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Rhetorical questions as an off-record politeness strategy in language use among the Bukusu

Eunice N. Neyole¹, Frida A. Miruka², Deborah N. Amukowa³

^{1,2} Masinde Muliro University of Science & Technology, Kenya

³ Maseno University, Kenya

Correspondence: eunicewalela@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper sought to discuss rhetorical questions as an off-record politeness strategy with the aim of determining the context and reasons for their use in communication. It focused on language use amongst users of Bukusu language through a case study of Manguliechi's oration. The study was guided by the Politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1987). Purposive sampling was used to sample Manguliechi, whose language use formed the basis of this study. Data was collected by use of content analysis and discourse methods. Data analysis was done through the interpretive method and the results reported by description. The research outcomes are expected to play a vital role in highlighting and explaining the context and reasons for the use of rhetoric questions as an off-record strategy in language. The report will also contribute literature in critical discourse analysis of African languages.

Keywords: Bukusu, indirectness, off-record strategies, politeness, rhetorical questions

Public Interest Statement

The research outcomes are expected to play a vital role in highlighting and explaining the context and reasons for the use of rhetoric questions as an off-record strategy in language.

Introduction

A communicative act is done off record if it is done in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act (Brown and Levinson 1987:211). The statements uttered off record provide a number of defensible interpretations to the addressee and at the same time not holding the addresser responsible to commit him to any specific interpretation. It is the responsibility of the addressee to decide how to interpret the message from the addresser. In this context, such off-record utterances are essentially indirect uses of language. The indirectness is not in reference to formal types of indirection but rather to linguistic strategies in context. Therefore, the lexical meaning may not necessarily be the intended meaning. Some inference has to be made in order for the information to be truly understood. The actual processes that lie behind the comprehension (and thus the production) of indirection are not well understood. This research findings attempt to discuss the reasons why speakers choose the use of rhetoric questions to communicate. Besides, the paper highlights the contexts of the use of the questions among Bukusu language speakers.

Athanasidou (1991) cited in Dzamal (2016) has classified questions into four categories based on their function in communication and intentions of speakers: information seeking questions, rhetorical questions, examination questions and indirect requests. This implies that questions play different roles in the communication process depending on the intent of the addresser and the function they play. Some questions are aimed to test the knowledge of addressee's or to interrogate them while others are intended to urge addressees to do something.

A rhetorical question is an interrogative statement made under circumstances indicating that the speaker or writer does not seek a reply. This brings in an assumption that the response from the addressee whether verbalized or not is always obvious. It may not be the case in all contexts because even though rhetorical questions are meant to be in the information seeking category, they are not asked in order to get an answer instead they serve the purpose of providing information. As mentioned by Dzamal (2016) rhetorical questions are characteristic in that they are used to achieve something else other than elicit answer. They play a functional rather than structural role. This intended meaning may be understood by relating the addresser's message to the contextual cues (social distance, relative power or rank imposition). These cues from the addresser's utterance provide information that the addressee is expected to make inference to. Rhetorical questions require a cognitive response represented by the addressee's acceptance of the answer implied by the speaker. By doing so rhetorical questions violate the Gricean maxim of quality.

Grice is a philosopher and linguist who believed that conversation is a cooperative activity in which both speaker and addressee engaged each other using the same (understood) guidelines. The speaker on one hand intends to communicate in an understandable fashion while the addressee also intends to understand that communication. In order to achieve this Grice (1989) came up with cooperative principles put in four underlying categories known as maxims: quality, quantity, manner and relevance maxims. The maxims are an

understood agreement between the speaker and addressee through the communication process. This paper has focused briefly on the maxim of quality because it is the one violated by the use of rhetorical questions. The primary principle in the quality maxim is “Try to make your contribution one that is true.” This can be guided by the following sub-maxims:

- i. Do not say what you believe to be false.
- ii. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

In asking questions the addressee and speaker are bound to sincerity and truthfulness. Rhetorical questions deny the addressee the opportunity to interrogate or give feedback to the speaker. On the other hand, the speaker has evaded the role of taking responsibility of the addressee’s interpretation. This therefore suggests that the speaker has a reason for such use of language which could be implied and inferred from the cue in context.

The Bukusu are a Bantu speaking people who are part of the larger Luhya ethnic group. The Bukusu live in the western parts of Kenya and form about 17-20 percent of the estimated six million Luhya community. The Bukusu live mainly in Bungoma County but others spill over to Kitale, Trans Nzoia County and Lugari in Kakamega County. Pockets of the Bukusu also live across the border in Uganda’s Mbale District. Their main source of income is from subsistence farming mainly in the maize crop, but cattle and other domestic animals also play an important role. Sugar cane and coffee are two of their most important agricultural crops. The area usually receives sufficient rain to sustain the population. As is the case in most Kenyan communities, the Bukusu traditional culture is under heavy pressure. A number of traditional customs have been maintained, some with reinvention and adaptation. For instance, the initiation rites among the young men are still taking place among virtually all sections of the population. However, the timing has been adapted to coincide with school vacations, so that they do not interfere with the child’s education. Some people have inculcated Christian practices.

