

Nigerian English Honorific Markers in Teacher-student Interaction

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of honorific markers in teacher-student interactions in some foundational schools in Southwestern Nigeria, with a focus on the influence of Nigerian English and indigenous cultural values. The study addresses a gap in existing literature concerning the cultural adaptation of English lexical forms to express honorification in classroom discourse. The specific objectives of the study were to identify the honorific expressions used in Nigerian English in teacher-student interactions, analyse their pragmatic functions, and explore their socio-cultural significance. Drawing on Arundale's Conjoint Constituting Model of Communication and Leech's Politeness Principle, the study adopted a qualitative design. Ten schools were purposively selected, and thirty teacher-student interactions were recorded using participant observation. The findings reveal that students frequently use a mixture of Nigerian English, Yoruba particles, and Standard English in greetings, requests, permissions, and compliments. It further reveals that honorifics such as "aunt" and "uncle" are pragmatically employed for reverence, and Yoruba pluralization is transferred into English discourse to reflect respect. Finally, the findings show that teachers accept these forms as appropriate in both formal and informal settings. The study concludes that honorific expressions in Nigerian English are culturally and contextually bound, reflecting mutual orientation to respect in the classroom. The paper contributes to existing knowledge by demonstrating the dynamic and innovative nature of Nigerian English in educational interaction.

Keywords: Nigerian English, teacher-student interaction, honorifics, politeness, pragmatics.

1. Introduction

The English language, originally a European language, has become one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, with nearly 1.5 billion users (Ethnologue, 2023). Its global spread has led to its adaptation across diverse sociolinguistic contexts, particularly in postcolonial societies such as Nigeria. According to Bhatt (2001), English is increasingly seen less as a European language and more as a global medium representing multicultural identities, sociolinguistic diversity, and distinct functional norms. Achebe (1975:103), in his seminal essay *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinemann), submits that the English language must be adapted to suit African realities: "I feel the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings." This view foregrounds the nativisation of English, giving rise to Nigerian English, which accommodates local expressions, cultural references, and indigenous communicative practices. In the educational sector, particularly in classroom settings, Nigerian English manifests through code-mixing, lexical innovation, and pragmatic strategies that align with local norms. Jegede et al. (2024) observe that linguistic strategies in Nigerian contexts often reflect socio-cultural positioning and

rhetorical goals. Similarly, Jegede (2024) notes the strategic use of politeness markers to negotiate power dynamics in communicative interactions. The classroom, as a microcosm of the wider society, serves as a critical site where language, culture, and pedagogy intersect. Teacher-student interactions are shaped not only by formal educational expectations but also by informal cultural codes, including the use of honorifics to express respect, solidarity, and social roles. This cultural embedding of language use underscores the complexity and dynamism of communication in Nigerian schools, where the English language is both a medium of instruction and a vehicle for cultural expression.

2. Literature Review

2.1 On Culture and Honorification

Culture plays an important role in determining human behavioural expectations and conducts. According to Sarangi (2009), culture is an organizing principle that underlies social systems and determines the totality of human behaviour. The variability of culture accounts for different cultural realities that are found in different societies. Honorification is a common practice in different cultures and it is often signalled through the use of language or through gestures. For instance, there is a difference between the use of *ó* and *e* among Yoruba people to show social hierarchy. While *ó* is a second person singular pronoun for someone who the speaker is older or higher than they are in terms of social standing, *e* is a linguistic honorific term that is used to show that the subject is older than the speaker is. This is also found in French in which the social standing of the addressee determines the choice between *tu* and *vous*. Apart from using linguistic honorific terms to show deference for or socially indexicalising someone, there are many cultures that use gestures to establish social hierarchies among interactants. For instance, bowing and touching of another person's feet is an honorific signage in the Japanese and the Indian cultures respectively.

