



## Politeness in Computer-Mediated Pragmatics of Complaint Tweets by Clients of Ghanaian-based Telecom Networks

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### Abstract

This study investigates tweets of clients of three telecommunication networks in Ghana, to determine the various politeness strategies they employ while lodging complaints. 403 complaint tweets were purposively sampled and analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively using Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) politeness framework and Anchimbe and Janney's (2011) Postcolonial Pragmatics models. Results indicate that most complaints have some linguistic indicators that correspond to at least one of Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies. Patterns emerging show that most complainants had suffered various network instabilities which had affected their daily routines; hence, causing them to make interrogative utterances with little or no mitigations. This probably accounted for the frequent use of more bald-on-record and negative politeness strategies than others. However, the competitive frequencies between positive and negative politeness strategies seem to align more with the cultural orientation of participants than a mere attempt to consider the face needs of network providers as argued by Brown and Levinson (1987).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) has over the years become an integral part of people's everyday lives (Ling & Pedersen, 2006). As a result, almost every aspect of human life (e.g., day-to-day dialogues, business transactions, work-related communications, political dialogues, international dialogues, and many more) is dominated by the communication avenues made available by CMC. The emergence of smartphone technology has made CMC even more widespread and easier, such that people can perform all forms of communication remotely. Although the mobile phone was initially developed for calls, its functions are now unlimited since it has become multifunctional with the help of the internet.

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Social Media Communication (SMC) is one of the most recent technological innovations that has influenced and possibly redirected how people use language globally. As an aspect of CMC, SMC is a relatively new development in academia both as a genre of language research and as a medium of communication (Cheng, 2015). In line with the assertion of Emigh and Herring (2005), language use in every genre has its unique structural properties. Thus, SMC presents its users with the opportunity to explore both written and non-written communication sub-media to achieve various communicative goals. However, written communication in SMC is more like spoken speech characterized by colloquial expressions, various types of reductions (syntactic reductions, short form of words and abbreviations), unconventional writing formats, and many more (Baron, 1984; Rafi, 2014; Bieswanger, 2016; Chong, 2020). It is based on this that Segerstad (2005) asserts that SMC written language is predominantly a hybridization of spoken and written language.

The internet has provided communicative actors worldwide including businesses the opportunity to satisfy their communicative goals in a relatively easier and more convenient way without having to move from one place to another. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have become more beneficial to businessmen and women than any other users (Mason et al, 2021). Business people and companies use social media platforms for sales, advertisements, and customer complaints. The world of business has grown more competitive due to advancements in technology and other socio-economic variables. The 21st century has witnessed a higher growth of business establishments worldwide, ranging from the production and supply of goods to the provision of services. This has created stiff competition over clients in the market. As a result, merchants have to adopt innovative communication strategies to win their clients' trust and loyalty. Social media and other CMC platforms have become some of the easiest and most convenient media for transactions and customer engagements. The quality of an organization's communication and response to customer complaints determines its image—dialogues between customers and customer service representatives (CSR) are dominated by elements of politeness.

Politeness is a fundamental constituent of human interaction and it is very vital to the mediation of 'friction' in face-to-face exchanges. Politeness is conditioned by the socio-cultural norms dictated by members of a society who negotiate their intentions through verbal and non-verbal actions (Holmes, 1990; Alfadda, et al., 2024). "The theory of politeness has become closely associated, in everyday life, with norms of displaying respect, deference, obedience and with strategies aimed at carrying out a favor..." (Watts, 2003:34). From this perspective, politeness is employed as a social strategy and as a means of achieving goals during various interactions. Hence, politeness strategies are very crucial in our daily lives to maintain harmony, and it is important to know the rules of politeness and how to apply them in the appropriate discourse context. There have been several studies on the use of politeness in merchant-client engagement (Maier, 1992; Marriot, 1993; Mullany, 2004; Townley, 2019; and Tengku et al, 2019). However, most of these studies only focused on the politeness strategies employed by the customer service representatives of the companies without considering the politeness strategies that clients employed during various speech events. This study, therefore, situates this well-known phenomenon in a postcolonial social media/merchant-client engagement context to assess how clients employ various politeness strategies during business dialogues with MTN Ghana, Vodafone Ghana, and AirtelTigo when lodging complaints on Twitter.

### **1.1. Research Objectives**

This study sought to examine the politeness strategies used by clients of the three telecom networks in their complaint dialogues on Twitter and to attempt situating these strategies within the sociocultural realities of participants.

## **2. BROWN AND LEVINSON'S (1978, 1987) MODEL OF POLITENESS**

Brown and Levinson's concept of politeness has been the most famous framework in studying linguistic politeness since the late twentieth century. Their (1987) model is considered the most influential in politeness studies, particularly in computer-mediated communications. They define face as the public self-image that every human wants to claim for themselves, and recognize two aspects of face: negative face (freedom from imposition) and positive face (the desire to be liked, admired, and appreciated). They argue that participants in any interaction have faces that need to be maintained, and speech acts such as requests, apologies, and promises can be potential sources of face threats (FTA).

Brown and Levinson propose politeness strategies to mitigate the weight of FTA. They assert that the choice of a particular politeness strategy is generally determined by social factors such as the relationship between interlocutors and the "weight" of the act. Their politeness strategies include the bald-on-record strategy, which is the least politeness strategy which does not minimize Face Threatening Acts targeted on the addressee's face. This strategy is often used in situations of great urgency and among close associates.

The positive politeness strategy attends to the addressee's positive face, using linguistic tokens such as gratitude, deference, greetings, group identities, avoidance of disagreement, and the use of positive and negative lexicons, compliments, and exaggeration of interest in the addressee and their concerns. This strategy seeks to establish agreement or solidarity between the interlocutors.

The negative politeness strategy addresses the negative face of the interlocutors, using linguistic cues and speech acts to avoid imposing their ideas on the addressee. This strategy involves apologizing, pessimistic indicators, formulaic polite terms, first-person pronouns, and presuppositions. The off-record strategy uses indirect language to remove the speaker from the potential of being imposing, using hints, metaphors, ellipses, indirect language, and hedges. Lastly, the 'Do not do the FTA' strategy, where the speaker chooses to remain silent, is used to avoid issuing FTAs.

As part of their description of the politeness phenomenon, Brown and Levinson listed about fifteen linguistic indicators that are mostly employed by speakers in mitigating FTAs. They include gratitude, deference, greeting, group identity, presupposition, please, 1st person pronouns, apologies, indirect/direct questions, 2nd person pronouns, hedges, disagreement avoidance, and pessimistic terms. However, the inapplicability of this model to other multilingual, multicultural, and collectivist nation-states' practices of politeness has attracted a lot of criticism from postcolonial and multilingual linguistic researchers. Their critiques (Ide, 1989; Gu, 1990; Nwoye, 1992; Anchimbe, 2006; Anchimbe and Janney, (2011, 2017)) established the foundation for the emergence of postcolonial pragmatics and other related models in multilingual linguistics study. Hence this study complementarily adopts both Brown and Levinson's framework and Anchimbe and Janney's Postcolonial pragmatics as the basis for analyzing the data—drawing parallels between tenets of both frameworks.

### **2.1. Postcolonial Pragmatics: A review**

Postcolonial pragmatics is a recent postcolonial linguistic movement and theory proposed by Anchimbe and Janney (2011, 2017). It is developed against the biases of classical pragmatic frameworks designed as universals for linguistic study. Although it is difficult to explain in the light of mainstream pragmatic theories, it is the most appropriate theory for postcolonial context-based research. The English concept of politeness does not have a directly translated version in most postcolonial languages, and the nearest word to politeness is sometimes used for research purposes. For example, Ide (1989) used the Japanese term 'wakimae' (meaning discernment) as the closest term to politeness, referring to the practice of polite behavior according to social conventions. Similar terminological difficulties abound in many other African languages but have not yet been discussed due to the lack of adequate frameworks.

Anchimbe and Janney's postcolonial pragmatics model does not provide a comprehensive separate framework for politeness analysis like mainstreams. However, they have examined various pragmatic indicators against which a multilingual pragmatic study of various kinds can be done. The central determiners of this theory are the collectivistic nature of postcolonial societies, the deal with verbal threats to group face, and the need to study politeness as a reflection of the culture of participants, not based on some universals that may be inapplicable to postcolonial societies (Anchimbe, 2006).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The study uses a corpus of tweets posted by clients of MTN Ghana, Vodafone Ghana, and AirtelTigo gathered from their Twitter pages. A cursory search of their Twitter handles revealed a series of relevant tweets from clients. We formed a corpus of screenshots from the three web pages between 8th May 2023 and 25th May 2024. Precisely, tweets were incorporated into the corpus if they were posted by clients (individuals or customers), contained complaints or feedback about services or products, and were written in English, the dominant language used on these platforms. Meanwhile, promotional tweets or advertisements that do not contain complaints or feedback, or were written in languages other than English were omitted from the corpus. Using these criteria, 750 tweets were captured in the initial corpus. After a thorough screening, duplicates were deleted, resulting in a reduced corpus of 450 tweets. The study then applied Patton's (1990) Purposive Sampling Technique (PS) to further scrutinise the data (to identify the utterances that constitute complaints), resulting in a final sample of 403. These complaints which were reconstituted to form the primary data for the study were subjected to various categorization processes and subsequent analysis using Brown Levinson's (1978, 1987) politeness models and Anchimbe and Janney's (2011) Postcolonial Pragmatics theory. The three web pages of the telecom networks were considered sufficient for a representative analysis and discussion of the study.

