The Analysis of Politeness Strategies in Casual Conversations in Matengo

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Abstract

*Politeness has garnered the attention of many scholars worldwide, who have focused on the types of face-threatening acts and the strategies employed to mitigate them. Despite extensive theorisation of politeness, empirical studies in many African languages remain scarce. This study analyses the politeness strategies used by Matengo speakers to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs) in casual conversations. The research adopted a qualitative, descriptive design and was conducted in Mbinga District, Ruvuma Region, Tanzania. Data were collected through audio recording of naturally occurring conversations, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews with Matengo native speakers. The interviews were intended to confirm the information collected through participant observation. A total of ten conversational transcripts and interviews with fifteen informants were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that Matengo speakers employ a range of politeness strategies to mitigate FTAs. The strategies include the use of past tense forms when making requests, plural personal pronouns with singular reference, the politeness clitic **oti/ote** 'please', diminutive morphemes **ka-** and **tu-,** and traditional specific address names. These strategies function to minimise imposition, signal deference, and protect the negative face of interlocutors. The study further demonstrates that politeness in Matengo is strongly shaped by social variables, including age, kinship relations, marital status, and relative power, resulting in a predominance of vertical politeness over horizontal solidarity-based politeness**.** This study, therefore, provides insights into how Matengo speakers maintain respect, harmony and order within their community. Furthermore, the findings document linguistic practices that may be at risk of change due to language contact.*

Keywords: Casual conversations, Matengo language, politeness, politeness strategies, face-threatening acts, honorifics

1 Introduction

Despite their grammatical competence in a language, speakers often experience communication breakdowns caused by a lack of knowledge of the language-specific politeness norms and strategies governing appropriate social interaction (Leech, 1983, p. 75). According to Brown and Levinson, human beings have face, and they are rational agents. Face in this context is 'a public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself (1987, p. 61).

 Brown and Levinson further argue that 'face is something that is emotionally invested, and it can be maintained or lost'; thus, 'face must constantly be attended to in social interaction' (1978, p. 66).

On the other hand, rationality is the mode of reasoning from ends to means. This means that all human beings have ends they wish to achieve; thus, they devise means to achieve them. Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 65) further argue that 'certain kinds of acts intrinsically threaten face.' These are the acts that, by their nature, run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or the speaker. According to them, these are called Face Threatening Acts, henceforth FTAs. These acts include, but are not limited to, requests, orders, disagreements, refusals, complaints, and compliments. Thus, politeness is viewed as a strategy for redressing FTAs in social interaction.

Since these publications, various scholars have conceptualised politeness in terms of its role in social interaction, i.e., the ways it shapes social interactions among people and cultures. Lakoff (1975, p. 64), for example, perceives politeness as "a social lubricant that aims at reducing friction in interpersonal interactions." Yule (1996, p. 134) views politeness as 'showing awareness of another person's face.' Sell (cited in Yoshimura and Whinney, 2011) views politeness as a velvet glove within which to hide one or another kind of iron fist. Watts (1992, p. 44, cited in Yoshimura and Whinney, 2011) perceives politeness as "a mask used to conceal egos which functions to avoid conflicts and tone down potential aggression and ensure interactions are smoothly accomplished." Yule (2010, p. 135) further contends that politeness is showing "awareness and consideration of another person's face." Generally, politeness can be viewed as the use of the right word, phrase or acting properly in a context determined by implicit rules that exist in a particular society.

Studies on linguistic politeness have revealed that politeness is a universal phenomenon (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987; Brown, 2015; Brown & Levinson, 2000). Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 44), for example, argue that the universality of politeness phenomena is founded in three major aspects: face, rationality, and mutual knowledge between interactants. Thus, interactants choose appropriate means to achieve their ends. Generally, Brown and Levinson (*ibid.*) argue that there are 'universal principles that underlie the construction of polite utterances across languages and cultures, although the realisation of these principles varies across cultures and languages. This idea is also supported by Brown (2015, p. 326), who argues that although politeness is a universal phenomenon, it is 'conventionally attached to certain linguistic forms and formulaic expressions which may be very different in different languages and cultures.' Therefore, it is safe to argue that, although politeness is a phenomenon that is found in every culture and language, the realisation of politeness differs significantly from one language and/or culture to another.

Yule (1996, p. 134) also contends that 'ideas about appropriate language to mark politeness differ substantially from one culture to another.' Consequently, Ogiermann (2009, p. 1) highlights the importance of studying politeness within a specific language, arguing that it is difficult to generalise the concept across all languages. She states, "the longer politeness is studied, the more ambiguous and less transparent it becomes, and the more difficult it appears to capture specific features of politeness". This stance calls attention to investigating politeness in individual languages and/or cultures to identify the nuances of each language. Additionally, literature has shown that politeness can be expressed both verbally and nonverbally (Leech, 1983). Yoshimura and Whinney (2011) argue that non-verbal forms of politeness include dressing styles, facial expressions, gestures, and specific forms of a particular language.

