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Pragmatic Strategies, Politeness Forms, and Power Relations in Conflict Talk: A Linguistic Analysis of the "I Am Not a Fool, Sir" Interaction in Nigerian Institutional Discourse.

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Abstract

In the bustling heart of Abuja, a tense confrontation between Federal Capital Territory Minister Nyesom Wike and a soldier, Lieutenant A.M. Yerima, captured national attention in November 2025. Wike's sharp rebuke "You are a very big fool" and Yerima's composed retort "I am not a fool, sir" unfolded amid a land dispute, sparking widespread debate on respect, authority, and communication in Nigeria's hierarchical institutions. This article delves into the pragmatic strategies, politeness mechanisms, and power dynamics spot, drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, Goffman's (1967) Facework Theory, Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1976), and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1989). We argue that Yerima's response exemplifies "polite resistance," a culturally nuanced tactic rooted in Nigerian norms of deference and maturity, allowing subordinates to reclaim dignity without escalating conflict. Through a detailed examination, this study enriches African pragmatics, institutional discourse, and conflict management scholarship, offering insights for civil-military relations and professional training in high-stakes environments.

Keywords: politeness, conflict talk, power relations, Nigerian discourse, institutional communication

Introduction

Language is not merely a tool for conveying information; it is a battlefield where power is asserted, identities are defended, and social hierarchies are negotiated. Imagine a high-ranking government official, fueled by frustration over a blocked land access, unleashing a verbal assault on a uniformed soldier: "You are a very big fool. As at the time I graduated, you were still in primary school." The soldier, unflinching, replies: "I am not a fool, sir. I have

integrity." This real-life exchange, which went viral in November 2025, exemplifies how brief interactions can reveal profound insights into human communication (Channels Television, 2025). Occurring during a land dispute in Abuja, it highlights the tensions between civilian authority and military discipline in Nigeria's institutional landscape.

Institutional discourse, particularly in contexts like Nigeria's civil-military interactions, often mirrors



broader societal structures of power and respect (Fairclough, 1989). Here, Wike's words represent an overt challenge to the soldier's dignity, while Yerima's response navigates the fine line between resistance and subordination. This incident resonates deeply in a culture where respect for hierarchy is paramount, yet personal honor demands defense (Adegbija, 1995). Despite extensive research on politeness and conflict in global pragmatics, few studies have dissected such micro-level encounters in African settings, where cultural norms amplify the stakes (Odebunmi, 2010; Adetunji, 2025; Olatunji, 2025).

This article addresses this gap by posing key questions: What linguistic styles characterize the participants' utterances? How does Wike's statement function as a face-threatening act (FTA) in a hierarchical context? What pragmatic strategies enable Yerima's polite resistance? How do power relations shape their choices? And how does Nigerian socio-cultural context influence public interpretations? Our objectives are to identify styles, analyze FTAs, examine resistance tactics, explore power influences, and unpack cultural implications. By doing so, we contribute to sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis, with practical applications for conflict resolution and training in Nigeria's public sectors.

Literature Review

Face and Facework

At the core of interpersonal dynamics lies the concept of "face," the public self-image individuals strive to maintain (Goffman, 1967). Facework strategies to preserve or restore this image becomes crucial in conflicts, where threats can disrupt social harmony. In institutional settings, face threats often stem from power imbalances, as seen in African judicial discourses where superiors wield linguistic control (Obeng, 1999). This framework is vital for our analysis, as Wike's insult directly assaults Yerima's positive face (desire for approval), prompting defensive facework. Extending this, Nigerian studies emphasize how face acts intertwine with cultural politeness principles, particularly among Yoruba speakers (Olatunji, 2025).

Politeness and Impoliteness

Politeness Theory posits that speakers mitigate FTAs through positive (building rapport) or negative (respecting autonomy) strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Conversely, impoliteness involves intentional face damage to assert dominance (Culpeper, 1996). In Nigerian contexts, politeness is culturally inflected, emphasizing respect for elders and authority (Adegbija, 1995; Olateju, 2019; Olatunji, 2025). Recent studies, such as Adetunji's (2025) analysis of (im)politeness on social media platforms like X, reveal how digital discourses mirror offline power plays, with impoliteness often used



for political persuasion. This duality is evident in our case, where Wike employs bald-on-record impoliteness, while Yerima counters with polite redress. Further, impoliteness in Nigerian political forums positions interlocutors strategically, reinforcing hierarchies (Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2021).

Conflict Talk

Conflict talk encompasses disagreements laden with power, ideology, and emotion (Grimshaw, 1990). In African pragmatics, such talk often integrates cultural strategies for resolution, like imagery and indirectness (Chernenko, 2019). Power relations further complicate this, as language reproduces inequalities (Fairclough, 1989; Melefa & Chukwumezie, 2017). Nigerian legislative and media discourses frequently showcase direct commands to reinforce hierarchy (Ayeomoni, 2007; Odebunmi, 2010; Akande, 2023).

Empirical Insights

Empirical work on Nigerian politeness highlights its role in institutional harmony. For instance, politeness strategies in classroom discourse foster inclusive discussions (Influence of Politeness Strategies, n.d.). In medical consultations, doctors and patients construct politeness to navigate asymmetries (Politeness constructions, 2024). Military communication studies emphasize disciplined restraint, with indirect resistance preserving dignity (Ogunyemi, 2018; Adeyemi, 2020).

Recent analyses of spoken Nigerian English reveal how politeness adapts to multilingual contexts, mitigating conflicts in everyday interactions (Adeyemi & Salawu, 2012).

Conflict resolution in Africa often employs pragmatic discourse strategies to de-escalate (Language in Conflict Resolution, n.d.). Yet, gaps persist: Few integrate impoliteness from superiors with subordinate resistance in real-time Nigerian conflicts, especially viral ones amplified on social media. For example, open letters in Nigeria blend pragmatolinguistic elements of im/politeness to challenge authority subtly (Adetunji, 2024). Additionally, greetings in Ilorin communities illustrate how politeness principles shape sociolinguistic behaviors, offering parallels to institutional deference (Olatunji, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Our analysis is guided by an integrated theoretical approach. We employ Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1976) to classify the illocutionary force of the utterances. Politeness and Face-work Theories (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967) help us unpack the management of threats and dignity. Finally, Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1989) allows us to connect the micro-interaction to the macro-ideologies of power and authority in Nigerian society. These are complemented by Nigerian-specific sociolinguistic frameworks that account for local norms of turn-taking and cultural politeness.



Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative pragmatic-discourse design. The primary data is the verbatim transcript from the viral video of the encounter. Secondary data includes media reports, public reactions on social media (particularly X), and eyewitness accounts. The analysis involved thematic coding, a detailed stylistic examination (focusing on lexis, syntax, and tone), and the systematic application of the theoretical frameworks outlined above.

Analysis and Discussion

Linguistic Styles and Contrasting Strategies

Minister Wike's linguistic style is unambiguously aggressive and condescending. His declarative statement "You are a very big fool" uses intensifying amplifiers ("very big") and is followed by a belittling age comparison. This is a classic "bald-on-record" impoliteness strategy, a direct power move designed to humiliate and dominate publicly.

In stark contrast, Lieutenant Yerima's response is a model of concise, deferential assertiveness. His simple negation ("I am not a fool") is immediately softened by the honorific "sir," and he grounds his defence in the abstract quality of "integrity." This style reflects military precision and positive self-presentation. It is a polished, culturally intelligent rebuttal that denies the insult without mirroring the aggression.

The Face-Threatening Act and Power Enactment

Wike's utterance is an expressive speech act of contempt. In the framework of Politeness Theory, it constitutes a severe, unmitigated threat to Yerima's positive face his need for esteem and approval and is magnified by the public, hierarchical setting. Through a CDA lens, this is more than an insult; it is a public performance of power, a reinforcement of civilian dominance intended to put a military subordinate "in his place."

Polite Resistance: A Culturally-Nuanced Counter

Yerima's genius lies in his use of "polite resistance." He employs negative politeness (using "sir") to acknowledge the formal hierarchy and redress Wike's face, thus adhering to cultural expectations of deference. Simultaneously, he performs a representative speech act, assertively stating a fact about his own character ("I have integrity") to reclaim his positive face. This two-pronged approach allows him to defend his dignity without committing an act of overt insubordination that would escalate the conflict. It is a strategy deeply resonant in a Nigerian context, where mature composure (*omoluabi* ethos) is highly valued.

Power Relations and Subtle Subversion

The interaction is fundamentally shaped by power asymmetry. Wike's directness is enabled by his



perceived superior authority. However, Yerima subtly subverts this dynamic. By invoking his duty to follow “orders” and anchoring his identity in “integrity,” he draws on the alternative legitimacy and discipline of the military institution. He challenges the abuse of power not by yelling back, but by calmly asserting an unassailable moral position.

Socio-Cultural Resonance and Public Interpretation

The overwhelming public reaction on platforms like X, which praised Yerima’s maturity and criticised Wike’s arrogance, confirms the cultural reading of this exchange. Nigerians widely interpreted Yerima’s response as the “right” way to handle such provocation with dignified restraint. The event even spawned memes and musical remixes (“gyration”), a cultural practice that often serves to mock verbal excess and defuse tension through humour, further underscoring society’s aversion to unwarranted aggression from those in power.

Conclusion

The “I am not a fool, sir” moment transcends a mere political headline. It serves as a compelling lens through which to examine the intricate dance of language, power, and culture. In a nation continually negotiating the boundaries of authority and respect, Lieutenant Yerima’s response stands as a case study in resilient, principled communication. He demonstrated

that pushback need not be explosive to be effective.

This analysis, by blending pragmatic theory with cultural insight, advances scholarship on African institutional discourse. It also offers a practical lesson: in a climate of often tense hierarchies, strategic politeness and calibrated assertiveness can be powerful tools for conflict de-escalation and dignity preservation. For Nigeria’s institutions from government to the military fostering such communicative competence may be a vital step toward more respectful and effective governance.

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