As Agha (1994) puts it, the one's choice of any of these honorific terms is determined by social status of individual interactants who are expected to be respected. Therefore, the higher the social status of an individual, the higher the deference that is expected to be paid to that person. One of the areas in which the English language has been domesticated in Nigeria is in the domain of honorifics. According to Ide and Yoshida (1999), honorifics are linguistic markers of deference for the addressee or the referent by the speaker. This definition establishes a connection between honorifics and politeness. However, the connection that the submission of Ide and Yoshida creates between honorifics and politeness is against the submission of Agha (1994) who claims that the use of honorifics is independent of politeness (see also Irvine (2009)). To him, politeness relies on speaker-addressee relationships while honorifics shows deference to different role categories. Based on different role categories, Shibatani (2006) identifies three categories of honorifics: *referent honorifics*, *subject honorifics* and *addressee honorifics*.

Referent honorifics are grammatical honorifics that are used to show deference to a nominal referent. Honorary titles such as *Mr*, *Reverend* and *Sir* are the most common examples of this type of honorifics. There are also referent honorific titles that are derived from kinship terms such as *uncle*, *brother* and *in-law*. In some languages, there are still some instances of

using plural personal pronominal items such as *vous*, *vy* and *e/won* in French, Russian and Yoruba, respectively, that are used to mark respect for someone older or someone in a higher position. Considering the use of *won* as an honorific marker in Yoruba explains the adoption of ‘*they*’ – a plural third person pronoun in English – as a pronominal referent for a singular referent as in

- i. They are calling you. *Won n pe o.*

This is typical of a Yoruba speaker of English who is cognizant of the demands of the culture that an elderly person must be respected even with the one’s choice of words and when the person calling is older than the person uttering the sentence above. Also, Watts (2003) sees honorifics as grammatical forms that are used by interactants to indexicalise the social relations that exist among them. One of the greatest influences of the English language is the cultural practice of its host nations.

1. Situating the problem in scholarship (problem statement)
2. Examining existing literature
3. The English language in the Nigerian contexts

Brown and Levinson (1978:276) refers to honorific as a grammatical encoding of relative social status between participants in a communicative event. It encodes the higher status of interlocutors. Grundy (2000:273) discusses honorifics as linguistic forms employed by interactants as a sign of deference. Some scholars have worked on English honorific forms as many others have worked on the Nigerian English. Honorifics has been extensively researched in grammar but received sparse attention in pragmatic research, especially in the interaction between teacher and student. In showing honor in the Nigerian society, honorific expressions and the level of regard to the superior or the elderly define utterances. That informs why honorifics is attached to politeness and respect conferred to an interactant of higher status. However, Levison’s discussion on honorifics presents different types of honorifics, which is explained with a figure 1. Honorific is classified as relational and absolute. Relational honorifics includes referential honorifics which deals with direct indexing without reference to the addressee; referent honorifics, bystander honorifics which gives preference or respect to non-participants in interaction over hearers and formality levels of honorifics. Absolute honorifics consists of authorized speakers and authorized recipients.

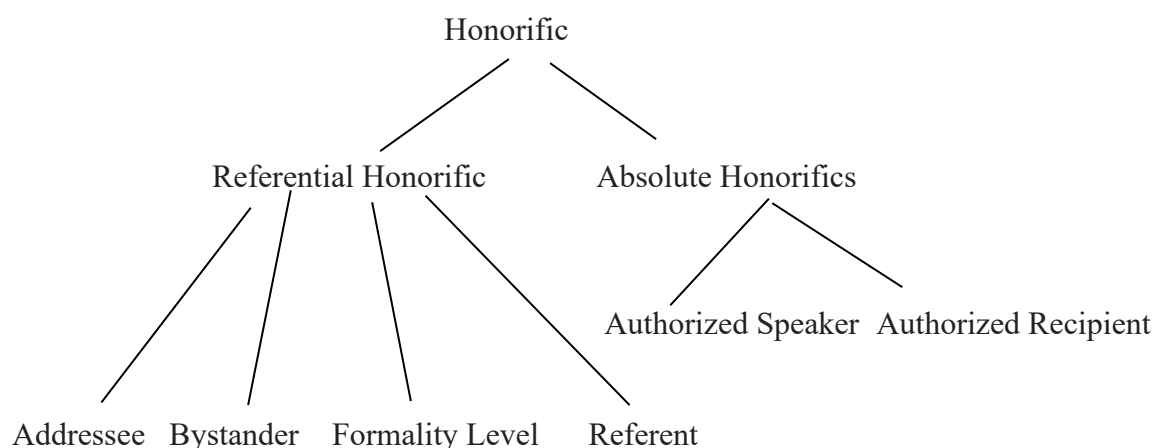


Figure 1: Types of Honorifics (Levinson 1983:90).

