, positive face is the positive and consistent image people have of themselves, and their desire for approval. On the other hand, negative face is 'the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition' (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 61). They polarized politeness into two: positive politeness and negative politeness. Positive politeness is expressed by satisfying positive face either by indicating similarities or by appreciating the interlocutor's self-image while negative politeness is expressed by saving the interlocutor's face by mitigating face-threatening acts.

The authors present an inventory of possible ways of achieving both positive and negative politeness. Any act that ‘runs contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or the speaker’ (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 70) is called a face-threatening act (FTA). Politeness is usually employed to mitigate FTAs and to satisfy the interactants’ face. Politeness tokens like expression of affection, solidarity, showing understanding, and respect for personal preserves are face-enhancing acts. On the other hand, acts such as commands, disagreements, insults, criticisms, and refusals are FTAs. An FTA makes the interactant at the receiving end lose face, if not mitigated, hence the need for politeness strategies to correct or mitigate threats to face.

Brown and Levinson identify five politeness strategies, called super strategies, open to speakers when doing the FTA. These include doing the FTA (1) without redressive action, baldly on record, (2) with redressive action (negative politeness), (3) with redressive action (positive politeness), (4) off-record and, (5) not to do the FTA. Three sociological factors: social distance of speaker and hearer, relative power of speaker over hearer and, the absolute ranking of the imposition are crucial in determining the level of politeness a speaker employs.

In this paper, the authors hold that any successful advertising venture such as the advertisements of herbal drugs should deploy a number of politeness strategies and do away with impoliteness and face-threatening acts. Although public advertising such as the one under study does not bring speaker (advertiser) and hearer (buyer) close in a one-on-one conversation, the context shows that it is an instance of public conversations as customers react in one way or the other to the advertisements. Therefore, the current research is concerned with how advertisers of herbal drugs in the eastern part of Nigeria

deploy tokens of politeness in their advertisements and how customers tend to react to such advertisements. It seems to us that there is dearth of research as regards politeness strategies in advertisements. We therefore hope that this study will contribute to literature on politeness in advertisements.

Data Collection and Sources

Data consists of six audio recordings of herbal drug advertisement collected from various points in Owerri metropolis. Herbal drug sellers in the metropolis advertise and distribute their products through the use of public address systems fixed to their buses and vans. These are stationed at certain popular streets and junctions, though there are others who walk from place to place and advertise their products through one-to-one interaction. The herbal medicine sellers whose advertisements were collected for the purpose of this research were stationed at Wetheral Junction, Douglas by Okeonunwa, Wetheral by Man Street and Hadel Junction, Orji. Data, which were collected between March and May 2018, were rendered in Nigerian Pidgin, Igbo, English or a code-mix of English and Nigeria Pidgin. These were transcribed by the researchers and, only four (4) of the advertisements were purposively selected for analysis.

Data Analysis and Discussion

This section presents the analysis of the data and their discussions. In the first part, the researchers present the analysis of politeness and face-enhancing strategies employed by advertisers and discuss their potential functions to customers' face while the second part presents the analysis of impoliteness and face-threatening acts employed by herbal drug advertisers. The potential functions of these to customers' face are also discussed.

Politeness and Face-Enhancing Strategies in Herbal Drug Advertisements

The data yield only a very few expressions of politeness and, these occur in only two of the data. In Advert 2, the advertiser politely seeks the attention of the members of the public, though with an informal expression of: *Yes oh! Yes oh!* The repeated phrase is an informal way of introducing himself and getting people aware that he is around them. He does this with a tone of elation. For anyone entering into a conversation to introduce himself is positively polite as it engenders solidarity and appeals to both the positive and negative face of the listeners. The tone too shows subtly that the speaker wishes to identify with the people and wishes to be welcomed and accepted by the people. The speaker goes further to greet his listeners by saying: *My country people* before embarking on his product advertisement. The initial greeting uttered this way is positively polite as it functions to enhance the positive face of hearers as it shows that he recognizes them and thinks about them. In addition, the expression of greeting has the potential of making the advertiser to be positively thought of by hearers, as the hearers will consider him courteous and polite.

In Advert 3, the only polite and face-enhancing token, one which virtually runs through the whole advertisement is the dramatic conversational mode of the advertisement. Presenting an advertisement in a dramatic way in the public is an indirect way of appealing to the people's sense of humour. Part of the advertisement runs thus:

Papa Ijebu what are you selling?

Gwogwonise!

Mama Ijebu what are you selling?

Gwogwonise!

Any person with stomach ache, what will heal the person?

Gwogwonise!

Any person bitten by snake, what will cure the person?

Gwogwonise!

Any person with heart attack, what will cure the person?

Gwogwonise!

The sense of the dramatic in the advertisement above and the humour it creates in the listeners are capable of drawing people close because humour and dramatic performances usually function to draw the hearer close to the speaker in a conversation. The strategy therefore is positively polite to the hearers' (members of the public) face wants. This is capable of drawing the hearers close to the seller and, to enquire about the product.

From the above, we are able to identify only three instances of politeness and face-saving politeness strategies in the data. These strategies include seeking attention, greeting and dramatic conversation, all of which appeared only once. Our analysis will now turn to impoliteness and face-threatening tokens in the data.