The data on each politeness type was keyed into Excel 2013 to enable the creation of graphs and charts and to generate the percentages that were used for the discussion of findings. The text in the data was lifted as it appeared on Twitter, though to conform to standard practice, personal information such as names of complainants, names of firms' representatives, and personal phone numbers of complainants were deleted from the data. It must be stated however that companies' names have been retained. Since complainants already intended to make their tweets publicly available to various search engines, it is justifiable for one to use them for academic research, conforming to International Academic Ethics as asserted by Taylor and Pagliari (2018). A tabular representation of the raw figures and their corresponding percentages was generated. Using Brown and Levinson's theory complementarily with Anchimbe and Janney's frameworks, the interpretation, analysis, and discussion were done with strict reference to the research objectives of the study.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Politeness Strategies Identified in Clients' Complaints in the Data

Statistically, 403 politeness strategies were identified in the data. Four politeness types (positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on record, and off record) were present. Table 1 and Figure 1 respectively give tabular and graphical representations of these politeness types:

Table 1: Politeness types in the data

Politeness strategy	Number of occurrences	Percentage
Bald on Record politeness	139	34.5
Negative politeness	138	34.2
Positive politeness	105	26.1
Off record politeness	21	5.2
Do not do the FTA	0	00
Total	403	100

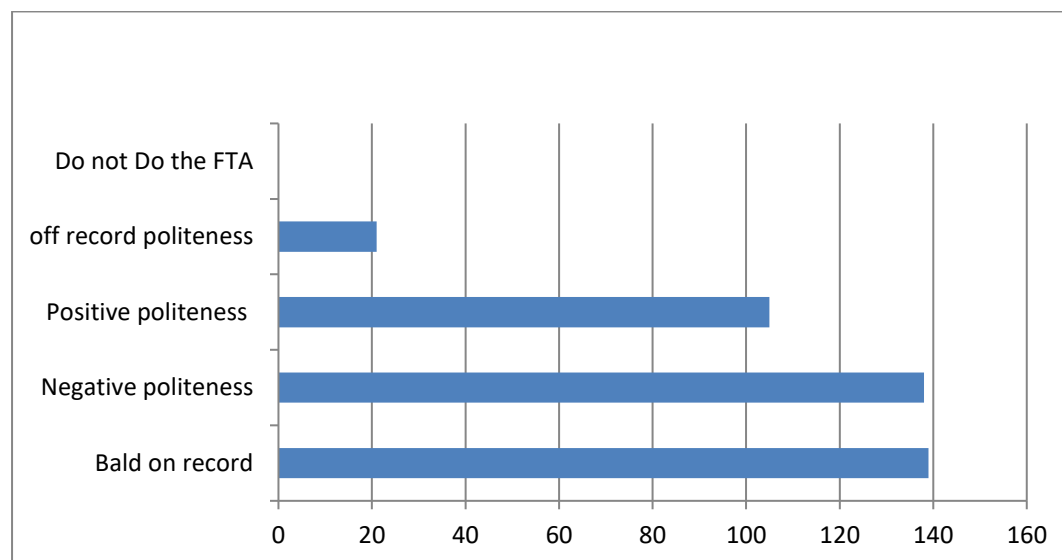


Figure 1: Politeness types in the data

The data reveals that bald-on-record politeness strategies are the most common in the clients' complaints, with the off-record strategy recording the least occurrences. The 'do not do the FTA' strategy does not occur at all, which according to Hu et al (2019), is a common feature of CMC. The dominance of the bald-on-record strategy contradicts Ghanaian culture, which is known for indirectness. This pattern in the data is probably a result of the anonymity that social media provides for complainants which makes them safe to make their utterances without considering face.

### 4.2. Bald on Record Politeness Strategy (BOR)

The statistics in Table 1 above show that the bald-on-record politeness strategy dominated the data (34.5%), suggesting that complaints were more inclined towards direct attack in the form of interrogation and condemnation. Customers in these dialogues employed BOR for accusing, blaming, expressing anger, making negative commendations, questioning, and request.

The bald-on-record strategy is a very direct way of communicating without avoiding imposition, and complainants did not make any effort to minimize threats posed at the hearer's



face. This strategy is likely favored by complainants for various pragmatic reasons, as it is more likely to embarrass or create discomfort in the hearers by posing direct questions or directly addressing the hearer with imperative clauses or blunt statements.

In the social media context, customers who adopt this strategy likely seek to express their frustrations over poor services provided, make urgent requests, express disappointments, or question the efficiency of service providers. Only two categories of over fifteen features of Brown and Levinson's politeness cues were identified as pointing to bald-on-record politeness in the data: the use of the second person pronoun and the use of direct question/starters. This minimal usage of politeness cues may reflect the cultural orientation of complainants, as individuals in most postcolonial settings carry the faces of groups like family, religion, and ethnicity rather than individual faces. The Ghanaian culture frowns upon bluntness, which possibly accounted for the minimal use of bald-on-record politeness cues. Table 2 shows these features and their corresponding frequencies and percentages:

Table 2: Bald on-record politeness strategies in the data

Number	Strategy(CUE)	Frequency	Percentage(%)
1	2 <sup>nd</sup> person pronoun	14	10.1
2	direct question/start	125	89.9
TOTAL		139	100

#### 4.2.1. Exegesis of Bald on Record Politeness Strategy

The bald-on-record politeness strategy is a common tactic used by speakers to express frustration, disappointment, dissatisfaction, and inefficiency with telecommunication networks. Some speakers may have deliberately refused to mitigate threats to their hearers' faces, as suggested by Brown and Levinson. This strategy is often used out of desperation or urgency, and speakers may not see the need to address the hearer's face needs. The data suggests that most complainants may not see the need to mitigate or make provisions for the hearer's face needs because they believe the firm is in the wrong and should be addressed accordingly. The Ghanaian culture abhors directness, as it indicates disrespect, impoliteness, and negative representation of one's family or ethnicity. This may explain why complainants, even when frustrated, choose two of the least offensive bald-on-record politeness cues when filing complaints.

##### *Expressing frustration through bald-on-record politeness*

Customer complaining behavior is a very complex discourse, influenced by different variables including culture, and complaint purpose. Some of the complaints seem to be expressing an outpour of anger, frustration, and disappointment in network providers, leading to the use of bald-on-record strategy in expressing their concerns. A lot of such complainants probably sought to create a direct impression that they are fed up with the instabilities and inconveniences that the network operators create:

**BOR 1.** I've tried calling *severally*, don't know what the point of your call center is if it cuts the line on me when I try to speak to customer care! TOBI and your online chat won't let me report my fault either. There's a telephone pole that's fallen over. Fixed broadband is out in the area I'm guessing *you'll* want me to DM you details.

**BOR 2.** What at all is wrong with your network?

**BOR 3.** I've been complaining since Friday, still your network is so bad *this is so tiring*

In an attempt to criticize and probably tag the network operators as irresponsible and not living up to their tasks, customers seemingly did not see the need to mitigate the FTAs that their statements may have posed to the hearer's face. The complainant in example BOR 1 has probably been through a lot of stress just to report a fallen network pole which caused a network blackout in his area. The alleged constant rejection of his call by the firm has presumably made

him express his frustration by adopting the bald-on-record strategy. Similarly, the complainant in example BOR 2 appears to be expressing his frustration through direct rhetorical questions. It might look as if the complainant is asking a mere question but in reality, the clause seems to bear an illocutionary and pragmatic load portraying the customer's frustration, anger, or disappointment. The complainant in example BOR 3 appears to be more straightforward by using the lexicon *tiring* which simply conveys his disappointment.

### *Making urgent requests through bald-on-record politeness*

The use of interrogative constructions is no doubt meant to elicit responses from hearers. However, when such questions are not mitigated, they become bald-on-record since they are directly posed to the hearer. This mostly happens when speakers need urgent responses to their questions or complaints. In the data, a lot of the questions used by complainants were immediately followed by backup explanations of the problem that needed to be addressed. Below are some examples:

**BOR7.** *So isn't there any other way I can access 110 or 111...I have got bets to win for crying out loud*

**BOR8** @MTNGhana @AskMTNGhana *what wrong with your turboNET. Internet is extremely slow*

**BOR9** @AskMTNGhana *when is the issue with my fibre going to be fixed? It has been hell using your internet services these days*

The complainants in the above examples express an immediate and dire need for the services listed in their complaints. As a result of the urgent need for the assistance they sought, they never showed interest in mitigating the FTAs that their utterances could potentially cause the firms. The speaker in example BOR 7 urgently needed a short code to access their network system to execute his betting agenda. Similarly, even though not stated, speakers for example BOR 8 and BOR 9 perhaps needed the attention of the firms for the Wi-Fi networks to be fixed so that they could continue with their usual duties.

As a result of the faceless nature of social media profiles (due to the prevalence of false profiles and identities), a lot of users do not recognize the face needs of participants in their dialogues. This is very common in most computer-mediated dialogues (Hu et al, 2019). Also, it is common to see people deliberately choosing certain linguistic resources to attack the face of the opponent to achieve a particular pragmatic effect. Such speakers in those contexts might resort to the use of bald-on-record politeness strategies as exemplified in this data. It must be stated admittedly that complainants took advantage of the anonymity that social media afford its users to say anything they want. A study conducted on the same topic in a face-to-face dialogue may reveal lesser use of bald-on-record strategies because of the physical presence of firms' representatives. Thus, the cultures of most postcolonial African societies do not encourage directness. It is perceived as an irresponsible behavior. In considering the factors that might have accounted for the dominance of bald-on record strategies, one must acknowledge the influence of the global community. As much as postcolonial societies have unique cultural systems, the global community especially the Western world has had a major effect on their cultures, especially their language. This might also be a major variable responsible for the linguistic choice of participants in the data.

### **4.3.Negative Politeness Strategies**

The next politeness strategy identified in the data is negative politeness. As the data indicates, Negative Politeness constitutes 34.2% of the total number of strategies used in the data. The data suggests that many of the complaints targeted the negative faces of their firms. To avoid such levels of impositions, they resorted to various kinds of negative politeness strategies to mitigate the weight of the FTAs issued. Some negative politeness cues were identified as mitigating the hearer's negative face. Table 3 gives an illustration of the composition of negative politeness strategies as identified in the data:

**Table 3: Negative Politeness Strategies as identified in the data**

NUMBER	STRATEGY	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE (%)
1	Apologizing	7	5.1
2	Pessimisms	12	8.7
3	Please	80	57.9
4.	1 <sup>st</sup> person pronoun	31	22.5
5	Presuppositions	8	5.8
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>138</b>	<b>100</b>

As represented in Table 3 above, 'please' is the most used negative politeness linguistic cue in the data while the use of pessimistic constructions, presuppositions, and apology cues constitute the least employed negative politeness strategies in the data. This frequency of occurrences may be attributed to the fact that most forms of complaints as requests, questions, and suggestions constitute an intrusion into the hearer's negative face. This, therefore, calls for the need to adopt some negative face-redressive expressions to reduce the face-threatening effect of the utterances. This finding could be attributed as well to Ghanaian cultural habit of excessive use of the term 'please'. It is a common practice in Ghanaian languages especially Akan to use *mepa wo kyew* translated as *please* even when the speaker is angry. This is a basic linguistic practice in Ghana, so participants probably adapted this from the local language.

#### 4.3.1. Exegesis of Negative Politeness Strategies

A negative politeness strategy is mostly employed by communicators to help protect the negative face of the listener. This is achieved through the use of various linguistic and nonlinguistic cues. However, this study focuses only on the linguistic dimension of politeness which has been discussed below:

##### *Apologies*

Most complainants appear to be aware of the dangers that their utterances were likely to cause the recipients so they perhaps deliberately began by attempting to reduce, if not to neutralize, the effect by apologizing. In most instances, the complaint began with an apology followed by the complaint proper, which sometimes can be insulting. It should also be noted that this is not just a matter of politeness, but could be a cultural behavior among members of the Ghanaian community. Ghanaians generally apologize first before verbal attacks. Thus, the instances in the data categorized as part of Brown and Levinson's theory could be a typical reflection of Ghanaian linguistic practice and not necessarily the conscious adherence to politeness rules proposed based on Western-context politeness practice. Below are some instances of mitigation through the use of apologies:

**NP 1:** *I am sorry to say this* but of late you people are really not doing your job properly.

**NP 2:** *Sorry ooo*, but MTN network is very useless recently

**NP 3:** *Sorry to ask oo*, what exactly have these networks been doing? I keep switching from one network to the other yet I face the same problem. It's really unfortunate.

The complainant in example NP 1, knowing very well that he/she will be encroaching upon the hearer's territory, chose to apologize first before issuing the FTA. The utterance seems to be teaching the firm and its representatives what their job is and how they should carry out their duties as service providers. The utterance, even though an obvious threat to the firm's negative face, has received some amount of mitigation through the use of the apologetic expression "*I am sorry to say this*", which is a reflection of *Ghanaianism* in the linguistic behavior of the complainant.

Similarly, the complainant in example NP 2 is probably also aware of the potential threat that his/her utterance will cause the hearer so he/she begins by rendering an apology before issuing the FTA which reduces the weight of the FTA on the hearer's face. Unlike examples, NP 1 and NP 2, the complainant in example NP 3 appears to be questioning the instabilities of their



services and calling on the service providers to account for their alleged failures. From an illocutionary perspective, he/she is presumably trying to tell them the right things to do by pointing out to them some of the things they are doing wrong. Thus, complainants are imposing on the firms what they (customers) think is right and must be done. That is an attack on the negative faces of firms; hence the apologies sought to mitigate such attacks.

### *Redressive linguistic cues and pessimistic indicators*

On-record politeness as a whole is rooted in classical discussions of the politeness concept. It is usually a redressive action taken to mitigate the consequence of the obvious FTA issued by a speaker. Two main redressive cues have been identified in the data—the use of ‘*please*’ and ‘*kindly*’ on the one hand and the use of pessimistic expressions on the other hand. According to Thompson and Anderson (2019), ‘*please*’ and ‘*kindly*’ constitute the most common politeness indicators in Ghana. In this particular data, ‘*please*’ is also being used to mitigate the FTA that a request, a question, or a direct comment may issue to the hearer. Similarly, the speaker, to avoid intruding into the privacy of the hearer, usually chooses to sound pessimistic through the use of modal verbs such as ‘*could*’, ‘*can*’, ‘*would*’, etc. This probably reduces the effect that a direct request would have posed on the hearer’s face. The use of these linguistic items could be a reflection of ‘Ghanaianism’ rather than a fulfillment of politeness rules. It must be acknowledged that a lot of these practices are unconscious linguistic behaviors that are deeply rooted in the Ghanaian cultural systems and may have very little to do with the scope of politeness as discussed above. Below are some instances of such utterances used in the text:

**NP 5:** Hello @AskMTNGhana *please* how do i get your Turbonet to buy for my biz? I'm not able to apply online.

**NP 6:** @MTNGhana Your Network at Nsumia near Dobro is very VERY bad! Can you *kindly* do something about it! Asking for the community. Thanks

**NP 7:** *Please* can someone help me? My internet just went off and I can't continue my work @Askvodafoneghama

**NP 8:** I cannot access Internet on my phone. *Can* you rectify that for me?

**NP 9:** I lost my SIM card today. *Can* you *please* disconnect it for me?

Clients in examples NP 5 and NP 7 above doubtlessly needed help from firms’ representatives but were also cautious of the effect that their utterances may have on the hearer’s faces. They could have gone straight to ask *how do I get your turbonet to buy from for my biz Or can someone help me?* The complainants probably felt it was necessary to mitigate their questions to reduce the force of the intrusion posed by the question. Examples NP 6 and NP 9 express pessimism in a form of a request just like example NP 8. The difference between speaker NP 8 and the two is that NP 6 and NP 9 also have redressive linguistic indicators ‘*please*’, and ‘*kindly*’. All the speakers in the above examples appear to be very mindful of the faces of their hearers and perhaps consciously or unconsciously chose to avoid any direct intrusion into their privacies through the use of politeness resources as indicated above.

### *The use of first-person references*

Complainants sometimes prefer to express their dissatisfaction by personalizing their stance in order not to appear as imposing their opinions on the hearers or third parties. Thematically, active sentences put meaning emphasis on the subject which mostly begins the sentence; hence constructing comments with first-person pronouns is a probable attempt by the speaker to claim responsibility for whatever opinion that the utterance seems to express (Sekyi-Baidoo, 2002). Thus, the complainants in the data appear to be making entitlement claims to their utterances (by their sentence structures) such that it will not look as if they were creating a public impression of inefficiency on the part of the service providers. Below are some examples of first-person pronouns references as used in the data:

**NP 10:** God *I'm* so frustrated with the internet services that you lot provide in my neighborhood. *I've been complaining* since March and we're still here @AskMTNGhana. How???

**NP 11:** Asuwear *I couldn't* watch the penalties yesterday because both of them @AskMTNGhana and @VodafoneGhana decided to do what they know best....

**NP 12:** @AskMTNGhana *I did* an internet bundle of 5 cedis for my sister this morning around 7:20 am up till now she hasn't received the bundle yet still my airtime was taken.

As illustrated in examples NP 10 to NP 12 above, each participant was careful with their choices of words in expressing their frustrations. The use of the first-person pronoun 'I' signifies their readiness to accept whatever implications that their utterances may have on the image of the firms. They try to restrict the frustration to themselves only; claiming ignorance of other people who might have suffered the same fate from the network providers. Speakers, therefore, have made calculated attempts to reduce the weight of the FTAs that their utterances may have on the general image of the firms by making use of the first-person singular pronoun 'I' in expressing their frustrations and disappointments. This perhaps was to let the firm and third parties involved know that the speaker is only expressing an opinion and not a general truth. Situating this finding within the postcolonial linguistic context, the Ghanaian culture, like many other African societies encourages bravery and representation. The use of personal noun pronouns in this context may be an attempt to willingly take responsibility for one's actions without endangering the faces of others.

#### **4.4. Positive Politeness Strategies (PP)**

The Positive politeness strategy is the next strategy to be discussed. As captured in Table 2, it constitutes about 26.1% of the total number of strategies used in the data. The data suggests that many of the complaints were aimed at attacking the positive faces of their firms. To avoid such levels of attacks on firms' integrity, they resorted to various kinds of positive politeness strategies to mitigate the weight of the FTAs issued. During the analysis, various positive politeness cues were identified as mitigating the hearers' positive faces. Table 4 gives an illustration of positive politeness strategies identified in the data:

**Table 4: Positive politeness strategies in the data**

<b>Number</b>	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>1</b>	Gratitude	27	25.7
<b>2</b>	Deference	11	10.5
<b>3</b>	Greetings	28	26.7
<b>5</b>	Group identity	13	12.4
<b>6</b>	Disagreement avoidance	6	5.7
<b>7</b>	Positive lexicon	3	2.9
<b>8</b>	Negative lexicon	17	16.2
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>105</b>	<b>100</b>

'Greetings' had the highest number of occurrences among all the positive politeness strategies employed by complainants in the data while the use of positive lexicon and disagreement avoidance strategies were the least employed positive politeness strategy in the data. 'Greeting', as a politeness indicator dominated the list of positive politeness strategies probably due to the cultural background of participants in the dialogue. 'Greetings' play a very relevant pragmatic role in Ghana and Africa as a whole (Anchimbe, 2006). The value placed on greetings by society is likely to have influenced the communicative strategies of complainants even on social media.

##### **4.4.1. Exegesis of Positive Politeness Strategies**

Complainants express positive politeness by relying on several linguistic indicators such as words that express gratitude, phatic constructions, and in-group identity markers. All these were used in the data probably to achieve the general aim of protecting or mitigating the forces of the FTAs that their utterance might have issued on the positive faces of their firms.

### Gratituiton

A lot of the utterances that have positive politeness strategies contain linguistic resources that express gratitude or appreciation. Even though very little use of gratituiton (as we choose to call it in this study) is expected, there were several instances where complainants begin by showing some appreciation for a recent period or a particular aspect of the services provided, followed by the complaint proper; which is mostly unpleasant. A number of the complainants also expressed gratitude in advance while anticipating a positive response to their request or question. Below are a few instances of gratituiton expressed in the data:

**PP 1:** @MTNGhana Your Network at Nsumia near Dobro is very VERY bad! Can you please do something about it! Asking for the community. *Thanks*

**PP 2:** I lost my SIM card today. Can you please disconnect it for me? I'm ready to supply the detail you may need. *Thank you.*

**PP 3:** *Thanks*, but Still cannot see option 3. \*151# Options 1, 2, 4 5...What happened to 3?

The pragmatic implication of example PP 1 is that the firm is not living up to expectations which resulted in the provision of bad network services in the complainant's community. This amounts to an attack on the positive face of the firm since they deserve or expect their services to be appreciated and recognized. In an attempt to mitigate this FTA, the complainant chose to thank them for the job they are yet to do. Examples PP 2 and PP 3 however, present slightly different complaints—they both make requests and ask questions respectively. While the complainant in example PP 3 thanked them for the previous work done, he also interrogates the absence of other codes. This, we believe, is to create neutrality in fulfilling the face needs of the hearer or probably a mere reflection of traditional Ghanaian cultural values. The complainant in example PP 2 thanked them with the hope that they will execute the request s/he made. This is however uncommon in customer complaints, as seen in this study, since a lot of them get frustrated and do not even consider the face needs of their listeners.

### Phatic construction

It is common in daily discourses to see people exchange greetings, salutations, or other non-content-related expressions for the sake of communication continuity, initiation, or closures. These all fall under the phatic function of language. They are mostly used in an attempt to create inclusion or establish common grounds which is the preoccupation of positive politeness. Find below some instances where greetings, a common form of phatic expression, have been used in the data as a positive politeness strategy:

**PP 4:** *Hello* @AskMTNGhana please how do i get your Turbonet to buy for my biz? I'm not able to apply online. I keep getting errors.

**PP 5:** *Dear* @MTNGhana @AskMTNGhana why the hell do I have over 250gig yet my internet doesn't work and it has to take you 24-48 hrs to look into it? Will you compensate me for the 48hr losses???

**PP 6:** *Hello* @AskairteTtigo gh how do I retrieve the Id number I used to register my sim

**PP 7:** *Hi*, my office phone has just been stolen. How do I block the number since it's not registered in my name????

Except for example PP 5, all the other instances perhaps sought to ask for help directly in the form of a question. Ordinarily, seeking help issues a threat to the negative face of listeners (Brown and Levinson, 1987). However, the FTA mitigation strategy employed by the complainants seemingly sought to bridge relations and establish a common ground for smooth communication; hence making it a positive politeness strategy. For example, even though the speaker in example PP 5 seemed very angry and was ready to unleash his/her anger through the question of condemnation, s/he chose to first greet the firm to at least show some respect. This, in a subtle way, helps minimize the FTA effect on the positive face of listeners.

Contextualizing the concept of greetings within the African culture will perhaps give a better meaning to why customers, even on social media chose to greet before complaining. In Africa, it is customarily encouraged to greet anyone you meet or speak to, no matter the kind of mood one may be in. Sometimes the interlocutor does not mean the words he/she utters but because it is a socially recognized pragmatic principle, s/he is expected to greet. This context might have influenced the choice of the angry complainants in the data to greet even though they probably never meant it.

Greetings are used in social media just like normal face-to-face engagements to get the attention of the addressee, and to show respect as the customs and values of their society require.

#### ***In-group identity construction***

In-group markers are usually linguistic expressions that seek to create a common identity between speakers and hearers or third parties. This kind of positive politeness strategy is mostly used to create a kind of relationship or familiarity among participants such that whatever FTA will be issued will have less weight on the hearer. Below are some examples of in-group markers used in the data:

**PP 11:** @.....*Dear all*, please I plead with you to add your voice to the thread above to enable @MTNGhana resolve this issues urgently. Thank you

**PP 12:** @VodafoneGhanaplease come and explains why *you guys* were able to deduct as whooping 1.5GB Data in 20 minutes. I called your call center and you said you can't see what I used my data for so you are giving me a link to check myself. And the link you gave me doesn't exist

In example PP 11, the complainant urges third-party participants to support a sensitization campaign to help MTN develop a remedy for the public complaint. This is considered a heavy FTA on the firm's positive face. However, the writer's choice of words and plea to involve others helps reduce the weight of the FTA. In example PP 12, the complainant addresses his service provider using the identity word 'guys', which is mostly used among age-sets in Ghana. This choice may be a deliberate attempt to reduce his linguistic shot at the firm's integrity.

Group indicators may be present in the data due to the social nature of communication and the cultural principle of togetherness and unity. Ghana's values confront society's problems as a team, rather than factions of the same tribal, ethnic, or social group. The prevalent perception of communal solutions embedded in the cultural elements of Ghanaians might have accounted for the use of these in-group identity markers.

#### **4.5.Off-Record Politeness Strategies (ORP)**

Off-record politeness is a crafty way of communicating such that speakers can deny any implicatures in the form of FTAs when asked to account for utterances they made. Complainants in this data attempted to mitigate a number of their FTAs issued in their utterances through the use of the off-record politeness strategy. It is however not expected to dominate business discourse since interlocutors within the business domain are expected to honor precision and clarity of expression in their daily dialogues. In most instances, communicators tend to make utterances that indirectly convey their intended messages without obviously stating them. In this data, however, not many of these strategies have been used. The few instances where they were used mostly employ hedges and linguistic tools to enable their users to express their unwillingness to be direct in their utterances. Table 5 presents a distribution of the various off-record politeness strategies as propounded by Brown and Levinson (1987):

**Table 5: Off-record politeness strategies in the data**

NUMBER	STRATEGY	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE (%)
1	Indirect	9	42.9
2	Hedges	12	57.1
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>21</b>	<b>100</b>

As represented in Table 5 above, only two main off-record politeness cues were present in the merchant-client complaint engagements. The use of hedges was more prevalent in the data than indirect constructions. It is quite expected that off-record politeness strategies occupy very little or zero margins in a normal business dialogue since it is one of the most formal domains of life where precision and clarity are communicative assets for both merchants and clients. However, one may attribute the 5.2% occurrence of off-record politeness in the data to the fact that the dialogue took place on a social media platform which also has its unique linguistic and nonlinguistic cues employed by its users. The relatively social environment created by the Twitter platform probably inspired customers' use of metaphorical constructions among other indirect cues, to mitigate the FTAs they issued in their utterances. One may also attribute this unexpected occurrence to the typicality of Ghanaians as people who are mostly indirect in speech. The Ghanaian culture boasts of several metaphors, proverbs, and indirect constructions in their languages which are part and parcel of their communicative behaviors.

#### 4.5.1. Exegesis of Off-Record Politeness Strategies

Off-record strategies are mostly used by speakers to create room for denial of the responsibility of creating implicatures. The complainants resorted to the use of a few hedges and metaphors in the data. This always happens when they want to attack the face of the hearer indirectly. Below are some examples:

**ORP 1:** *I am tempted to assume that @mtn Ghana has become incapable of providing quality network for its clients*

**ORP 2:** *I don't know much about other country's networks but I think MTN Ghana has the poorest network ever.*

**ORP 3:** *@vodafone Ghana, your turbo nets have become beans waa!!*

The first two examples made use of various hedging devices like '*tempted to assume*' and '*I don't know much*' to help them deny ever issuing an FTA if held to account. In example 1 for instance, the writer can take refuge in the fact that he is only speaking based on assumption and cannot therefore accept responsibility for calling MTN an incapable network. Similarly, the complainant in example ORP 2 has acknowledged that he has insufficient knowledge of what he is saying so he is only expressing an opinion without facts; hence he gives no room for accountability. Finally, the third complainant in example ORP 3 sought to attack the efficiency of the network providers through the use of the metaphor 'beans'. This has become a common metaphorical expression among youth groups in Ghana and is used to refer to something cheap, useless, or unreliable; depending on the context of use. This client topped it up with the Ghanaian intensifier 'waa'. The complainant hid behind this metaphor to rubbish the services of the firm without giving room for anyone to hold him responsible for creating implicatures. This linguistic behavior is a culture-specific element that may not apply to monolingual Western societies.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study has presented a detailed analysis of clients' use of linguistic politeness when lodging complaints on Twitter. The analysis shows that the politeness strategies the clients used were bald-on-record, negative politeness, positive politeness, and off-record politeness strategies. One would have assumed that since most of the complaints were in the form of questions and



thus constitute an intrusion into the hearer's territory, negative politeness would have dominated the other strategies in the data. However, the bald-on-record strategy was found to be the predominant politeness type. This is probably because customer complaining behavior is rooted in elements of frustration, anger, stress, and disappointment such that in an attempt to express such unpleasant experiences, customers are tempted to not consider the face needs of the hearer. Thus, a lot of them ended up making blunt unmitigated utterances which made bald-on-record politeness most dominant in the data. Because complaints constitute an area predominated by FTAs that target the negative face, it was highly unexpected to have competitive frequencies between negative politeness (34.2%) and bald-on-record politeness (34.5%). The pattern, as already stated, could be a result of the emotional forces that triggered those complaints lodged by the various clients towards their respective network firms.

The study also presents elements of conformity between the linguistic behavior of participants and the culture-specific prescriptions of Ghanaians. Thus, it appears as if the communicative strategies outlined as part of the politeness indicators propounded by Brown and Levinson are more of a reflection of the culture of the postcolonial Ghanaian society than a fulfillment of their politeness framework. This study is an attempt to respond to the problem of disciplinary expansion by extending the politeness scope of inquiry into merchant-client dialogues in Ghana and customer complaining behavior as a sub-genre of business communication. This study recommends that further studies be conducted on politeness in customer complaining behavior by comparatively examining the choices of politeness strategies that clients make during computer-mediated engagements and face-to-face dialogues with their respective firms. We also recommend that future studies on members of postcolonial Ghana should adopt multilingualism-related politeness theories in analyzing the data. We believe it will provide a more logical interpretation of the data than any monolingual-centered theory would provide.

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