2.2 Review of Previous Studies

The Nigerian English has attracted scholarly interests and the features that mark the Nigerian English exist within the core linguistic aspects such as phonology, syntax, morphology, pragmatics and semantics. Extant studies existed in the various linguistic aspect to affirm the peculiarity of the Nigerian English, the English spoken in the Nigerian society. Nigerian English contains features originating from Nigerian native languages in the English Language expressions. Scholars refer to Nigerian English as a variety of English that is socially acceptable in Nigeria and globally intelligible (Ekpe, 2004). Ekpe terms the Nigerian English expressions, 'glocalization', that is, adopting a global outlook into a local condition. Igboanusi (2006) investigates syntactic features of Nigerian English, where he discusses the features of NE created through syntactic processes. His data were collected through recordings of the basilectal and acrolectal varieties of the Nigerian English. In his findings, NE shows some aspects of nativization resulting from the contact of English with indigenous languages and with pidgin. It is of interest to note that even the acrolectal speakers of the English Language use the nativized version in their communication.

Okoro (2017) opines that faulty analogy is responsible for the sub-standard sounds produced by second language users of the English Language. He claims that as a result of following a logical pattern of not only pronouncing English sounds but also in the general use of the English language, L2 speakers use faulty analogy and hence, faulty production of sounds. He believes in the formal teaching of such analogy at the early stage of formal learning. This tradition aligns with the perspective of this paper to collect data from elementary and secondary school users of English. Using the theory of language variation and change, Duru (2022) explores and analyzes different instances of the Nigerian English usage and concludes that Nigerian English is used solely by Nigerians to express their experiences and the variety is therefore not an imperfect learning of the British or the native speakers' English. From Duru's perspective, users of other varieties of English are open to researches to show the different manners in which the language can be used, for instance, Uba (2015) attempts a morphophonemic classification of Nigerian English. Unuabonah (2019) focuses on corpus

pragmatics to do frequency, stylistic variation and discourse markers of Nigerian English; where new discourse markers were discovered. Alrawi and Al-hassan (2014) examine the pragmatic study of English honorific forms. The few extant research works highlighted serve as the foundation upon which this work is built. The work focuses on Nigerian English but examines the different use of honorific markers to elicit politeness and to achieve meaning in teacher-student interaction.

3. Theoretical Choices

This work benefits centrally from Arundale's conjoint co-constituting model of communication and Leech's politeness principles. Also, relevant is the concept of style in discourse, which provides the tool for analysing creativity and social context in the interactions. The conjoint constituting model and the politeness principle are discussed in section 3.1 and 3.2, respectively, and are related to style and discourse.

3.1 The Conjoint Constituting Model

Arundale (2022) accounts for how persons in interaction constitute relationships as they mutually constitute talk and conduct. He explains constituting as "the process of forming a whole by bringing together otherwise separate elements", the elements can be interpretation of interactions or even humans involved in interaction, while mutually constituting a sequence of talk and conduct is an emergent, conjoint and collaborative undertaking, (2022:3-11). He proposed the conjoint co-constituting model of communication. The model conceptualizes that participant produce utterances that are mutually constrained such that reciprocally affect their formulation of interpretations. What distinguishes this approach to communication from others is the argument that collaborative and emergent characteristics of communication are as a result of the way in which meanings are conjointly co-constituted by interactants. Conjoint co-constitution model by Arundale bothers on the manner in which "each participant's cognitive processes in interpreting and designing are responsive to prior, current or potential contributions the other participant makes to the stream of interaction", Arundale, (2005:59). The co-constitution model implies that what individuals know is co-constituted in interaction with other people and material practices of persons as they interact with one another in particular situations. The approach describes a conjoint co-constituting model of communication that two or more people constitute as they conjointly make up meanings and actions in interaction. It relates phenomenon both at the culture-general and culture specific levels and follows a sequential interpreting principle.