Impoliteness and Face-Threatening Strategies in Herbal Drug Advertisements

Contrary to our findings as regards politeness indicators in the data, the four advertisements collected for this study display profuse use of impoliteness and face-threatening acts. The first of these is direct command, also known as the imperative mood which is not always command oriented, but can be a prayer, an exhortation, an appeal or even a supplication. However, all the data under study display instances of the use of imperative mood as direct command. Scholars (Brown & Levinson, 1978; 1987) have argued that direct command is face-threatening and impolite to the hearer's face wants. In advert 1, direct command

appears twice. The advertiser first says: *Drink this medicine for me in the morning and in the night*. Since the customers are socially distanced from the speaker, commanding them directly is an imposition which is capable of embarrassing and threatening their public face wants. Again, the advertiser says: *Come and take it now*, commanding his potential customers to come immediately to take the products. The latest direct command seems not to give the customers any option of their own. Therefore, these two are impositions because they threaten the negative face of listeners, their desires not to be imposed upon.

Direct command also occurs three times in the second advert, once in the third advert and three times in the fourth advert. In the second advert, we observed such direct commands as: *Rush now and take your own, Always remember to apply it after taking your bath, morning and night for me*. In the third advert, we see: *Always apply it to the affected area morning and night*. The fourth advertisement displays three instances of direct command which are: *Come and take your own Agness Nwanma and brush with it every day*. and *Don't rush it for it will reach everybody*. All of these are impolite and face-threatening to both the hearers' positive and negative face.

Apart from advert 4, all the advertisements claim that their products have multipurpose health benefits or healing powers. This claim, to many customers, may be considered a blatant lie and, consequently it may put customers off. For instance, in the first advert, we have:

Dr. Igodo cleanser is a medicine that cures all kinds of disease both sexually transmitted disease oh! It cures gonorrhea. It cures syphilis. It cures staphylococcus. It cures typhoid. It cures

hypertension. It cures hookworm. It cures bacterial infection. It cures eczema. It cures stomach cancer. It cures rheumatism.

Similarly, in advert 2, we have:

Na de medicine wey dey cure every kind of skin disease. Kuban be the only medicine wey dey cure all kinds of yammayamma disease wey dey on top pesin body. Kuban dey cure pimples, eczema, heartaches, ringworm, rashes, bumps and others. (It is the medicine that cures every type of skin diseases. Kuban is the only drug that cures all kinds of filthy diseases inhabiting the human body. Kuban cures pimples, eczema, heartaches, ringworm, rashes bumps and others.)

In the third advert, the chorus-like repetition of *Gwogwonise!* is very important. The word derives from a Yoruba word, *Gbogbo n'ise* which literally means 'it cures all'. Telling lies, as seen in the advertisements under study is considered face-threatening and impolite because the customers know that a drug will not really be capable of curing so many ailments or all the ailments, especially when the ailments are not related in terms of symptoms and the body parts affected. People generally detest lies and tend to dislike liars. Telling lies to gain customers, when the customers become aware of the lies, become face-threatening to their negative face. This violates the customers' right to non-distraction.

In advert 4, we observe that the advertiser asks an unwarranted question, a rhetorical question targeted at embarrassing the potential customers. Asking one's customers *Brother, have you washed your teeth today?* is grossly impolite and face-threatening to both the hearers' positive and negative face. It attacks hearers' positive face because hearers may not want to patronize the product lest they are assumed to fall into the category of people who have not washed their teeth today. It

also attacks hearers' negative face because those who have not washed their teeth today will prefer to be left alone undisturbed rather than being exposed. From both angles, the possible result is that hearers will distance themselves from buying the products, at least in the public.

In advert 2, the advertiser addresses members of the public, his prospective customers, by saying:

Abeg, no look us like Lucozade Boost oh! Na Kuban we carry come.

(Please, stop looking at us like Lucozade Boost oh! It is Kuban we brought.)

The first part of this excerpt shows that the speaker is grossly impolite and does not care about the face expectations of hearers. He therefore goes on to perform a face-threatening act of insult through derogatory comparison. By this speech act, he compares the look on the faces of his would-be customers to that of one gazing foolishly at him or his products. With the abusive language, he insults his prospective customers. The fact that the sentence begins with *Abeg (Please)*, a politeness strategy (pleas and appeals are polite) does not in any way downplay the sharp effect of the face-threat. The insult is capable of having a very strong effect on both the customers' positive and negative face.

In this part, we have attempted a politeness analysis of the data with a view to uncover the impoliteness and face-threatening acts used by herbal drug sellers in Owerri metropolis. The analysis has yielded such impolite and face-threatening speech acts as direct command (nine times), insults (once), unwarranted question (once) and claim of multiple uses (fourteen times).

Conclusion

This paper has examined the polite and impolite linguistic features in advertising among herbal drug sellers in Owerri metropolis with a view to determining the face-enhancing and face-threatening acts in the advertisement. It is our assumption that face-enhancing tokens of language will enhance advertiser-customer relationship and contribute to increase in sales while face-threatening speech acts will grossly affect advertiser-customer relationship and inhibit sales of herbal products. Analysis of the four recorded advertisements has revealed only three instances of politeness and face-enhancing strategies directed by the advertisers to their customers. These strategies include seeking attention, greeting and dramatic conversation. On the other hand, impolite and face-threatening utterances in the four conversations are many. They include direct command (which appeared nine times), insults (which appeared once), unwarranted question (which appeared once) and claim of multiple uses (which appeared fourteen times). The above findings imply that herbal drug marketers in Owerri metropolis pay very little attention to the politeness needs and face wants of their potential customers. On the other hand, herbal drug advertisers in the city use imperative mood when advertising their products and, very often, tell lies in a desperate attempt to woo customers. The paper therefore suggests that herbal drug advertisers should carefully select polite utterances and minimize untrue expressions.

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