Studies on politeness have been conducted in various languages around the world. For example, House (2005) explains that in German, politeness is typically expressed through direct language when making requests, refusals, and criticisms, as indirect expressions are often associated with insincerity. Nadia and Nurizah (2021) examined politeness strategies in the Malaysian Prime

Minister's Maiden speech. The study revealed that the Prime Minister employed politeness strategies such as using group identity markers, exaggeration, avoiding disagreement, and attending to the receiver's interests in the speech. Similarly, Mutunda (2006) examined verbal politeness strategies in Lunda culture in Zambia. The study reported that kinship terms, pronouns, personal names, taboos, and euphemisms are strategies used by the Lunda in their verbal interactions to convey politeness.

In Tanzania, unlike other parts of the world, politeness in ethnic community languages has received limited scholarly attention. One of the few existing studies on politeness in Tanzania is Magashi (2017), which examined linguistic politeness in social interactions among Sukuma speakers. The findings revealed that the past tense, in-group identity markers, plural personal pronouns, self-denigration, diminutives and augmentatives, address terms, white lies and repetitions are among the strategies used to redress FTAs. However, this study alone is insufficient to explain politeness phenomena across Tanzania's diverse communities, given the significant cultural differences in this multicultural society. In addition, although some studies on the Matengo language exist (Ndomba, 2007; Kapinga, 2018), none have focused on politeness. This study, therefore, aimed to analyse politeness strategies used by Matengo speakers to redress face-threatening acts (FTAs) in casual conversations. Thus, the study provides an understanding of politeness practices by unveiling strategies for mitigating face-threatening acts in the Matengo language. The strategies highlight the need to preserve politeness norms as part of the Matengo people's cultural identity.

2 Methodology

The target population of this study comprised Matengo native speakers who were born and lived in Mbinga District of Songea Region, Tanzania. Four wards, namely Mikalanga, Maguu, Litembo and Mpapa, were purposively selected because they are the homeland of Matengo native speakers. As such, the study involved all Matengo native speakers who were born and reside in Mbinga District. The study employed a qualitative approach, which allowed the collection of rich, detailed data through direct interactions with native speakers to gain insights into their cultural norms, values, and relationships that shape politeness. Further, the study employed a descriptive design, which helped to describe the politeness forms used by the Matengo speakers to redress FTAs. The sample of 15 informants was interviewed, while 10 transcripts of naturally occurring conversations collected from Matengo native speakers were used in this study to analyse politeness strategies. The interview informants were purposively focused on Matengo native speakers. The number of these informants for interviews and the transcripts of naturally occurring conversations were determined by data saturation. Additionally, purposive sampling was used to select Mbinga District and the wards within which the study was conducted. In this study, data were collected using audio recordings of naturally occurring conversations, participant observations of strategies the Matengo speakers employed in interactions, and interviews, which served to probe the meaning and interpretations of the data collected through participant observation. The conversations were recorded with the Matengo speakers' consent during family gatherings, traditional ceremonies, and sports and games. Thematic analysis was used as the data analysis method, and the audio data were first transcribed. Thereafter, words, phrases, and sentences from naturally occurring conversations and participant observation that contained themes were identified and presented accordingly.

3 Findings

This part presents the linguistic strategies the Matengo speakers use to express politeness in casual conversations. It presents five linguistic politeness strategies discussed and realised by the data analysis, namely plural personal pronouns, the past tense, the clitic *oti* and its variant *ote* "please", the diminutive morpheme *ka-* and its variant *tu-,* and address forms.

3.1 The use of plural personal pronouns

The analysis of the data collected in this study revealed that the first-person plural "*twe*" 'we' and the second person plural "*mwe*" 'you' are used to express politeness in Matengo. Extract 1 illustrates this argument:

(1)	F: bo-m-jomba-gu-jumwich-e?
	Hello-3SG-uncle-2SG-PRES-fine-AGR
	'Hello uncle, are you fine?'
(2)	D: e:na. abali-ju-ku-nyumba.
	Yes-information-of-to-house
	'Yes, how is home?
(3)	F: salama tu, m-jomba.
	Fine-only-3SG-uncle
	'It is fine, uncle'
(4)	D: twe, tu-bil-e
	We-SM- PRES-exist-AGR
	'We exist'
(5)	F: mbona-ngasetu-bon-an-a au le ma-jukumo? gwi-temba-li-aotikunyumba mjomba.
	But-1PL-see-REC-FV-or-because of-PL-responsibility? -2SG-visit-APPL-FV-please-home-uncle
	'But, we don't see each other, or because of responsibilities? You, please, visit your uncle'
(6)	D: lyoba-limu lama twite-mbalyaj-e mjomba
	day-one- must-1PL-visit-AGR-SG-uncle
	'One day we must visit uncle.'