Also, Arundale (1999) proposes an improved conceptualisation of politeness that requires more than the traditional account by Brown and Levinson. He argues that contextual features should not be ignored in the interpretation of utterances and specifically in the analysis of politeness at the level of interaction. He concludes that interpretations should be made if the specific context of use is established. The cognitive view of context, according to Arundale, conceives of common ground as an interactive mechanism which relies on the experiences of participants as they negotiate interpretations in interactions. Common ground in this context is based on background knowledge and mutual assumption. He bases his proposal on politeness as an interactive strategy directed towards someone's face in order to achieve interaction goals.

Arundale shifts from an individual perspective of face to a more interactional focus of the concept. To him, politeness is a social phenomenon arising in the conjoint co-constituting of human relationships and argues that interaction should be analysed from the participants' perspective and not from the analyst's view. It concludes that interactions are not a result of speaker's intention but an achievement of the interactants; convention and heuristics as well as salient aspect of the context including background knowledge.

3.2 The Politeness Principle

Leech's work (1983) is a significant contribution to the field of pragmatics. He opines that pragmatics is a set of strategies and principles that enable humans to achieve success in communication. Leech (1983) identifies seven maxims of politeness as tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, sympathy and Pollyanna Principle. The justification of each maxim is, thus, the reason Leech's politeness principle is grounded in interpersonal rhetoric. In order to make an in-depth pragmatic interpretation, Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) and Leech's Politeness Principle (PP) must interact. Politeness Principle surfaces as a means of rescuing Cooperative Principle from certain exceptions. Leech (1983:80) states that "Politeness Principle can be seen, not just as another principle to be added to the politeness, but as a necessary complement which rescues the Cooperative Principle from serious trouble". The following examples illustrate the point that the Politeness Principle rescues the Cooperative Principle:

- (1) A: How was my presentation in the class today?
B: The presentations generally were not bad.

Obviously, B's response to A's question in example 1 above flouts the maxim of quality as B did not directly answer A's question. Rather than give a specific response to A's question, B gave a general response that "the presentations generally were not bad". An explanation that can be given to this is that A's presentation was not likely to have been good. B could have been specific and divulged more information but such would be at the expense of being polite. Therefore, B suppresses the specific information in order to uphold Politeness Principle. Leech argues that while the Cooperative Principle is useful for regulating participant's conversation and tailoring it towards the actualization of illocutionary/ discoursal goal, the Politeness Principle performs a higher function of ensuring the maintenance of social relationship. It is then interlocutors are seen as being cooperative in the first place. Essentially, the Cooperative Principle can be sacrificed for the Politeness Principle in order to continue to foster good relationships.

The Politeness Principle is generally formulated to minimize expressions reflecting impolite belief and maximize expressions that reflect polite beliefs. The principle is further explicitly stated in the following maxims: tact, generosity approbation, modesty, agreement, sympathy maxims and Pollyanna Principle. The tact maxim minimizes the expression of belief, which implies cost to other and it maximizes the expression of beliefs to other. Generosity maxim minimizes the expression of benefit to self and maximize the expression of cost to self. Leech (1983) explains the approbation maxim which is sometimes termed as flattery maxim

as: minimize expressions of dispraise to other and maximize expression of praise to other. This maxim has a significant effect on criticism. It holds that criticisms must be downplayed. The modesty maxim says minimize the expression of praise of self; maximize the expression of dispraise of self. The way this maxim is applied differs significantly from one culture to the other. The maxim of agreement minimizes the expression of disagreement between self and other; maximizes the expression of agreement between self and other. This maxim explains why directness is more often used in expressing agreement than in expressing disagreement.

Leech (1983) presents a stylistic view of discourse and different devices in language to produce expressive value and the values distinguish a speaker or group of speakers from other speakers. This work employs Leech's politeness maxims of modesty, tact, approbation, sympathy, generosity and agreement to explain honorific markers in teacher-student interaction. His interest is concerned with the existence of understatement or litotes, hyperbole, irony or sarcasm. This he considers as an aspect of politeness adopting a stylistic view of discourse and co-construction of meaning, Fraser, (1990) and Arundale, (2006). While Brown and Levison (1987) emphasize face as a social aspect of interaction, explicating the Face Threatening Act, Arundale (2010) considers face as a second part of his model, which is an individual's perspectives in interaction. He explains face as participants' interpretation of relational connectedness and separateness and opines that face is not brought into any interaction but constituted during interaction.

4. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative design using participant observation and audio recordings to examine the use of honorific markers in Nigerian English within teacher-student interactions. The data comprised thirty audio-recorded interactions purposively selected from five public and five private schools in South-western Nigeria, covering both elementary and secondary levels. The selection criterion was based on the schools' use of English as the primary medium of instruction and their geographical representation of urban and semi-urban educational contexts. The sampling technique involved purposive and stratified selection to capture diverse sociolinguistic realities. Informed consent was obtained from school authorities, and ethical considerations were strictly followed to protect the identities of participants. To ensure the naturalness and credibility of the interactions, recordings were made in informal school settings such as morning assemblies, classroom corridors, and lesson transitions. Teachers were briefed to allow uninterrupted conversations, and their involvement in the recording process helped reduce the students' awareness of being observed. The research instrument was a digital audio recorder, while the researcher, a proficient user of Nigerian English, manually sorted the expressions. The data were thematically analysed using insights from Leech's Politeness Principle and Arundale's Conjoint Constituting Model of Communication. Thematic coding was employed to identify recurrent patterns of honorific usage, pragmatic functions, and cultural references. The validity and reliability of the data were enhanced through cross-verification with standard English dictionaries and relevant linguistic texts. To improve rigour and transparency, coding consistency was ensured, and categories were reviewed iteratively. The limitations of the study include its regional focus and reliance on audio data without visual

cues. However, the method was suitable for capturing the linguistic realities and contextual dynamics of classroom discourse.

5. Analysis and Discussion

In communicating and relating in the classroom, the interaction reflects the domestication of the Nigerian English in direct transliteration from the native language, coinages and cultural features which are used as honorific markers. The analysis of the Nigerian English from the data shows three categories of honorific markers in the classroom interactional engagements between students and teachers as they relate. The pronouns and titles are either classroom-based honorific markers or kins-based honorific markers. These are constrained by the academic and cultural contexts respectively. Both honorific type markers are occasioned by referentiality and culturally-induced politeness conversational maxims largely on the part of the pupils but mutually co-constructed by the teachers. These are treated accordingly using two broad classifications.

Classroom-based honorific markers

The classroom-based markers are expressive honorific words, phrases and expressions used by students to revere their teachers in the classroom. These honorifics are appellative honorifics discussed as identity and personality, modesty and reduplication and repetition. These markers explain scaffolding, as grounded in the classroom interactions, and discussed in relation to the status of the teachers. Scaffolding is a metaphorical concept that involves the teachings given by the instructor or a more experienced member of an institution to a learner. Scaffolding establishes a positive atmosphere for learning and can be explained as a process of passing instruction in the school domain. In this Nigerian English projected type of honorific markers, students refer to their teachers by the subject the teacher teaches them in class in order to avoid direct naming of the teachers as mark of politeness and respect. The students use linguistic expressions that indicate elevation without a mention of the teachers' names.

Honorifics of Identity and Personality

Our identity is basically whom we call ourselves. Identity is shaped by one's belief and it relates to the basic values that dictate the choices one makes. Edward (2009:20) establishes a link between personality and social identity as the uniqueness got from a common human store. Personal identity is, hence, proportional to the society or social groups in which an individual is located.

Sample 1

Teacher: Who is there?

Student: Good morning ma.

Teacher: It's not morning, it's afternoon. What are you doing here again?

Student: I want to submit my assignment on **uncle Government's table**.

Teacher: Submit and get back to your class! And stop moving about **like the beads of the waist**.

Sample 2

Teacher: Why are you two kneeling down?

Student: **Aunty Literature** told us to kneel down.

The interactions present classroom honorific markers as resource for creating the teacher's identity. In the interaction, the teacher questioned the pupil on why she was loitering around the staffroom. The setting inferentially evokes a typical Nigeria teachers' working space that is usually by staff members. Pupils are not naturally expected to be playing around or entering the space indiscriminately as an index of politeness and decorum. The situation presented in the interaction, the teacher in the office queried the pupil seeking the motive behind her presence in the staffroom. In her response, the pupil declared that she came to submit assignment on the table of "Uncle Government". This makes the identity created for the teacher marked and a unique display of honorifics. The qualifier "uncle" is the honorific marker underlined by the cultural ideology that de-emphasises proper name mentioning of the elderly which invariably satisfies the demands of cultural politeness. Instead of calling the name of the subject teacher, the pupil created an identity for the teacher and referentially chose to identify him by the subject "Government" that he teaches.

It is customary for young maidens especially of marriageable age to string beads and adorn the waist with it. This is a signification that the young maiden awaits advances from men. The custom of adorning the waist with bead is peculiar to women only, it is an identity of the maiden. The expression "**like the beads of the waist**" is a simile. As the maidens move and twist their waists, the beads automatically move around with the twist. The teacher likens the restlessness of the student to the movement of the beads used on waists. Student here attempts a renewal of face in contrast to the restlessness described by the bead of the waist. The simile used in interaction is a direct transliteration from the mother tongue. The politeness exhibited by the teacher is a negative one, instead of chastising the student for being restless, he adopts the use of a simile.

Honorifics of Modesty

The maxim of modesty by Leech (1983) minimizes praising self and maximizes the expression of dispraise of self. Sorry is literally an unhappy feeling about something bad that you have done, a form of blame for the one experiencing it, especially when the unpleasant occurs. It communicates compassion and it is used to demonstrate empathy. The use of 'sorry' in Nigerian English performs function of remorseful feeling or act of penitence, pity, sympathy or compunction. 'Sorry' is a modest way of maximizing the expression of dispraise of self. The repeated use of 'ma' is a title that denotes that the student is good-mannered.

Sample 3

Student: Sorry ma

Sample 4

Student: Sir, may I be allowed to take the notes to **their** table?

Teacher: Whose table?

Student: **Uncle Government's table**, sir.

Sample 5

Student: **Uncle Fine Art**, please, give us five minutes more, sir.

The teacher teaches government and students attach the subject to his identity. The same applies to fine art and literature teachers. The honorific markers here is based on the belief that teachers are family members and are called according to their occupational title. From the interaction, it is deducible that gender is acknowledged in this special form of teachers' identification by subject. The use "Aunty Literature" depict this conscious in the pupils who chose to avoid the mentioning of the Proper names of the teachers. The students' use of identifying adjectives "uncle government's table" instead of "Government teacher's table" and "uncle Fine Art" is a politeness principle of approbation, maximizing praise and showing regard and solidarity to the teacher

Sample 6

Teacher: The last test you wrote has been marked. Many of you did well, but some of you did not write your name after all my shouting. Is that right in your own eyes? Class captain? Get these two people for me.

Student: Yes sir.

Teacher: They need cane to hear word.

Sample 7

Student: Sir, should we answer in a,b,c or 1,2, 3?

Teacher: Write your test! If I talk now, you will say "**uncle has come again**", it's part of the test. The instruction is clear.

Student: Sorry sir.

Sample 8

Students: Good morning **Sir**, welcome to JSS 3B.

Teacher: Bring out your workbook, and no talking please.

Student: **Sir**, is it a test we are having?

Reduplication and Repetition as Honorific Markers

Reduplication refers to the repetition a word or part of a word in utterances for specific purposes. Okoro (2000) considers reduplication as a significant variety marker in the Nigerian English. It is actually a practice which serves specific socio-pragmatic functions in interaction such as emphasis, profusion, plurality, urgency, etc. In the samples below, reduplication performs honorific functions.

Sample 9

Teacher: How long will it take you to finish this simple drawing, **ehn**?

Student: **Sorry sir**.

Student: **Sir**, we are coming **sir**. **It remains small, sir**.

Teacher: We can continue next week. Let those who have finished, submit **now, now**.

Student: **Sorry sir, we are sorry, sir**.

The repetition of the lexical item ‘sorry’ as used in the above sample shows the level of regard accorded to the teacher. This is an instance of reduplication in the Nigerian English. The level of deference is depicted by the repeated ‘sir’ and ‘sorry’. The pronoun ‘we’ is a collective acceptance of guilt by the students; the pronoun is used here as a device of expressing solidarity and collectivity. Nigerian English as a honorification marker reflects principally in the discursive acts and asymmetry relation between the teachers and the students in the interactions. Reduplication of ‘sorry’ and the generic title ‘sir’ here points to the mutually constituted conduct innovated for honorific purposes, they have been able to constitute a relational connection, a process of connecting through the request and establishing the higher position of the teacher. The formulation aligns with Igboanusi (2002)’s definition of reduplication as a process of innovation. The expressions are generated to appeal to the teacher for more time. The repeated use of ‘sir’ denotes respect and good manner in the Nigerian society. Predominant among these discursive resources of asymmetry constructed through the Nigerian English is the use of ‘sir’. The teacher’s morphological reduplication “now now” serves as an imperative act of ordering within a non-illocutionary force and shows the urgency with which the teacher requires the students to finish. The marked apologies “sorry sir” from the students, shows the deference to the teachers and teachers, as possessing higher authority and the students as below them.

Kin-based honorific markers

Kith and kin are not necessarily related by blood in the Nigerian society. Students living in the same house or on the same street may refer to themselves as brothers or sisters. Students are accustomed to individual subservience to their society. This underpins the spirit of oneness, of connectivity and accompanied by responsibility and commitment to one another as reflected in the culture. Kinship honorific markers in some literature, show that Nigerian English honorific markers are culture-inflected communicative patterns that lexicalize and appropriate contextually modified kinship terms by students. The teachers, for instance, are regarded as in loco parentis and are therefore addressed in gradable kinship terms by their students. This is typical of what operates not only in Nigerian elementary schools but also secondary schools.

The contexts of student-student interaction

This type of honorific marker evinces lexical intensification of kinship terms using qualifiers that are culturally and linguistically typical of Nigerian English usage. These qualifiers are gradably deployed to yield to cultural honorification where parents are not exclusively accorded the parental identity of fatherhood or motherhood. It is a product of the collectivist ideology in the Nigerian culture. The interactions typify the deployment of these honorific markers.

Sample 10

Pupil: **Big Mummy** is calling you.

Pupil: Big Mummy is not calling me. It's not me. You are lying.
Pupil: I'm not lying, **they** are calling you.
Pupil: You lied on me to Big Mummy abi? I didn't do anything.

Sample 11

Teacher: Why are you few in the class? Class captain, where are the others?

Student: They have gone to **big Daddy's office**.

Teacher: **Let us wait small for them**. Bring out your note and don't make noise.

Sample 12

Pupil A: why did you **tell Uncle Sam for me**? I only share my water with my sister.

Pupil B: He said we must not take water from other people's water bottle.

Pupil A: Thank you, gbeborun. **She's my sister**, go and ask well, **we live in the same compound**.

As evidenced in the interactional engagement in the interactions entrenched in the teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil contexts; there is the gradability in terms kinship terms in referencing the teachers. Despite the fact that these engagements are situated in the classroom context, in the interactions the pupils take recourse to cultural normativity in which the older persons of the society and are playing parental role or related to one's parents are regarded as parents. The use of "big mummy" and "big daddy" as well as the "uncle Sam" demonstrates such endeared loco parentis relation. The lexemes "daddy" and "mummy" are two terms that refer to parents in their normative forms. However, in the Nigerian cultural sense in which the pupils have used the terms to suggest the age and role of the teachers. The age determinant is apparently related to the pupils' perception of the expected age of the members of staff. This is predicated on the pupil-to-pupil context in the interaction when they referred to one of the teachers as "Uncle Sam". Two pragmatic possibilities are possible determinants of these referential differences which concretize gradability in participants' honorific. In other words, Uncle Sam could be a junior staff or younger staff while big mummy and big daddy could be aged or senior colleagues of Uncle Sam.

Shared knowledge provides a very strong base for the teacher-pupils' recourse to the use of the "big mummy" and "big daddy" as can be seen in the sample. This is hinged on the fact that the teacher did not make any attempt to correct the Nigerian English expression. Rather, the teacher confirms the sharedness in adding that "let us wait for them small", an expression that is also Nigerian. However, since the focus is on honorifics backed by the cultural politeness dictates on how children address elderly ones.

The interaction shows, especially in the use of the plural pronominal "they" to refer a singular entity "big mummy" through the Nigerian expression "big mummy" or "big daddy". This is traceable to the Yoruba translated honorific pronominal "e" used to address older and elderly ones. It is this cultural epistemics that has been imported into the pupils' orientation to the use of English which is invariably tainted as the Nigerian English honorific marker. In the same interaction, the Nigerian cultural construction of the family is defined in the pupils to pupil interactional context exemplified in Pupil A's engagement of

pupil B on the definition of “sister”. The former’s knowledge demonstration shows that the ideology addressing of teachers with such family-based honorific terms. Go and ask well is not an imperative that the speaker expected the hearer to follow but a tact maxim telling the other participant not to concern herself with her family ties. This strongly reveals the strong ties between the two neighbours who regarded themselves as sister.

Honorifics and Code-mixing in the context of teacher-student interaction

Code mixing in the classroom is an unplanned and unconscious experience because both teachers and students are aware of the formal setting of the classroom. However, in a bilingual setting, although the English Language speaking is dominant, pieces of the native language are inserted in the utterances within the class.

Sample 13

Student: She is lying on me ma.

Teacher: **mechonu**, they are always lying on you.

Teacher: Good morning everyone.

Sample 14

Pupil A: Thank you, **gbeborun**. **She’s my sister**, go and ask well, **we live in the same compound**

Sample 15

Teacher: Just do what I wrote on the board.

Student: Excuse **Sir**, you have not marked the last one **ni**.

Teacher: I will mark both together.

Sample 16

Teacher: **Let’s be quiet**. Tear a sheet of paper, write your name, indicate your class too or your script will miss. **Oya**, open to page 38 and answer exercise 2a to e and 4.

Student: **Sir**, should we answer in a,b,c or 1,2, 3?

The three instances of the mixture occur within single utterances unlike code switching where the other language can occur in trends of talk. ‘mechon’ which means keep quiet is uttered to warn the student of incessant complaints. To the teacher, the tact maxim in use here is an act of correction which is beneficial to the student. There is a dispraise to the student who expresses her displeasure to others’ reaction to her attitude towards her sister. She uses the word ‘**gbeborun**’ which is the term that describes someone who interferes in other people’s business and it performs an affective function in that context. Her expectation was for others to agree with her as she identifies with her neighbour whom she has taken as a sister. Any dissenting comment in that regard is a show of negative politeness to her. Both remarks are negative responses to conversation.

Particle ‘ni’ has been code mixed in the context of the classroom. Particles are often used in English with verbs to form phrasal verbs. Adding the particle to the interaction derive

from the approbation maxim. A particle is a small word added to another word to create a completely new meaning to indicate a specific function in communication. 'