

Communicating Off-Record Politeness by Use of Non-Usual Stress in Kiswahili Language

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ABSTRACT

The interpretation of meaning as intended is a major factor to be borne in mind by interlocutors in a communicative event. Though speakers choose strategies that enable communication messages in well-interpreted manner, thereby eliminating ambiguity, the same is not the case in the use of unusual stress, which is normally contrasted. Unusual stress communicates off record by giving out hints. This paper discusses unusual stress as an off-record politeness strategy with particular reference to Kiswahili language that is spoken in Kenya. Bi. Msafwari's topical discussion from the Swahili community laid the basis for analysis. YouTube files of Mawaidha na Bi. Msafwari (Bi. Msafwari's topical discussions) were the sources of data. Analysis shows that unusual stress functions as an indirect politeness strategy through its characteristic use of free stress. It changes the intonation of the word in use thereby giving a basis for more than one interpretation of meaning. The non-usual emphasis is a hint that the speaker deliberately conveys to the listener in a given context. This paper concludes that determining the meaning intended in unusual stress is complex. This is because unusual stress has opposing functions within the same statement. It is therefore recommended that detection of the presuppositions in unusual stress can reduce ambiguity and direct the listener's interpretation toward the intended meaning.

Key words: Intended Meaning, Kiswahili, Topical Discussion, Unusual Stress

I. INTRODUCTION

Prosody is an aspect of speech which is created by variations in pitch, loudness and duration of speech sounds or, respectively, recesses within a verbal utterance. Besides marking syntactic and word boundaries, sentence mode and phrasal stress as well as showing speaker's emotions, prosody facilitates lexical and syntactic speech processing. It also affects pragmatics by showing the speaker's intentions and emotions as well as helping the listener to anticipate an intended turn-taking (Seifert & Otten, 2008). This implies that sound and meaning have an important role in conveying a message. From the special phonological arrangement, semantics can detect whether a word has meaning or not in a specific language. Communication therefore arises from meaningful units created according to special phonological rules and a special order of the phonological discipline. This implies that language has a certain order of its pronunciation that leads to the discovery of meaning. When that order is violated, ambiguity is created in the interpretation of the intended meaning. Levis & Levis (2018) hold this view when they posit that pronunciation features are not equal in how they affect listeners' ability to comprehend meaning. It is in this context that this paper examines unusual stress as a linguistic strategy used by a speaker to deliver message off record.

Off-record is a politeness strategy that involves the use of language in an indirect manner (Brenner, 2018). The speaker uses lexicons with primary meaning to focus on additional meaning. This additional meaning is the one that is related to the context. Although there exists meaning in the lexicon, what is intended is to be understood by being linked to the context. Therefore, the intended meaning that the speaker attaches importance to is ambiguous because those who do not associate it with the contextual cues may miss out on the speaker's intended meaning (Obuchi and Sangili, 2016). Off-record strategy portrays the speaker as one who does not pressurize the listener to accept his message because the meaning that the listener interprets is his personal choice and responsibility. Therefore, utterances made off-record are



ambiguous because the intended meaning is in what the speaker intends to say even if it is not in the lexicon provided (Neale as cited in Leth, 2021). The meaning of the lexicon may therefore be misleading to the hearer because one has to look for an additional meaning for each statement, the pragmatic meaning. Such a situation arises in the use of unusual stress.

Unusual stress is an off-record strategy that refers to the stress placed on a word or syllable contrary to its normal stress. This means that the word bearing the unusual stress is pronounced with a non-usual intonation. The stress is unusual because the length of the stressed syllable is longer than usual. The stress length used in pronunciation can either be short, normal or long (Matinde, 2012). Unusual stress takes into account the long length put in pronunciation of a syllable of a word. However unusual stress does not change the meaning of the word but rather gives the word an unusual pronunciation. These utterances tend to provide various cues that the speaker intentionally gives as a hint to the intended message for the addressee. This study attempts to describe unusual stress as an off-record politeness strategy with reference to examples in Swahili language.

Kiswahili is a Bantu language, originally spoken along the East African Coastal strip, from Sabaki, Tana River down to Mtwara in Tanzania. Swahili language has spread to many parts of the African continent and the rest of the world. Currently, Kiswahili is not a language confined to the region of its origin, East Africa. The sentiments of the Director General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, (UNESCO, 2020) demonstrate the spread and growth of Kiswahili when he says that the language is spoken by a population of 120 to around 150 million people, and it has flourished beyond the borders of its native speakers. Swahili is both an official and national language in Kenya. Mrs. Msafwari, fondly referred to as Bi. Msafwari by her listeners is a family counsellor who advises mainly on marital issues on Kenyan Citizen TV channel. She employs a unique style of communicating by use of Kiswahili language. Her works have also been analyzed in this study, for purposes of identifying how off-record politeness obtains in Kiswahili with special focus on unusual stress.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the Politeness theory of Brown & Levinson (1987). This theory focuses on universal principles that underlie the construction of polite utterances. In doing so, they analyze four politeness strategies employed by a speaker in encoding their message in order to give attention to face wants. They therefore propose positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record and on-record as strategies that a speaker can employ to save face during a communicative act. A communicative act is off-record if it is done in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the speech act. The speaker leaves himself out by providing a number of defensible interpretations; cannot therefore be held to have committed himself to just one particular interpretation of his act.

The intention or intended meaning of the speaker is not obtained by examining only the lexicon used but also the wider context of communication. In the use of off-record strategy, lexicons are used to convey the pragmatic meaning in order to avoid embarrassment (Golidina, 2014). This situation shows that interpretation of the intended meaning is complex. This is due to the fact that the interpreted meaning depends on the lexicon used, the context, the meaning intended by the speaker and finally, the meaning deciphered by the hearer or listener. According to Brown & Levinson (1987), the speaker should be creative in encoding his message by involving contextual parameters because they are meant to give cues to the hearer. In addition, the speaker does not take blame for the meaning interpreted by the hearer because the interpreted meaning is the hearer's responsibility. One of the sub-strategies or forms identified in politeness theory to convey a message off record is unusual stress.

2.2 Empirical Review

Unusual stress, in which words or syllables are emphasized to show their relationship to other words or syllables calls attention to how spoken lexical information is highlighted to express explicit and implicit comparisons or contrasts (Muller & Levis, 2020). By so doing, it evokes a set of possible referents and then uses pitch and length to select one referent from the group. Unusual stress is therefore a special use of prominence that is not restricted by the patterns related to normal prominence such as prominence on the last content word or by the patterns related to information structure, that is, prominence on the last content word of new information (Hahn & Dickerson, 1999). Contrastive prominence can occur



Kiswahili is an African Bantu language spoken mainly in East Africa and the Great Lakes region. In many Bantu languages, tone is extremely mobile, shifting to positions several syllables from their sponsor to syllables at word or stem edges (Downing, 2004). The target for spread or shift in many languages is the penultimate syllable (Philipsson 1998). For instance, Cassimjee & Kisseberth (2000) show that in Giryama, if a verb word contains a single High tone, it surfaces on the stressed penultimate syllable, no matter which syllable in the word sponsors the High tone. However, in Kiswahili, the target spread is semi-penultimate syllable (Ashton, 1969). Therefore, how is the unusual stress phonetically realized in Kiswahili, where vowel length is functionally contrastive? The current study sought to find out the use of unusual stress in communicating indirect politeness.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study used content analysis method to analyze recorded conversations. Focus was placed on examining meaning as derived from expressions between people in a communicative act. The structure and function of the text was analyzed to determine the reasons for the use of words in a certain way, how the arrangement of words in the given order worked in the specific text and the effect of those words on the listener. YouTube recordings of Bi. Msafwari's topical discussion by the Citizen Television channel were listened to and transcribed. Phrases with words that indicated the use of unusual stress were extracted from the written transcriptions and analyzed by interpretivism method.

IV. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

In this section, unusual stress as an off-record politeness strategy has been described with reference to Kiswahili and language.

Bi. Msafwari's makes the following statement in her conversation:

*Lakini ningependa hapa Mombasani tuwe mfano kwa wale wanawake wengine. Yaani tukaweze kuona kwamba uko ndani ya nyumba, ukajue majukumu yako. Majukumu yako ni umtengenezee bwanako kama ni breakfast, ni lunch, umpelekee maji ya kuoga hata kama uko na mfanyakazi lakini uelewe **wewe** kama mama majukumu yako ni nini.*

But I would like us here in Mombasa to be an example to those other women. That is, when in your house, know your responsibilities. Your responsibilities are to prepare for your husband, whether it's breakfast, lunch, or bath water. Even if you have a house help, you need to understand you as a wife, what your responsibilities are. (My translation)

In this statement she encourages wives to identify and fulfill their duties to their husbands in marriage. Referring to wives, she uses the pronoun "wewe", (you) which is presented phonetically as [we:we] instead of "wewe" presented as [wewe]. In the word "wewe" the first syllable is pronounced with a longer time interval than usual. The words that appear before and after the word have been given normal stress thus, distinguishing it from other words.

Muller and Levis (2020) explain that words or syllables with unusual stress are emphasized to determine the relationship of their message with other syllables and words used together. The unusual emphasis gives the word a chance to be given more attention compared to the message of the other words used. In the example above, Bi. Msafwari says, "uelewe **wewe** kama mama majukumu yako ni nini." translated as, understand you (singular) as a wife, what your responsibilities are." The pronoun "wewe" (you/singular) is emphasized with an unusual emphasis to draw the listener's attention to it. Therefore, the interpretation of the whole statement should in turn give importance to the emphasized word. In paying attention to that word, the following interpretations arise:

- i. By failing to fulfill marriage obligations, the essence of being called a wife becomes deficient.
- ii. If the above statement turns out to be true then it will be accepted that there are different categories of wives. However, the real wife is the one who fulfills her duties to her husband. The emphasis also shows that despite different opinions on responsibilities in marriage, a true wife is one who understands that she has marital responsibilities.

In another excerpt, Bi. Msafwari says:

Kwa sababu wengi wanaolewa tu kwa sababu ya ule msisimuko wa mapenzi. Mnapoketi pale ndani ya nyumba mkafikiri kuwa kila labda utakavyokuwa umeolewa utakuwa ukipelekwa katika mikahawa ukila chakula au asubuhi mkiamka kama ni breakfast mwende hoteli mkale. Ningependa kuwaambia wanangu

wapenzi, mwanamke hata akisoma afike wapi lazima kama amesema yes I do. Hulazimishwi na mtu kuolewa lakini kama utaamua kuolewa ni uelewe kwamba kwa kuolewa kuna majukumu ya kuolewa na mazito na ni mengi.

Many get married due to the excitement of love. When you sit there in the house, you think that because you are married, you will always be taken to restaurants to eat, or when you wake up in the morning, whether it is breakfast, you will go to a hotel, I wish to tell you my dear children, even if a woman studies to whatever high level, so long as she said Yes, I do. You are not forced by anyone to get married, but if you decide to get married, you need to understand that by getting married, there are responsibilities. Marital responsibilities are many and heavy. (Our translation).

In the statement above, Bi. Msafwari goes on to emphasize to women that in marriage, there are responsibilities which must be fulfilled. In mentioning this, she, holds the view that marital responsibilities are a must for every woman. She is however, aware of those who hold a contrary opinion that marital responsibilities are slavery and should therefore, not be accepted. Bi. Msafwari is faced with the challenge of persuading all parties to accept her opinion; that the responsibilities in marriage are not optional. When she uses the word “majukumu” (responsibilities) phonetically written as [majukumu:] unusual stress is placed on the last syllable of the word. The length duration in the pronunciation of the last syllable is longer than usual but the meaning of the word remains unchanged. Bi. Msafwari does not want to openly force the women to accept her view on marital responsibilities, but the interpretation which obtains in that unusual stress is that responsibilities exist and must be fulfilled. Attention to the interpretation of the whole phrase has been drawn to the word [majukumu:].

In another episode, the following conversation ensues between Bi Msafwari and Kanze;

Kanze: *Yeye anasema kwamba, yaani kule kuolewa ukiamua kuolewa, mtu huwa yuaolewa kwa sababu gani? Si mtu huwa yuaolewa ili akaweze kutoa upweke. Tunasema ‘company’ si mtu huwa yuaolewa ili akaweze kutoa photocopy? Haya yakuja mengi yaliingilia wapi?*

Bi. Msafwari: *Hakunaa. Hakuna kabisa tuseme kwamba mtu afanywa maid. Na kusema ukweli lazima wewe mwenyewe ukiwa mke uelewe kwamba...*

Kanze: *The question is, why does one get married? One marries so as to get rid of loneliness. We say ‘companionship’. Doesn’t one marry so they can procreate? Where did these other responsibilities come from?*

Bi. Msafwari: *No. There is absolutely nothing true in the thought that in getting married one is made to become a maid. And truthfully, yourself, as a mother, should understand that... (Our translation)*

In this conversation between Kanze and Bi. Msafwari Kanze holds the view that responsibilities in marriage should not be forced on the woman alone. She maintains that all the partners in marriage should play their roles. However, Bi. Msafwari does not agree with the same. She holds to the point of view that responsibilities are not forced on wives. In response she says: *hakunā* (No), presented phonetically in Swahili as [hakuna:]. In the word “*hakunā*”, stress is placed on the last syllable. This stress gives the presupposition that the thought of sharing responsibilities in marriage is not only rejected but impossible. The hint provided is that responsibilities in marriage are for women although, this is not openly presented by the word used.

In another example Bi. Msafwari says;

Bi. Msafwari: *Sikiliza nikuambia mwanangu, nikwambia na nikufundishe, nikufundishe mahaba. Mahaaba, mahaba sijui niyaiteje kwa kiingereza unielewe mwanangu ama kwa kienglish ujue. Niseme pengine ma-love. Lakini nikisema ma-love pengine mnielewe vizuri.*

Bi. Msafwari: *Listen, my child, let me tell you and teach you, teach you about romance. Romance, romance, I don't know how to call it in English for you to comprehend, or know, my child. I should probably say “love”. (Our translation)*

In the above statement, she advises women on how they can foster romance in their marriages. She implores them to take in her advice about love by saying, "...but let me teach you about “mahaba. *Mahāba mahaba*”, (romance). In the word “mahāba” phonetically presented as [maha:ba], the middle syllable is articulated with a longer duration. Although Bi Msafwari’s opinion about romance is opposed by those who refer to themselves intellectuals, the attraction that points to the word “mahāba” (romance), will attract many to listen to her advice. The unusual stress placed on the word mahaba brings out the following interpretations.

a) That there is something new that she wants to explain about romance.



b) That she wants to explain the truth in the meaning of the word [maha:ba].

In the above example, attention is given to the importance of the word [maha:ba]. It affects the interpretation of the whole statement made. Therefore, there is a presupposition that the previous information that the listeners might be having about the meaning of the word [maha:ba] is false.

The foregoing discussion alludes to the possibility that unusual stress leads to the existence of indirectness in language use. This is brought about by the fact that the presuppositions used provide for various interpretations of the intended meaning of the word in question.

These results show that in the Kiswahili language, unusual stress can manifest on various syllables, both in the middle of the word and penultimate. For example, in the words [maha:ba] and [we:we] unusual stress occurs in the middle. However, in the words [majukumu:] and [hakuna:] unusual stress occurs in the penultimate syllable. Obuchi & Sangili (2015) have shown that Kiswahili language adopts closed stress in which words are stressed on the second syllable from the end of the word. Unusual stress, however, tends to violate that rule as some words are stressed on the last syllable. Unusual stress therefore, is used intentionally by the speaker as a strategy to convey an indirect message.

Results have also shown that unusual stress in Kiswahili language occurs in open syllables. Moreover, it has been shown that when unusual stress is used, attention is directed to the specific word in question. The specific word given attention therefore, carries the intended meaning and affects the interpretation of the whole phrase.

V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

This paper concludes that interpretation of meaning in the use of Kiswahili unusual stress is complex. The complexity arises due to the fact that unusual stress is a free type stress where emphasis is placed on a syllable depending on the intention of the speaker. This cannot be predetermined because it depends on the circumstance and the speaker's intention. Besides, unusual stress conveys meaning by use of hints, and this gives it the distinctive feature of giving the listener an implicature rather than the intended meaning. The intended meaning may be face threatening but the style of communication (by use of unusual stress) softens the face acts. The listener's public image therefore seems to be respected and relations maintained. Therefore, although stress is a very important element that enables the listener to identify words and comprehend meaning, unusual stress can hinder the recipient from deciphering the intended meaning. This paper recommends that when the listener is faced with unusual stress, they should first identify the shared knowledge contained in the co-text, provided by shared context, then, filter out the presuppositions that appear in the text. This is where they will find the relationship between what is said and other semantic categories that are not clearly evident as Muller and Levis, (2020) advice.

5.2 Recommendations

This study has noted that the use of unusual stress mainly focuses on encoding of the message under the underlying circumstances. It could be interesting to investigate the perception of the listener on the impoliteness or politeness of the message. We also suggest further research on the use of other paralinguistic features used as linguistic strategies to save face during communication.

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