

Politeness among The Swahili of Mombasa: A Family Perspective

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Abstract

This paper discusses politeness strategies within the Swahili community of Mombasa. It focuses on households and specifically on wife and husband interactions to discover what strategies are used and how effective they are. This paper argues that wives and husbands in Swahili households hold mutual feelings and affections that each must mind in communication. The paper uses the Politeness Principle (1978) that looks at politeness on a minimum maximum politeness scale in the relationship between speaker (self) and hearer (other). The six maxims proposed by Leech are discussed and it is shown how they guide a marriage to make it stable, fruitful and friendly, eventually a polite institution. Often in the Mombasa family units, requests are made indirectly and so are corrections. Affective use is also used to make the interactions fruitful. Politeness between the husband and wife seems to rest on a power balance where more politeness is expected of a wife.

Key Words: Politeness, Swahili, Mombasa, Famili Perspective

Introduction

There has been growing literature on the subject of politeness over the years (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987; Adegbija 1989; Leech 1980, 1983; Gu1990; Fraser 1978, 1990; Matsumoto, 1989; Vilkkii, 2006; Walters, 1979). However, politeness remains a tricky concept in terms of how it is understood by people and used by many scholars and even more elusive across cultural divides. Further, studies have taken family politeness for granted. Yet the family is a centre of intense interaction that can either uphold politeness or lead to impoliteness and eventually, communication breakdown. A general definition of politeness is provided by Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2011:1132) which defines polite in two ways:

1. Socially correct but not always sincere.
2. Having or showing good manners and respect for the feelings of others.

These two views reflect a general understanding of politeness. However, good manners, respect and social correctness vary with culture, context and many other social factors.

This paper focuses on the *Wamvita*, one of the Swahili communities at the Kenya coast who live on Mombasa Island. This is a community whose phonological system is fairly different from the standard Kiswahili because of the dental stops [t] and [d] as in *tukua* take and *ndoo* come. We investigate the nature of politeness in the Swahili family with a focus on husband–wife interactions. The Swahili woman - man interactions are famed to be the most cordial in East Africa. Of interest to this paper is to discover the strategies used and how these strategies enforce harmonious family relationships given the demands on the family. Many Swahili families encourage marriage between distant or even close cousins. The reason is to make the otherwise complex institution stable. However, some people marry people unrelated to them. Many Swahili marriages are arranged by parents. However, in such a case, the consent of the duo is sought. Marriage is a highly respected, honoured and highly guarded institution to which all youth look. It is therefore important that it has to be sustained at all cost.

The Swahili are without exception Muslim and any inter-marriage with non Muslims is strongly resisted. Most Swahili families live within nucleus families. Sometimes their families are larger than the nucleus family consisting of the nucleus family and extended relatives like uncles and aunts and even grandparents. These extended families interact with politeness strategies to maintain this balance and attenuate impoliteness. Young people are trained in accordance with Muslim ethics and ethos. One of the imperatives of this training during *Madrassa* is politeness. The youth are supposed to respect the old. For example, the youth are supposed to greet the elderly people first by saying,

1) *Asalam aleikum* (peace be upon you)

or

2) *Shikamoo* (I hold your feet)

The old would reply by saying *aleikum salaam* and *Marahaba mwanangu* (That is good, my child) respectively.

This type of greeting shows how politeness is strongly emphasized within the Swahili community. If a young person were to disobey this arrangement he would be told “*shika adabu*”, (learn manners) as a way of reconsidering his poor politeness strategies that are not in tandem with societal expectations. There is a popular brand of music, “*taarab*”, sang by the Swahili whose thematic treatment focuses on correcting behavior, admonishing rude and uncultured wives or husbands and other members of society. Islamic teachings also constantly advise on good interaction that is responsible and in tandem with Muslim teachings and standards. Politeness is supposed to facilitate harmonious co-existence of the old

and young. Women and men, people and their daughters in laws or mothers in laws or even sisters in law or brothers in law or even people who occupy different ranks in society like Muslim Imams, teachers etc.

When girls in the Swahili society of Mombasa are being brought up, they are taught by their mothers, grandmothers or other elderly women. Those who go for initiation rites by *makungwi* (Traditional women trainers) are taught how to relate with their husbands. It seems more polite behaviour is expected from wives than husbands. Nevertheless, even men are advised to handle wives with skilful use of language and therefore avoid discord. As the young girls grow up and take up their *madrassa* lessons, they are also encouraged to be polite and they are taught about the women during prophet Mohamed's time who were exemplars of their polite demeanor. Mothers constantly observe their daughters language behavior and it is constantly corrected, admonished and redirected. It needs to be observed that modernity has brought about changes and some girls are not able to go through traditional training sessions because of challenges of modern life which sometimes take them away from home to live in boarding schools. Some girls are therefore not able to attend *madrassa* completely well. When that is the case, a woman is advised about how to relate to the husband by aunts or close cousins who are elderly during preparations of her wedding. The politeness expected of a woman ranges from a woman's gaze, voice quality, voice modulation and sometimes her dressing which has to be descent to her politeness strategies of speaking.

Politeness Principle

This research uses the Interpersonal rhetoric model by Geoffrey Leech (1983) as a tool that informs it. The Interpersonal Rhetoric is an improvement of the Cooperative Principle (hereafter CP) by Paul Grice (1975). The CP has acknowledged that human communication which had four maxims namely, the maxim of truth which governs the truthful use of language only saying that for which you have evidence and that which you believe to be true, the Quantity maxim which governs the amount of information said, the maxim of manner which is about saying something with clarity to avoid misunderstanding and maxim of relevance or relation which is about information relating to what the occasion is so as to remain cooperative. Grice only noted that politeness was a motivating factor for the breach of the above mentioned maxims. In a sense, politeness perated like some sort of parasitic sub-maxim that was not central to CP. Leech (1983) expanded the CP to include the politeness principles (PP). Banter principle (BP) and The Irony Principle (IP). All these principles work together sometimes trading off to make a communication encounter successful.

In this paper, we shall focus more on the politeness principle (here after PP) which is responsible for explaining polite behavior. As a speaker produces certain speech acts. According to Leech, polite behavior is on a cost-benefit scale. In this

regard, a speaker tries to minimize cost for the hearer and in turn maximizes benefit for him and vice versa. These can be situations of absolute politeness and relative politeness. The former refers to politeness as it refers to a particular situation and the latter to politeness associated and varying with context. The PP has a number of strategies as we explain in the following section.

1. Tact strategy is a maxim that is responsible for politeness as a result of some amount of tact e.g. indirectness, stated as minimize cost to other and maximize benefit to other.
2. Sympathy maxim is a maxim that shows how politeness is shown by indicating sympathy.
 - a) Minimize antipathy between self and other
 - b) Maximize sympathy between self and other
3. Agreement maxim is a maxim that means that communicators have to strive to agree as much as possible.
 - a) Minimize disagreement between self and other
 - b) Maximize agreement between self and other
4. Generosity is a maxim that points toward a generous language use.
 - a) Minimize benefits to self
 - b) Maximize benefit of other
5. Modesty is a maxim that points toward a speaker being modest and therefore indicating politeness. a) minimize praise of self b) maximize dispraise of self.
6. Approbation is a maxim that says the speaker can praise the hearer and therefore express polite behavior. (a) minimize dispraise of other (b) maximize praise of other.

PP is an inferential principle which, like CP relies heavily on the context of situation for the interpretation of meaning. These maxims, work on a scale (Leech 1983; Fraser 1990). Negative politeness according to this theory, is about minimizing impoliteness and positive politeness on the other hand means maximizing politeness.

The Politeness Strategies within The Swahili Family

This section discusses the various strategies as used within the Swahili family of Mombasa by spouses. The strategies reveal the unique cultural practices of this community in handling a marriage relationship by keeping it stable, friendly and prosperous, and above all, polite.

Approbation Strategies

The *Mvita* family unit can be challenging with demands from either spouse or even children close or distant relatives. To balance these demands, approbation is often used. In this strategy, the speaker minimizes his or her benefit to minimize the cost of hearer and increase her or his benefit. Again in the Mombasa family, a wife or a

husband could use an approbation strategy depending on the occasion and hence exercising relative politeness. These could be achieved and the number of approbation strategies could be used by the Mombasa couples. Any of these utterances could or could not be accompanied by an honorific like *mume wangu* (my husband) and *habibi* (my man) for men and *habiti* (my woman) or *mke wangu* for women. Marriage partners who are of young age and of same age are even more elaborate with English honorifics, like *sweetheart*, *darling*, *honey* etc. The use of *mzee* (old man) as an honorific is completely avoided in case the other partner thinks you mean they are old. Sometimes they could use their Muslim names like Hassan, Mohamed, Ikbal, Husna, Fatma to signal closeness.

Perhaps this use would be impolite if this was not a context of intimacy. For example, if it was a case of addressing a father-in-law, it will require an honorific, not a first name etc. Sometimes the affective expression *mpenzi* (lover) could accompany the approbation as a way of showing love and sounding more polite. In most of the cases kinesics are used to reinforce politeness. These Kinesics range from gaze, voice modulation to a show of certain styles of hand movements. It has to be borne in mind that when the utterances are used to praise other the speaker demeans himself or herself in order to effectively approbate the other. When *mume wangu* (my husband) or *mke wangu* (my wife) is used there is a tendency to stress ownership and appreciation which in a sense is highly approbative. Absence of such approbation strategies could breed disharmony in the family. That is why most of it is encouraged during wedding preparations and even after, so as to make the family unit strong and friendly. It looks like complementing and approbating one another is expected. One couple we studied had the husband saying;

5) *Mke wangu leo umenipikia chakula kitamu. Mungu akuzidishie*

My wife, today you have cooked for me a good meal. Let God bless you.

The speaker tries to be consistent with the approbation maxim and hence compliments the wife. This was a context where the wife had cooked a good Kiswahili meal “*viazi vya nazi*”(coconut spiced potatoes) with “*samaki*”(fish). In this utterance, *mke wangu umenipikia chakula kitamu*, the husband uses the reference ‘*Mke wangu*’ which is in itself pointing toward appreciation and hence politeness. Gu (1990) makes a detailed analysis of address terms in Chinese and he demonstrates how they are central in mitigating for politeness. Further, the husband says ‘*Umenipikia chakula kitamu. Mungu Akuzidishie* (You have cooked me a good meal, May God bless you). He offers prayer for her thus being in consonant with the generosity maxim. Note, that in the Swahili community it is not acceptable for a husband to refer to the wife as ‘*Mama fulani*’ (mother so and so) as it would be the case with up country Kiswahili (see Habwe 2010). The fact that the husband refers to the wife affectively as “*mke wangu*” (my wife) and tells her *leo umenipikia chakula kitamu* serves to make this encounter polite. You will notice the use of “*leo*” “today.” The husband focuses on a particular day without

generalizing and hence making the praise a lot more relevant for the day in question. It is also important to notice the use of the verb form “*umenipikia*” (today you have cooked for me good food) in which there is the object reference -ni- which makes a specific reference to the husband as opposed to “*leo umepika chakula kitamu*” (today you have cooked good food) in which there is no direct reference to the husband. It helps to minimize distance between wife and husband and hence making the encounter even more polite. This expression means the wife is caring, loving and responsible to the husband. It could be argued here that the approbation is central to the *Mvita* community because although the woman is the one who is charged with the responsibility of cooking food, it would be impolite for the husband to take the cooking for granted more especially if the meal that is prepared is good. This acknowledgment of good food also serves to appreciate her role as a good cook. It is interesting how this approbation is said directly. The possibility means that a very high premium is placed on it and cannot therefore cause embarrassment. Let us look at another example of approbation. This is a case of one of the women who had the following to say about the husband:

6) *Eeh mume wangu, Wawajali watoto wako?
Angalia Musa anakufuata wewe.*

Eeh my husband. You care for your children?
Just see how Musa has taken after you.

In another context when discussing work related matters, the same woman told the husband;

7) *Unaona subira yako. Wataka uendelee hivyo hivyo. Usiwafuate wale wengine.*

You see your patience has paid off. You need to go on like that. Do not follow the rest.

In the two cases above a wife offers praise to the husband. In example (6) she appreciates the husband's care for his children and proceeds to say that one of her sons, Musa, has taken after the father's good habit. It is interesting to note here that the wife refers to the children as the husband's and not their children in a sense showing even more approbation and by extension showing modesty as well. She then comments him directly. Remember she affectively refers to the husband as *mume wangu* (my husband) as a way of engaging in a polite way – assuring the husband of her engagement and commitment to him in their matrimony. In this other example (7) the wife praises the husband for his patience. She proceeds to encourage him to go on like that. It is interesting to note how she encourages him to go on. She avoids making a direct remark directive, only saying “you need to go on like that.” This encouragement to go on helps to strengthen and to make the praise even more authentic.