Traditionally there was resistance against modern influence among the Bukusu. This was against colonial authorities. This was most vividly expressed in the Dini ya Msambwa movement, led by Elijah Masinde. This movement is a mixture of traditional religious beliefs with some Christian elements. The Bukusu have traditional priests who educate the community on language use and cultural practices in order to maintain order and continuity. Among the recognized priest endowed with oratory skills is Joseph Manguliechi.

Literature review

Yanti (2017) studied the strategies off the record that described modesty in conversation in the famous American show “Oprah Winfrey Show”. The results showed that the context of situation and violations of the maxims of conversation influenced the choice of strategies. The findings also indicated that there were some cases when factors that came in play during conversation such as intonation affected the choice of strategy. In addition, it was

discovered that some sentences involved more than one strategy. This research explored the use of off record politeness strategy however our study in the present discussion narrowed the strategy down to a single strategy: rhetorical questions.

Dzemaal (2016) has investigated whether rhetorical questions contain certain linguistic elements or forms which differentiate them from answer eliciting questions and thereby hint at their rhetorical nature even outside the context. He analyzed over 1200 examples of rhetorical questions. The research showed that context was the ultimate and most salient indicator of whether a question was rhetorical or not. The findings also showed that rhetorical questions contained elements on syntactic and semantic level. This current research focuses on the semantic level with the aim of discussing context cues and the payoffs.

Theory

Off record is a politeness strategy where an act of communication is done in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act. In constructing an off-record utterance one says something that is either more general (contains less information to the addressee in the sense that it rules out fewer possible states of affairs) or the utterance may actually be different from what the speaker means or intends to be understood. This research adopts this understanding to the phrase “indirect use of language.” In either case, the hearer must make some inference to recover what was intended by the speaker. Brown and Levinson divided the off-record politeness strategies in two categories: inviting conversational implicatures or being vague or ambiguous.

An implicature is a politeness strategy where the speaker gives hints during the communication process and hopes that the addressee picks up on them and thereby interprets the speaker's intended meaning. The speaker's utterance gives some appropriate contextual cues to form the inference basis to the addressee. It is therefore the task of the addressee to use the cues to decode the meaning. The speaker expects the addressee to understand what is being implied without taking responsibility of the speaker's interpretation. Brown and Levinson have listed ten sub strategies of implicatures namely: Hints, association clues, presuppositions, understatements, and overstatements, use of tautologies, use of contradictions, being ironic, using metaphors and use of rhetoric questions. By using these strategies, the speaker violates the Gricean maxims of efficient communications. It is under this background that we discuss rhetorical questions.

Methodology

The data used in this paper was obtained by content analysis. Recorded oration by Manguliechi was listened to, transcribed and then analyzed through discourse analysis methods. Rhetoric questions were extracted from the transcribed data then analyzed against tenets from the off-record politeness strategy (Brown and Levinson 1987).

Results and discussion

In this section we cite examples of rhetorical questions used in the oration and attempt to discuss the factors that may cause a speaker choose to communicate using this strategy. As mentioned by Goody (1978), the reasons for the use of politeness strategies are divided in to two categories namely: payoffs and the relevant circumstances (social distance, relative power or rank imposition).

Analysis of data revealed that:

In the context when the rank of imposition is not great, rhetorical questions are used to criticize the addressee. For instance;

Omukhasi omumeme yuno akhuria munju bali nawe oli khotaling'a. Ewe sotaling'a ta. Watikha ocha wae?

[A woman from the clan of Bameme threatens you in your house and then you decide to loiter. You are not the one to quit. Where are you going in the break up?]

Watikha mukholile murie?

[You with this break-up, what is wrong with you people?]

It is a Bukusu tradition that marriage is permanent. Breaking up or divorce was not entertained and the clan elders were to help sort out marital problems so that the family unit could not disintegrate. In case there was a solid reason for separation, it was the woman who was to go back to her family, escorted by the elders to give an explanation. The speaker does not like the view of the youth about marriage where separation, divorce and breakups seem to be normal. He particularly draws a criticism on men who run away from their seemingly not working marriages. His utterance is ridicule to them. From the context cues, the speaker is a respectable old man in society addressing the youth. In this context the social distance variable is the one that gives him an opportunity to criticize them. The rank of imposition is not great (he is an elder in society while they are young) and so he can openly rebuke them. He chooses to pose a rhetorical question for them to ponder on their character that is under critique.