Extract 1: The use of the plural personal pronouns "twe" and "mwe"

Extract 1 is part of a conversation between F and D, in which F is the uncle to D, and F is older than D. In line (5), F tells his nephew, D, that they do not see each other often and invites him to visit his home, saying, *"mbona ngase tubonana, au le majukumo? Gwitembaliaoti kunyumba mjomba",* which translates to, "but we don't see each other, is it because of responsibilities? Please visit home, uncle". In line (6), D responds that he will visit one day, stating, "*lyobalimu lama twitembaliaje mjomba, meaning* 'One day, we must visit you, uncle'. But, in his response, D uses the first-person plural pronoun "*twi*" 'we' instead of the first-person singular "*ni*" 'I'. This choice suggests that D is either including others in their conversation or employing plural pronouns as a linguistic strategy. Similarly, Extract 2 illustrates how the second person plural form is used to express politeness in Matengo.

(1).	A: masigetwe ganga
	Water- is- here.
	'Here is the water.'
(2).	B: Asandi
	'Thank you.'
(3).	A: gwe, jendakukajonguku-pwalanajumbech-e oti m-pukugukubeche i-lombiy-a.
	2SG-PRES-go-FV-to-Jongo-OM-tell-FV-1SG-OM-PRES-ask for-FV-
	For storing-PL-maize-my
	'You, go to Jongo, tell him I am asking for bags for storing my maize, please'
(4).	B: na n-obik-a mu-ka-nyozuch-e-chwidogu.
	1SG-SM-PST-ask-FV-2PL-to- add-FV-some more.
	'I was asking you to add me some more, please.'

Extract 2: The use of the plural personal pronoun *"twi"*

In Extract 2, A had given B some drinking water. After finishing it, B requested more water. In doing so, B used a plural second-person pronoun to refer to the addressee. This plural form is marked by the morpheme "*mu*" ('you' plural) attached to a verb *mu-ka-nyo-nzuch-e* 'you add me', instead of the singular morpheme "*gu*" ('you' singular), which could have been used to refer to a single addressee.

Similarly, data from observation revealed that first-person and second-person plural pronouns are used to express politeness in Matengo. Just as a sample, a woman in her 30s met her father-in-law, who was in his 60s. As they met, the woman first greeted her father-in-law by saying, *"Jambu atati"* (good afternoon, father). Her father-in-law responded with *"ena nzumwichi"*, yes, are you fine? The woman then replied: *"twe tujumukanile"* 'we are fine'. In this exchange, the woman used the first-person plural pronoun *twe* 'we' instead of the singular *ne* 'I' to refer to herself. Similarly, the man used the second person plural second pronoun, marked by the morpheme *nzu* ('you' plural) in the verb *"nzumwiche"* 'are you fine', instead of the singular *"gu"* ('you' singular), which would refer to an individual.

This observation was followed by interviews. A man in his 40s was presented with the examples above, which illustrate how speakers used first-person and second-person plural pronouns to refer to a single individual in conversations. He was then asked to explain why this occurs. The man replied: *"Ajaku alonje ilipe kuletaisima, tena ajaku alonjende ana pakuba na mundu joahesimu ngani'* "They speak this way to show respect, and they usually do so when addressing a person whom they highly respect."

Based on the above arguments, it can be concluded that the first person plural *twe* 'we' with its variants *twa* and *twi,* along with the second person plural pronoun *mwe* 'you' and its variants *mwa* and *mwi,* serve as strategies for expressing politeness in Matengo. These pronouns are typically used in conversations between people who highly respect each other. In particular, the plural personal pronouns are employed when speakers request something from those who are older or more socially and economically superior to them. Therefore, in Matengo, an utterance is perceived as more polite when plural person pronouns are used to address a single individual rather than a singular personal pronoun.

3.2 The use of the past tense

The analysis of the data collected for this study revealed that the past tense plays a significant role in expressing politeness in the Matengo language, especially when making requests. The Extract 3 illustrates this argument:

(1)	C: enuna-no-bik-a li-jelalyakuni-kulagal-i chilabo
	Thus-1SG-SM-PST-request-FV-3SG-hoe-your-SM-FUT-weed-AGR- tomorrow.
	'I was requesting your hoe that I will weed tomorrow.'
(2)	A: kolakola le ngasegwa-jomwil-e ku-kulagal-i?
	There-NEG-OM-PST-finish-AGR-FV-PROG-weed-AGR
	'Didn't you finish the wedding there?'