Another approbation move was observed at a table where visitors said:

Vis: *Chakula hiki kimepikwa kikapikika* Vis: This food is well cooked
Ni nani aliyekipika? Who prepared it?

Hus: *Wenyewe wapo papa hapa* H: The cooks are right here.

In this approbation strategy the husband not only agrees with the visitor thus being consistent with the agreement Maxim, but also praises the wife by acknowledging her good work. Notice, he does not say ‘*Huyu hapa*’ (this one here). This expression shows politeness to the wife. Note, the husband could still deny and say, “*si kweli.*” However, because he wants to show politeness, he acknowledges the skills the wife is famed of thus approbating her. It needs to be mentioned here that as the husband shows politeness, he successfully stays within CP and the PP and successfully functions within the interpersonal rhetoric. This interpersonal communication could break down if not well handled by the relevant parties.

Modesty Strategies

Modesty strategies are prevalent in the Mombasa family unit. These are strategies of speaker demeaning which have implications on the personality of the hearer and politeness. More than any other strategy, modesty is a central strategy within the Swahili family; treating the other with uttermost respect as you remain modest as a speaker is one of the hallmarks of good speaking among the speakers of *KiMvita*. Gu (1990) also acknowledges this to be a very central strategy among the Chinese. This is a favoured style among communities. One of the conversational encounters between a man and his wife in Mombasa reveals these modest strategies. Let us look at the following example:

9) H: *Jambo hili kwangu* H: This matter for me is heavy (hard)
Mimi ninzito siliwezi I do not think I can handle.
Nina fikiria wewe waliweza vizuri zaidi I think you can handle it
W: *Kweli?* W: Is that true?

This is uttered in a family context where the male spouse tells the wife that she is better placed in handling family finances. It is also important to remember that the utterances accord well with the PP but they could constitute a violation of the CP, particularly the quality maxim. It needs to be pointed out that the response of the wife is an expression of modesty as well. She merely asks a question, “*Kweli?*” (Is it true?), thus avoiding to say, “thank you”, like it may be the case in some Western cultures. She also avoids to *Ndiyo* (Yes). This indicates modesty. The fact that the wife merely asks a question gives her a chance to cast doubt on what the husband has said. This minimizes self praise and maximizes dispraise of self.

Agreement Strategies

A typical Swahili family will always have situations which could lead to disagreements between spouses because of competing interests and different points of view about a matter or situation. However, the couples strive to make marriages friendly and polite using politeness strategies they employ. More agreement is expected of a woman, though a husband is also expected to be polite. Many strategies are used in this regard. Some are indirect while others are direct. In a case that involves one of the families which we studied, a husband bought the wife a dress which she did not like very much so she said;

- 10) *Nimefurahi, lakini haikubaliani na mimi*
I am happy, only that the dress does not fit me.

You will notice the agreement which is shown by the word “Nimefurahi” (I am happy) at the beginning of the utterance is followed by the contrastive “lakini” (but) so as to indicate the other position of agreement. If the woman were not to use “Nimefurahi” (I am happy), perhaps with a facial expression like a smile, it would point toward another conflicting position. Remember, in this utterance the wife concedes, the dress is good except that it does not fit her. Wives can go to great lengths to avoid open criticism, only making it latent. In the Swahili society, husbands are encouraged to bring their wives presents. Wives in turn have to appreciate them. Open criticism could slow down the husband’s generosity. Many times, agreement is used as a way of showing politeness, and as a means of sustaining the family and making sure the husband is not completely discouraged from bringing other presents at home. One of the families we observed had a disagreement on whether or not the husband drinks because of the company he kept. Let us look at the exchange:

- 11) W: *Mume wangu mbona wanywa?*
H: *Mimi kwa hakika. Situmii tembo – kwa kuwa... vile niharamu kulewa.*
W: My husband, why do you drink?
H: For sure I am not a drunk. I do not take alcohol – Because it is not religious for one to drink.

And about his friend whom he was accused by the wife of leading him into bad company, he said:

- 12) *Ikiwa mtu ni rafiki – yeye ni mtu.*
Hayo ni mambo yake. Mimi siwezi kusindikizwa kuoa wanawake wengi.
If a person is a friend – he is a person that is his life. I cannot be forced into marrying many wives.

In the husband’s reply against the accusation that the friend could lead him into marrying many wives, he makes a three pronged defense. First, he acknowledges that one cannot be stopped from befriending others because like him (the husband),

that person is a human being and deserves dignity. Secondly, he says that if his friend was to marry many wives, that would be his character and finally he says that nobody can get him to marry many wives – certainly it is not forced on anyone. The answer is weaved so politely as to avoid contestation.