Rhetorical questions give an opportunity to the speaker to soften the face threat. The use of rhetorical questions enables the speaker to displace or avoid mentioning the intended addressee. If the victim is listening, he does not feel isolated or singled out. The tone may seem harsh but the question is not directed to a specific mentioned person. The addressee may even choose to fill in the gaps and assign specific names to the speaker's utterance. For instance, in the question he says:

Watikha mukholile murie?

[You (singular) with this break-up, what is wrong with you people?]

This softens the face threats and enables the victims to receive the intended meaning without being ashamed publicly. The shift from single person to plural makes the victim feel that he is not alone. In this case the face threat has been reduced.

Rhetorical questions are used with repetition in some phrase(s) to make the intended meaning memorable and convincing.

Bali barakikha khukhola bukhwe mala omwana abone nganekhola epei ya mawe ya bukhwe.

[They begin discussing dowry... and yet the child is in attendance, listening and seeing them put a price tag to the mother]

Omanyelikhuwa bali bukhwe, balikhabakhola bukhwe, bukhwe sina nibwo khabakhola?

[You know something called bukhwe that they are discussing... What kind of bukhwe are they doing?]

In the above questions the speaker addresses the improper use of language. He mentions that in society today people gather to do dowry negotiations in the presence of children; something he feels is not right. He points out that dowry negotiation is not the correct translation for the Bukusu word bukwe. To him the use of this word is an implicature of a taboo or a private matter that is, unveiling the mother's nakedness. He therefore asks what private matter they are handling in the presence of the children. The speaker mentions the improperly used word repetitively and puts a question tag to it. The repetition of the question makes the point he is passing across memorable and convincing. Some rhetorical questions may have an aspect of humor not only meant to soften the face threat but also to strengthen the assertion made by the addresser. For instance, in the following words;

Luno lurii chikhafu nicho kolongolo kakhwa nicho chiramire.

[These days, the number of animals agreed upon for bride price by the Kolongolo age set are the ones still asked for.]

Kamakhuwa bali chikhafu 13, bali yee 13 ya khochawe. Khochawe ekhola 13, bali rarawe 12.

[As mentioned, 13 cows are required; the thirteenth is the uncles, and the remaining twelve for the father to the bride.]

Ne chili? [But where are they?]

Ocha ne karatasi yong'ene, yaba ewanga elabukhe. Yalabukha etabukhe. Nono chili?

[You walk away with a white paper whose color continues fading, the color fades until the paper finally is tattered. Now, where are the cows?]

The speaker in the above utterance talks about how society has turned away from its culture. He says that dowry negotiation in the present times are agreements only written on paper but payments are never made. He therefore interrogates them by asking where the animals meant for the bride price are. He avoids openly accusing them of not fulfilling the agreement of paying dowry but this intended meaning is implied. In this case the threat imposition has been minimized but at the same time the assertions are strengthened through repetition of the question: where are they? Where are they?

Conclusion

From the above analysis we can conclude that in the use of rhetoric questions as a politeness strategy, a speaker's intended utterance undergoes transformation in the deep structure. The speaker always has an intended meaning in the communication process. However, in the deep structure he calculates the effect of the utterance to the face of the addressee and chooses the use of rhetorical questions depending on the payoffs and social factors. The findings have indicated that when the speaker's utterance is in a harsh tone, he deliberately omits the addressee's identity in the rhetorical question to reduce the threat imposition. He does so by generalizing the question to all audience. The results also indicate that rhetorical questions are used to criticize, in mitigating face threats by softening criticism and strengthening assertions as also illustrated by Frank (1990). Some not only have a humorous effect but make the intended meaning memorable and convincing. Therefore, rhetorical questions are functional and are used to achieve something else other than elicit an answer given the context. These findings contribute to knowledge by discussing rhetorical questions as a linguistic strategy in context.

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Author Biodata

Eunice Nafula Neyole is a PhD Candidate in the Language and Literature Education Department of Masinde Muliro University of Science & Technology in Kenya. She is currently writing her thesis. Her research interests are Discourse Analysis, Sociolinguistics and Semantics.

Frida Miruka has a PhD in Kiswahili. She is a lecturer in the Language and Literature Education Department at Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology based in Kenya. Her specialty is Kiswahili studies.

Deborah Nanyama Amukowa holds a PhD in Kiswahili. She is a lecturer at Maseno University, in the Department of Kiswahili and other African Languages. Her research interests are Gender issues in Language and Literature.

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