Extract 3: The use of the past tense

In Extract 3, C in line (1), was requesting a hoe from A, which she intended to use the next day. In so doing, C used the past tense when presenting the request, saying: *"enu na nobika lijela lyaku nikulagali chilabo"* 'I was requesting your hoe so that I can use it to weed tomorrow'. In Extract 3, C appears to use the past tense to make a request and to express a present state rather than the present tense.

In an interview aimed at exploring the opinions of Matengo speakers on why speaker C in line (1) used the past tense to express the present request, a man in his 40s was presented with the scenario in which speaker C used the past tense to make the request. He was then asked to provide reasons why speaker C might have chosen the past tense to make the present request. The man replied: *"Jwapaga ana ili enu kuloba koni gunyenyachela*, 'she said so to request humbly.' The same scenario was described to a woman in her 60s, who was then asked to explain why speaker C should make a request using the past tense. The woman replied: "*Ejuwaga ana manachi enu jukubajuloba kwisima nu nukunyenyache*." 'When she says that, she asks humbly and with respect.'

Based on the arguments above, it can be generalised that the past tense is one of the linguistic strategies used to express politeness in the Matengo language, particularly when making requests. In particular, the past tense is used when interlocutors are unfamiliar with each other. It is also used when interlocutors with lower status make requests to interlocutors with higher status. However, the past tense is not important for intimate people, who do not need to sound polite when making requests of each other. A request made with the past tense sounds more polite than a request made with the present tense.

3.3 The clitic *oti* /*ote* 'please'

The data analysis revealed that *oti,* and its variant *ote,* which is equivalent to the English word 'please', are common strategies for expressing politeness in Matengo. The clitic *oti* typically appears within a phrase or clause alongside other words to express politeness. When attached to a verb, it transforms the entire sentence into a polite form, regardless of whether the original sentence was interrogative or imperative. This is illustrated in Extract 4:

(1).	B: HHHHHHH gu-lombi-oti-omba-kunza-ako
	SM-PT-buy-AGR-please-PL-fish-there-out side
	'Just buy fish there outside, please.'
(2).	C: HHHHHHHH.

Extract 4: The use of the clitic *oti /ote* 'please'

In Extract 4, B, in line (1), told C to buy the fish that was being sold outside. To make the request polite, B attached the clitic *oti* 'please' to the verb *gulombi* 'buy'. C did not respond verbally but laughed, indicating that the statement was not perceived as a threat.

Observational data further revealed that the clitic *oti* 'please' and its variant *ote* function as linguistic strategies for expressing politeness in Matengo. This was observed on one occasion where a man in his 30s greeted his stepmother, who was in her 50s, by saying, *Jambu oti* 'good afternoon, please. His stepmother replied with, "e gujumwichi," meaning "yes, are you fine?" In this conversation, the man used the clitic *oti* alongside his greeting, making it sound more polite than it would without it. However, in her response, the stepmother omitted the clitic *oti* 'please', and the conversation continued smoothly. This implies that, in this context, respect is not reciprocated but flows in one direction.

The interviews were conducted to explore opinions from Matengo speakers about the essence of using the clitic *ote* 'please.' A 30-year-old man was presented with the scenario the researcher observed involving the man who greeted his stepmother. The man was then asked to explain the essence of using the particle *oti* 'please' in presenting the greetings. The man replied that, *ajaku bandu atumile nielii lialonje aibonikana alonje kuchibuli",* translated as, "people employ *oti* in conversations to avoid sounding rude". The same question was posed to a woman in her 40s, who also answered that, *"ajaku linenu oti litumika kuwasegupwaga se esi ngasalasima",* which means that "the word is used to indicate that what you are saying is not a command". From this evidence, it can be argued that the clitic *ote* 'please' is a strategy for expressing politeness in Matengo.

3.4 The diminutive morpheme

The data analysis revealed that the diminutive morphemes *ka-* and *tu-* are also linguistic strategies for expressing politeness in Matengo. The morpheme *ka-* is usually attached to singular nouns, while *tu-* is usually used with plural and uncountable nouns. For example, one may say: *na mbeche ka-omba kamo* 'I ask for one small fish' or *na mbeche tuombi tubele* "I ask for two small eggs". Extract 5 is taken from one of the conversations that illustrate how the diminutive morpheme expresses politeness in Matengo.

(1).   F: na m-ma-gul-i ka-tochika-mu anyenga.
          1SG-2PL-OM-ask-AGR- DM-banana-AGR-one- SG-aunt
          'I ask you for one small banana, Aunt.'
 (2).   A: jo-pa ale.
          OM- take- this
         'Take this.'
(3).   F: asandi anienga
         'Thank you, aunt'.

Extract 5: The use of dimunitive morpheme

In Extract 5, F in line (1) requested a banana from A (her aunt). In doing so, she attached the diminutive morpheme *ka-* to the noun 'banana.' This use of the diminutive morpheme *ka-* was intentional, serving to minimise the degree of imposition that could otherwise pose a threat to the addressee. Similarly, observational data revealed that the diminutive morphemes *ka-* and its variant *tu-* function as linguistic strategies for expressing politeness in Matengo. It was observed that incorporating the diminutive morpheme in requests helps to reduce the perceived imposition on the addressee.

This can also be illustrated by an observed interaction in which a man in his 40s requested a woman in her 30s to help him cultivate his garden. The man said, *"Na mwinyangati oti kulema ka-bustani ka chilabu kano"* I ask you to help me cultivate my small garden tomorrow, please. In presenting this request, the man attached the morpheme *ka-* to the noun *bustani* 'garden'. This use of the diminutive morpheme *ka-* conveys a sense that the task is not burdensome, implying that the addressees will experience much difficulty. Diminutive morphemes generally function to soften the degree of imposition on the addressee, reducing the likelihood that they will perceive the request as intrusive.

This exchange was followed by interviews aimed at gathering speakers' views and opinions on the use of the diminutive morpheme *'ka-'* and its variant *'tu-'*. A man in his 50s was presented with the scenario of a man requesting a woman to help him cultivate his garden. He was then asked to explain why the man attached the diminutive morpheme *ka-* to the word *bustani* 'garden'. The interviewee replied: *"Malajenji bandu atumi ilikupungusa ukaligwa se pwaga", meaning* 'Sometimes, it is used to reduce the severity of words that one speaks'. The same question was asked to a woman in her 30s, who responded: "*ili enu kumfanya jogu mpwaji jubonape sindu sikawaida",* meaning, 'To make the addressee perceive it as something ordinary.

Based on the above discussion, it can be concluded that the diminutive morpheme *ka-* and its variant *tu-* serve as a linguistic strategy for expressing politeness in Matengo. This morpheme modifies the meaning of the base word, shifting it from its neutral form to convey the sense of few, little, or small. Furthermore, the use of the diminutive morpheme reduces the degree of imposition, as it implies that the speaker's request is minimal and unlikely to burden the addressee.

3.5 Address terms

The data analysis revealed that specific address terms are used to express politeness in Matengo. It was revealed that politeness features associated with terms of address are important at the onset of

conversations since they can mark friendliness or respect. Below are the terms of address revealed to express politeness in Matengo.

3.6 Married women's ethnic names

Observation revealed that the Matengo have special ethnic names for married women. These names function similarly to the English title Mrs and are determined by a woman's surname and lineage. In interactions, Matengo women are addressed by their ethnic names rather than their first names or surnames. It was observed that, before marriage, women in the Matengo community are addressed by their first names. However, upon marriage, they are given ethnic names that are recognised exclusively within the Matengo speech community. These names signify respect, as married women hold a higher social status than unmarried ones in Matengo culture in daily interactions. Thus, the ethnic names assigned to them serve as a marker of respect, distinguishing them from their unmarried counterparts. Addressing a married woman by her first name is considered disrespectful. Table 1 presents the ethnic names given to married women in the Matengo community.

Table 1: *Matengo women's ethnic names*

No.	Surname	Women's ethnic names	No.	Surname	Women's ethnic names
1	Ndunguru	*Mwejela*	11	Ili	*Lugali*
2	Lupogo	*Chindembu*	12	Sangana	*Ndeka*
3	Kumburu	*Mauka*	13	Kapinga	*Peleka*
4	Komba	*Chitonda*	14	Milinga	*Jeu*
5	Kinunda	*Chinunda*	15	Mbunda	*Bolela*
6	Nombo	*Chiosi*	16	Lilo	*Mwanzaga*
7	Ngongi	*Chejeto*	17	Nchimbi	*Kigumi*
8	Mapunda	*Njindo*	18	Kihuru	*Siga*
9	Ndomba	*Tindu*			
10	Ndimbu	*Mangu*			

Source: Field Data (2021)

The observation was followed by interviews. A man in his 60s was asked to explain why ethnic names are assigned to married women. The man replied: *ajaku bachema kwisima enu nukwa topautisa na banji binga kutoguleka.* This translates to: 'They are given these names to show respect and distinguish them from unmarried women.

Based on this discussion, it can be argued that ethnic names assigned to married women are linguistic politeness strategies in Matengo. These names are like titles that signal respect for the married women. These ethnic names enable Matengo speakers to avoid the potential threat that may arise when addressing married women by their first names.

3.7 *Bambu* 'sir' or 'chief'

The data analysis revealed that, in Matengo, the address term *bambu* 'sir' or 'chief' is used to show respect when addressing men. This term is used to avoid mentioning first names. In Matengo, *bambu* 'sir' or 'chief' is used as a direct form of address to refer to all males politely. However, young men

are not permitted to use this term when addressing adults and elderly individuals. *Bambu* is typically used by speakers of the same social class, like age mates, close friends, and people with similar power or economic status. If a young male uses it to address an older male, it is interpreted as rudeness or disrespect. However, there are exceptions in which an older man may address a young man as *bambu* to elevate his status. Extract 6 supports this argument:

A:	*bambuleleno le ngatujendi kunywaugwembe"*
	'Sir, are we not going to drink local beer today?'
B:	*"twijenda chilabo bambu"*
	'Let us go tomorrow, sir.'

Extract 6: The use of the term, *bambu*

This observation was accompanied by interviews intended to gather views from Matengo speakers about the usage of *bambu.* A man in his 50s was presented with a scenario in which two men addressed each other using the term *bambu* instead of their names.' He was then asked to explain why they did so. The man replied: "*ilienukuleta heshima kuku nzachijwe*", meaning, 'In order to show respect to his colleague.

On another occasion, a boy was heard telling his fellow: "*Bambu, ngatuselegwi le kusule?",* *translated as,* 'Won't we be late for school, sir? This observation was also followed by an interview in which a 15-year-old boy was presented with a scenario involving two boys playing cards at home. The young boy was then asked to explain why the schoolboy addressed his fellow as "bambu". The young boy replied: "*sabu jolajola jabya bamboo jwache", meaning,* 'Because he was his fellow sir. From these observations, it may be argued that the address term *bambu* is a politeness strategy in Matengo as it is used to show respect towards one's interlocutor. This implies that, in this context, respect is reciprocal. These findings relate to the findings by Brown and Levinson (1987), who contend that address terms are 'in-group identity markers that are used to claim ground with H that is carried out by those definitions of a group,' thus, encoding a relationship between speaker and addressee.

3.8 The use of *Ala:mu* 'sister-in-law or brother-in-law'

Ala:mu 'sister or brother-in-law is used in Matengo to mean one's brother's wife or one's sister's husband. The term *ala:mu* 'sister or brother-in-law' by itself contains politeness features; that is, it carries a special meaning of respect when addressed to a person. The term is also used to address both males and females in Matengo. This is illustrated by Extract 7.

(1).   A: a-jibich-i-ko?
        SM-PERF-steal-AGR-where
      'Where have they stolen?'
(2).   C: kuku n-kosimundo
        From-3SG-his friend
      'From his friend'
(3).   A: kuku nkosimundu?
        To his friend?'
      'To his friend?'
(4).   B: kukaamone
      'To Amoni.'
(5).   A: amonibo: ala:mu?
        amoni-which-3SG-sister-in-law?
      'Which Amoni; sister-in-law?'(Meaning, which Amon my sister-in-law?)
(6).   B: katolemwa-namarehemu katole
        3SG-katole-3SG-son-3SG-late-3SG-katole
      'Katole. The son of the late Katole.'

Extract 7: The use of *Ala:mu*

In Extract 7, A in line (1) asked where the thieves had stolen from. C in line (2) responded, 'from his friend.' In line (3), A asked: 'Which friend?' B in line (4) replied: Amoni. A in line (5) asked again, 'Which Amoni, sister-in-law?' In line 6, B responded: Katole, 'The son of the late Katole'. Thus, in this extract, A addressed B, who is his brother's wife, as *ala:mu* 'sister-in-law'.

During interviews with Matengo natives, the researcher presented the scenario in Extract 7 to a man aged 40. He was asked to explain why A addresses B as *ala:mu* 'sister-in-law' instead of using her personal name. The man replied: "*ajaku jwachema alamu ili enu kuleta isima",* meaning, 'he addressed that way to show respect.' The same question was asked to a woman in her 70s, who replied: *"aji toka samani achema ahelahela. Aji alamu bi ngakwachema liina lyabo, ngasape. Jikuba tabia jiliyaha*", meaning, 'It has been this way since ancient times; you cannot address your sister-in-law by her first name. It is not good; it signals bad behaviour.'

Based on this discussion, it can be concluded that the address term "*ala:mu"* brother or sister-in-law is connotatively used to signal respect in casual conversations in Matengo. The term is always reciprocal, although a lack of reciprocity is still less threatening. The address term is not, however, used to redress face-threatening acts; instead, it is used to portray a sense of respect at the beginning of a conversation.

3.9 *Nkoanu* vs. *anihala* 'father-in-law or mother-in-law'

On the one hand, the term *nkoanu* 'mother or father-in-law' refers to one's wife's parents, encompassing both male and female parents-in-law. This term carries the sense of 'the highest level of respect' when it is used in direct address. In the Matengo culture, a mother-in-law is regarded with more respect than one's own mother. Observational data demonstrate how the term "*nkoanu"*, mother-in-law or father-in-law, is used to express politeness in casual conversations in Matengo. On one occasion, a 40-year-old man at home saw his mother-in-law coming from the farm with his wife.

The man approached them to greet his mother-in-law and addressed her as "*nkoanu*", 'mother-in-law,' before continuing with the greeting.

On the other hand, the term "*anihala*" in Matengo refers to one's husband's parents, encompassing both male and female parents. The term *anihala,* as a politeness strategy, is illustrated by data from observation. On one occasion, a woman aged 30 was heard telling her neighbour: *"Chilabo ne nijenda kwajangati anihala ba kutupu ngonde",* meaning, "Tomorrow, I shall go to help my mother-in-law to harvest beans."

This observation was followed by interviews in which a man aged 60 was presented with a scenario in which he greeted his mother-in-law using the term *nkoanu* 'mother-in-law' instead of her personal name. The interviewee was asked to explain the reason for doing so. The interviewee responded: *"Nkoanu ndejo. Enundenga kutachiwa kulogoliina lya chemana che enugwibya gukosichi adabo. Eguchema nkoanu kukubaenu nisima."* This translates to: "A mother-in-law is someone you respect very much. For that reason, one is not allowed to mention her real name, as it would sound rude. However, when you call her *nkoanu*, you show respect". Based on these discussions, it can be generalised that the terms *nkoanu/anihala* 'father-in-law'/'mother-in-law' are strategies for expressing politeness in Matengo culture. However, these terms are not used to redress face-threatening acts when presented.

4 Discussion

This study explored the linguistic strategies used by Matengo speakers to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs) in casual conversation. The findings demonstrate that politeness in Matengo is systematically realised through a set of recurrent linguistic resources, namely the use of past tense forms, plural personal pronouns with singular reference, the clitic *oti/ote* 'please', diminutive morphemes *ka-/ tu-,* and culturally specific address terms. These strategies reveal a politeness system that is strongly oriented towards the protection of negative face and the maintenance of hierarchical social relations.

Regarding the use of plural personal pronouns, Brown and Gilman (1960) observed that in most European languages, such as French, there is a binary distinction between the second person singular pronoun *tu-* (T), which is used to address less powerful interlocutors and the second person plural pronoun *vous* (V), which is typically used to address superior interlocutors. According to them, this distinction is determined by age, sex, physical strength, and institutionalised role, for example, in the army, church, or family (Brown and Gilman, 1960, p. 255). Similar findings were also reported by Magashi (2017, p. 161) in Sukuma, who argues that 'the first- and second-person plural pronouns can be used with singular referents as a politeness strategy to redress face-threatening acts, particularly in making invitations and expressing compliments. In relation to politeness theory, the use of a plural personal pronoun is an example of a negative politeness strategy that aims to show difference (P) or distance (D), thereby achieving the same goals as indirectness (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 198). However, the findings of this study contrast with those of Zeynalova (2025), who reported that personal pronouns are pragmatic tools that signal social status, inclusion, identity and communicative intent, not simply a politeness strategy. This implies that some politeness strategies, such as the use of plural personal pronouns, are not universal to all languages.

The findings of this study have further revealed that the past tense is one of the strategies that are used to remedy face-threatening acts in the Matengo language. These findings are consistent with

those of Thorstein (2005:151), who asserts that in Norwegian, the most common strategy for making requests is the use of the past tense, and that 'a request made in the present tense does not sound like a request. However, it sounds as if the speaker is literally describing what is going on in his/her mind at the time of the utterance, and it would sound more likely that the speaker is addressing him/herself rather than the person he/she is facing.' Magashi (2017) also found that the past tense is a strategy used to redress face-threatening acts in Sukuma, particularly when making requests. Therefore, taking politeness theory into account, the past tense is a negative politeness strategy intended to serve one's comfort zone, acting on one's negative face. However, Thanh, Ngoc, An, Thu, and Huong (2022) assert that past tenses are not classified as independent strategies; rather, strategies are defined in terms of FTA mitigation.

Another significant finding in this study is the use of the clitic *oti/ote* 'please'. These findings concur with the findings by Thorstein (2005), who argues that Norwegians employ 'please' as a politeness marker. In Norwegian, the politeness marker 'please' is used to redress requests even without combining it with other politeness markers. As such, a request made by the combination of modal auxiliary 'can' and politeness marker 'please' in a structure like 'can you come here please?' implies the highest degree of politeness that is beyond normal politeness. Magashi (2017) also reported similar findings in Sukuma. These findings run contrary to the findings by Thorstein (2005) in that, in Matengo, the politeness marker *oti/ote* 'please' can co-occur with other politeness markers like diminutive morphemes in ordinary politeness. For instance: boa oti kalibu kalaka 'remove that small stone, please'. Thus, in the Matengo language, the clitic oti/ ote, 'please', is a negative politeness strategy employed by speakers to minimise the possible threat that might happen if the same message were presented using forceful statements.

The diminutive morpheme is another linguistic strategy employed by Matengo speakers to redress face-threatening acts. These findings align with those of Eshreteh (2017), who explored the pragmatic functions of diminutives in Palestinian Arabic. Eshreteh argues that, in Palestinian Arabic, the diminutives minimise imposition, soften negative statements, express affection and endearment, intensify the speaker's emotions, and express intimacy and connectedness to one another. Magashi (2017) also argues that the diminutive morpheme expresses politeness in Sukuma. Specifically, it adds goodness (beauty) to the noun in question, therefore, expressing admiration and approval. However, these findings are contrary to Appah and Amfo (2011), who reported that the diminutive morphemes in Akan convey senses such as small, young, feminine, or insignificant, without framing diminutives primarily as politeness strategies.

With respect to forms of address, this study found that address terms are highly significant in fostering harmonious interactions, as they signal respect or friendliness at the onset of a conversation. These findings align with Hwang's (1991) findings regarding terms of address in Korean and American cultures. Hwang (*ibid*.) argues that American culture is first-name-oriented; however, in Korean culture, family and title names are more prominent. Hwang also argues that first names in Korean culture are restricted in use, as they are most commonly used among children's and young people's peer groups and by older persons addressing younger persons within the family. However, there is a difference between Korean and Matengo cultures in the emphasis placed on names and surnames. Thus, this becomes a Matengo cultural orientation. Brown and Levinson (1987) also argue that address terms such as dear, love, and friend are used to create an in-group identity marker between the speaker and the addressee, and that one feels good before the FTA is presented. Similar findings were reported by Katakami (1997) regarding the names and address

terms in Mbeere. Her study revealed that it is taboo for a daughter-in-law to mention her father-in-law's first name, as it is for a son-in-law to mention his mother-in-law's first name. As a result, if a woman has a son named by the first name of her father-in-law, and a daughter named by the first name of her mother-in-law, then she calls the boy Mugendi 'traveller' and the girl kaari 'a little girl' as an attempt to avoid mentioning the name of her father or mother-in-law. This is similar to the Matengo culture, where it is taboo for a son to mention his mother-in-law's first name, as it is for a daughter to mention her father-in-law's first name. However, in Matengo, if a woman has a son named after her father-in-law and a daughter named after her mother-in-law, she may use those names when addressing them. Magashi (2017, p. 209) reports similar findings in Sukuma, where the honorific terms mayʋ bhʋko 'mother-in-law' and bha:bha bhʋko 'father-in-law' are also used in Sukuma as avoidance strategies by daughters and sons-in-law in an attempt to avoid mentioning the first names of their parents-in-law. Overall, the findings of this study show how Matengo speakers use address forms to redress FTAs in casual conversations. However, the findings of this study run counter to Vismans (2023) and Yuwono and Santoso (2024), who argue that the choice of address terms does not directly align with politeness interpretation; instead, it implies sociolinguistic framing and identity.

5 Conclusion

This study analysed the politeness strategies used to redress FTAs in casual conversation in the Matengo language. The study identified five linguistic strategies used to remedy FTAs in casual conversations in the Matengo language. These are past tense, plural personal pronouns, the clitic *oti* and its variant *ote* (please), the diminutive morphemes *ka-* and its variant *tu-,* and terms of address. These strategies are aimed at counteracting negative face. It can, therefore, be concluded that the Matengo culture values negative politeness more than positive politeness. This is because most strategies, except for the diminutives, observed in the data were geared towards redressing FTAs that threaten the negative face of the interlocutors, including address terms. Consequently, vertical politeness is more prominent than horizontal politeness. For example, most address terms such as *bambu* ('sir' or 'chief'), *ala:mu* ('sister' or 'brother-in-law'), *nkoanu* and *anihala* ('*mother/*' *or* '*father-in-law*'), and married women's ethnic names are intended to show respect rather than solidarity or friendliness. This indicates that respect is more valued than friendliness or solidarity in this culture. Generally, the findings of this study show that the Kimatengo language has universal politeness strategies which cut across world languages, particularly Bantu languages. However, the use of women's ethnic names as a politeness strategy in the Matengo language is a significant and distinctive feature, given that the strategy is not attested in other Bantu languages, such as Sukuma.

6 Limitations

This study examined the linguistic strategies the Matengo speakers employ to mitigate face-threatening acts, focusing on casual conversations. However, the study did not include the paralinguistic aspects of language in its analysis of politeness strategies. That is, it did not include the nonverbal cues, the aspect of language that could serve similar roles in interactions. Furthermore, because this study focused solely on casual conversations, excluding analysis of politeness strategies in formal settings, such as meetings and dowry negotiations, a politeness study of formal events and nonverbal cues may be conducted to provide a deeper understanding of Matengo politeness and its contribution to the general theory of politeness.

7 Declaration of conflict of interest

8 Funding

9 References

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