It is interesting to note how disagreement is shown and agreement is sought in both excerpts (11,12). In the first excerpt, denial is made followed by reason for that denial. The tone of disagreement is brought down by this justification which is likely to be based on Islamic faith. It is interesting to note that because the wife wants to avoid open disagreement, she pauses a question to the husband instead of making an open accusation which could spur disagreement. If a husband is touched he could use a direct assertion of agreement by saying, *Umenitia imani* - you have elated my heart. This kind of assertion is meant to convey agreement regarding what the wife is doing or saying. We also found another agreement strategy expressed by a husband of one of the Swahili families. This was at a time when this man's daughter was engaged to a man whom both the wife and husband didn't like.

- 13) H: *Nina neno la Kooni* H I have a matter in my heart
W: *Ni Sawa* W: It is okay
H: *Lisilo budi hutendwa.* H: What can not be avoided is done. If we
Tukikazania sana atararuana nguo huyu kijana
If we struggle with this girl she will tear our clothing

In this exchange, agreement is expressed. First, the husband makes his wish known by saying '*nina neno la kooni.*' This is a tactful approach that signals some agreement by prefacing what he wants to say to the wife. It is like he is appealing for her approval and mitigating agreement. The wife follows by some form of agreement when she says "*ni sawa*" (you may proceed.) The man seems like he has been given an earlier approval when he says, "*Lisilo budi hutendwa*" remember the use of this strategy of a common saying is intended to solicit for the wife's approval. This is so because the saying signals a communal position, something which the wife cannot disapprove. Then, he politely says the message which the wife later approves that they marry off the daughter. In another case where a female spouse did not agree with the friend of the husband disagreement was sought a lot more tactfully. She said;

- Aaa naona Bw. Huyu Bwana* Aaa I think, this man some day why
Siku nyingine mbona humwambii sinaee?.. don't you tell him you don't
have?
Ili ujue kama ni rafiki au hapana. So that you may know whether he is indeed
a friend.

The same couple had a disagreement about helping parents and the wife said,

- 15) *Mimi naona kuwa itakuwa shida kupeleka pesa kwenu.
Kwanini mwezi huu hununui friji mwezi ujao ukawasaidia?*

I think it will be difficult to send money to your home. Why can't you buy a fridge this month and help the following month

She further remarked;

- 16) *Kwanini huzungumzi na ndugu zako wakatafute kazi?
Wewe ukawa ni pekee yako unayesaidia?*

Why don't you tell your brothers/sisters to look for jobs?

So that you are not the only one who is to assist.

In the first example, the wife pauses a question to the husband something that minimizes disagreement on the issue of assisting people. Further, she avoids making an absolute denial of assistance; she advises the husband that occasionally he could tell the person he does not have money. Note, the wife begins her utterance by saying, "I think" which makes the whole utterance an opinion and therefore should not indicate disagreement. It is interesting the way she offers the advice of not assisting by only indicating he does not have and not that he refused to provide for the needs.

In the example is where the same couples disagree on helping the family members, the wife again only gives the husband an opinion regarding what she thinks thus making the interaction less confrontational. Note that she does not also tell him not to help, she gives an opinion, "naona itakuwa shida" (I think it will be difficult) and she gives him the reason why it will be difficult to help suggesting he buys a fridge only for that month. He can help them during other months like he has done. Note that she does not stop him from helping. She only makes a suggestion that he should stop helping that month. It is also interesting to note that again, the suggestion to buy a fridge is a question which gives the husband a good chance to refuse or offer another reason for helping that month without sounding impolite. It is interesting to note her further utterance (16) in this interaction when she asks the husband why he cannot talk to the siblings to look for a job to save himself the burden of being the only one to support them all the time. Even in this suggestion, she can only pause a question. She would not want the husband to feel she is stopping him from helping his people.

Generosity

Generosity is expected from either spouse in a Mombasa household. A wife would welcome the husband home by saying:

- 17) W: "*Karibu nyumbani*" Welcome home
Or could welcome a husband to the table by saying
W: *Karibu mezani, mume wangu* Welcome to the table for dinner,
my husband

This is supposed to be a gesture of generosity. A husband would reply by saying

'Ahsante, nitakuja sasa hivi'

Thanks, I will come right away.

From our discussions with the Swahili households, generosity is the maxim that has perhaps the highest rating among all the other maxims. The most famed Swahili wife is the one who is generous to her husband in terms of the words she uses and the offers she makes. Equally, the husband is also expected to be generous in terms of the gifts he brings at home and how he addresses himself to situations that demand generosity. This generosity is supposed to be extended to the rest of the members of society. It is for this reason, when a husband leaves for work, the wife tells him "karibu" (welcome) instead of "kwaheri" (bye bye) which means he is welcome anytime like in this example.

18) W: *Kwaheri mke wangu*

H: *Karibu, mume wangu*

W: Bye bye my wife

H: Welcome, my husband

This constant anticipation of the husband at home is a clear show of the generosity maxim.

Generosity is a Muslim virtue just as much as it is an African virtue. It is expected in the family even as it is expected outside the family. The one who extends generosity is said to be showing politeness to the hearer and therefore "muungwana" (gentle) or "mkarimu" (generous).

The responsibility to be generous lies with both spouses. However, again more burden seems to lie with the women compared to the husbands.

We noted this conversation with one of the Swahili families we were observing:

19) H: *A salaam Aleikum, mke wangu*

W: *Pole kwa kazi*

W: *Nakuona umechoka, kaa nikuletee chai*

H: *Asalaam Aleikum, my wife*

W: Sorry, for the long days work.

W: I can see you're tired. Sit down so that I may serve you with tea.

In the above exchange a husband who is from work greets the wife using the Muslim greeting. In this community a greeting is a way of engaging someone politely (see Yahya Othman 1995). It is also regarded as a way of showing generosity by acknowledging the other person. The fact that the husband directs this greeting to a wife is itself an act of generosity. Notice the use of "mke wangu" (my wife) at the end of the greeting which is meant to make the encounter even

more polite. This reference is meant to reinforce this politeness. The wife, who would often remain at home, shows generosity by saying,

Nakuona umechoka, kaa nikuletee chai;

I can see you're tired. Sit down so that I may serve you with tea.

When a wife offers to serve the husband a meal, it points to generosity. It is important to note the Swahili house-helps could serve the mistresses husband with tea. In this case she offers to serve him herself as away of being even more polite. Generosity was observed within yet another family we observed. This was at the time when the husband returned from work after a long days work from *alfajiri* (early) to *magharibi* (evening time).

- 20) H: *Hodi huku. Hodi wenyewe* H: May I come in. May I come
W: *Karibu* W: Come in
H: *Hodi tena* H: May I come in
W: *Karibu: Pita ndani* W: Come in come in to the inside
H: *Ahsante* H: Thank you
W: *Pole kwa kazi* W: Sorry for the day's work
H: *Ahsante* H: Thank you
W: *Hebu nikupe glasi ya maji.* W: Let me give you a glass of
Aa wataka maji ya limau? limewater
H: *Nipe maji kwanza* H: Give me water first
W: *Ngoja kwanza nikuvue shati* W: Wait a minute so that I may
take off your shirt
H: *Ahsante, mke wangu* H: Thank you, my wife
W: *Shika maji.* W: Here is water

In this exchange, we are able to demonstrate many politeness strategies one of them being generosity. A husband is greeted with kind words as he comes home " *Karibu* " (welcome,) " *pita ndani* " (come right to the inside,) " *Hebu nikupe glasi ya maji* " (let me give you a glass of water), *ngoja nikuvue shati* (Let me take off your shirt). This exchange makes an encounter between a wife and husband very polite and sets a good mood for the evening. Greetings among *Mvita* couples which are normally used when the couples have been away from one another for a considerable length of time present a unique situation of generosity. First and foremost, greetings for the three families we investigated were a pointer toward cooperation – that is they indicated that the two individuals were ready to cooperate with one another to make the conversational encounter successful. On the contrary, if one never answered greetings, it would point to non-cooperation and even impoliteness. Sometimes the greetings would be accompanied by honorifics and references as " *mke wangu* " (my wife) or " *mume wangu* " (my husband). Sometimes they would not be. If a woman uttered the greeting first, the man would be obliged to answer and vice-versa. We would like to emphasize here that the

greetings in the *Mvita* family just like in the *Mvita* community are a pointer toward politeness (see Simm1974; Habwe 2010). In the family, they tend to point toward generosity of the person who utters the greeting to the other person. It means she is caring about the other person's feelings. Again it must be said that when a greeting is said by one spouse, the wife for example, she takes the cost of the politeness scale by trying to find out how the other person is, in this case, the husband and the partner is shown more politeness by the greeting indicating benefit on his part.

Greetings many times are accompanied by a tone of happiness or tone of sadness. When it is accompanied by a happy tone then it encourages the spouses to engage one another even more and vice versa. Greetings between spouses are also notably less elaborate as compared to greetings between members of community who are not husband and wife. Perhaps these greetings between communities are more elaborate because sometimes they seek information which may not be necessary between spouses who see one another frequently and only stay apart for some hours. However, if the spouses have been apart because of duty out of the home in cases of husbands, the greetings may be elaborate (see Omar 1991).

Greetings are never to be taken for granted. They seek for information about the hearer. Most times when a wife greets the husband, it means she is caring and according to the (pp) by Leech (1983) is generous. Like the set of the greetings above, the Swahili husbands or wives ask about, the evening, where the other partner is from, how the other partner is feeling. Most times the greeting is meant to be an opener to the rest of the interaction and this is why it has to be handled with great skill.

Sympathy

Like generosity, sympathy among couples in the *Mvita* Community is expressed through language and positive facial expression. It needs to be understood that sympathy in the Swahili Community of Mombasa is as important at home and among couples just as it is among the other community members. The extent of the sympathy varies with the situation and the language use.

The following was said by a spouse when any of the couples was in sickness, is sad or had challenge in life

| | | |
|-----|--|--|
| 22) | <i>Pole</i> | Sorry |
| | <i>Hayo, sahibu yataka moyo</i> | That requires a heart, friend |
| | <i>Yataka uwe na subira</i> | That requires patience |
| | <i>Ni ya Mungu hayo</i> | It is Godly |
| | <i>Hayo yaliyokufikia si peke yako</i> | That which has befallen you is common to all |
| | <i>Jikaze ndio kidunia.</i> | Take heart, that is way of the world |

These expressions that show benefit to the hearer were commonly used in the Swahili family units of Mombasa that we observed. By no doubt, they indicate care and sympathy by other spouses. The marriage relationship has many challenges like we have already observed. Any of the couples could be challenged. On one occasion, a husband was heard saying the following to his wife:

- 23) *Mke wangu usichukulie*
Wala usiwe na hasira wala maudhiko.
Kila binadamu ana tabia yake tofauti tofauti
My wife, do not always take it like that.
Neither have anger nor annoyance in your heart.
Every human being has their different character

The wife was upset by a friend and the husband showed sympathy by making the remarks above.

Notice, in the first sentence he uses the reference ‘*Mke wangu*’ (my wife) which is commonly used by the *Mvita* speakers to give their wives an assurance of love and ownership in society where men are polygamous because of religious faith which allows men and not women to have four marriage partners and a community which a man only needs to pronounce “*talaka*”, (divorce) thrice to end the marriage union. In this utterance where the husband tells the wife not to take offence because human beings are of various kind; good and bad, the wife is shown politeness. She takes the benefit of this exchange while the husband takes its cost of loving and care to explain what human beings are like. Here, politeness is shown by the husband pointing to a general rule of life. He advises her and indicates he is close to her.

In another interaction between a husband and a wife, the wife said the following at a time when the husband’s business was not flourishing as expected.

- 24) W: *Ndiyo kidunia, mume wangu*
Ni mambo ya Mungu na ukumbuke
Mtihani watu hupita kumbuka
Tulikotoka. Haya ni Mungu
That is how the world is my husband
That is the will God remember
People pass through these trials
Remember where we have come from, it is God’s will

In this utterance, the wife gives the husband assurance by telling him that this is worldly and also reminding him that what is happening is God’s will which nobody should challenge but only to accept as “*kudura*” (God’s will). Yet there is a further strategy of telling the husband that people suffer challenges in the world by giving him examples. Lastly she assures the husband that God will see them

through the problem. A couple, by using the utterances above and many others are seen as showing concern to one another by being polite to one another. The expressions help in reinforcing the marital unity of the two people. The Swahili family unit has to indicate and always show that they are friends to one another rather than just being in marriage.

Tact

Tact is a fairly general maxim that could criss-cross the other strategies we have mentioned among the *Mvita* community family members. According to this maxim, information has to be relayed to the hearer with tact or great skill for increased politeness or even using kinesics like eye contact, facial expressions, hand movements etc. One of the chief ways of enforcing this style is the use of sayings or the indirect language. The indirect language reduces cost for the hearer and increases cost for the speaker. Some of the tact strategies include hedging, using polite words like “pole”, (sorry) or even using honorifics to increase politeness to the addressee. Tact is a common strategy among Swahili spouses. It can be used by either spouse as away of showing politeness to the other. Let us look at the following example by one of the spouses in the families we observed.

- 25) *Nyumbani mama anahitaji*
Mama anataka dawa. Mimi naona tumsaidie. Wewe unaonaje?

Our mother has a need at home.

Mother requires medicine. I feel we should assist her. What do you think?

This is a case where the husband’s mother is suffering from a terminal illness. The husband feels that he has to make a request to his wife. However, he has to think out how to do it. The request could have financial implications. It could bring disagreement in the home since the family has so many budget challenges. However, he makes his position clear, as an opinion.

“*Mimi naona tumsaidie.*” I feel we should assist her

Further, he pauses a question to the wife,

Wewe, waonaje? What do you think?

This is a tactful way of saying something and we argue that it reduces the cost for the hearer considerably. You will notice that even before he gives his opinion, he makes a declaration of the situation “*nyumbani mama anahitaji*” (mother has a need at home). The declaration also serves as an introduction of what is to follow. He does not want to approach the matter directly. He makes sure the preface is as general as possible. This seems to agree with Lakoff (1993) who uses the same conversational maxim view by saying, “Do not impose”. The hearer could reject the proposal without a lot of difficulty. Consider if the husband had not made a provision for the question. It would constitute a blunt request which would increase impoliteness for the hearer without a chance to reject. Looked at in Face

terms based on Brown and Levinson (1987) one would say that such a blunt suggestion would constitute an injury on negative face of the wife.

Let us also refer again to the example (13) which we have already referred to:

H: *Nina neno kooni*

H: *Lisobudi hutendwa tukikazana atatuvua na nguo huyu kijana.*

In this strategy the husband introduces his opinion by a common saying, “What you cannot avoid must be done”. In another example of tact a wife concerned that the husband would spend money if he did not give it to her says:

26) *Badala ya kutoka nazo hizo pesa afadhali unipe mimi nifanyie jambo fulani. Waonaje?*

Instead of going out with this money it is better you give it to me so that I may use it for something else. What do you think?

In tactful approach the wife does not directly tell the husband to give her the money. She offers to provide a contrast which is not offensive and impolite by only providing a suggestion. The following utterance is even more tactful. The wife poses a question to the husband, “*waonaje?*” (How do you feel?) By posing this question, the wife uses some tact of indicating her earlier utterance was a mere suggestion which the husband could turn down if he so wished. She also expects that if he is wise, he should take up the suggestion positively. The question at the end is an enforcer of politeness to refuse without seeming to be impolite. One can observe that the language of spouses in Mombasa is so tactful. In another instance, the husband asked for water by saying:

27) *Tafadhali, niletee maji* Please bring me water

The wife replied by saying;

28) *Tafadhali njoo ujitilie. Naepua kitu jikoni.*

Please come and serve yourself, I am held up in the kitchen

In those strategies, the husband does not want to send for water directly. He even seems to be a more equal partner compared to the wife. Remember, among the Swahili, the wife is a helper. She is a companion, a lover. This is why the husband has to tactfully send for water saying; “*tafadhali niletee maji.*” (Please, bring me water). However, the wife would not say “I cannot bring you water”. She tactfully has to handle the answer to tactfully minimize meeting the high cost on the husband. Notice the use of the adverb *Tafadhali* (please) by both the husband and wife. Her answer is a polite way of getting her husband to take the water by himself or even to wait until she is through with her present assignment then she would give him water.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed politeness within the Swahili community of Mombasa. Using the Politeness Principle by Leech, it has found out that the burden to be polite among the Swahili community of Mombasa rests more with the wife compared to the husband. Many strategies e.g. asking questions, putting information indirectly, making suggestions instead of making impositions, use of honorifics and even sometimes using first names are some of the strategies used by spouses to make their relationship fruitful. Besides, greetings are a big enforcement of politeness among the households in Mombasa. Use of examples as one makes what would be an imposition or when one is showing sympathy is commonly used. Besides, sayings that are common to the Swahili society are used as a means of approaching an issue that could cause disagreement.

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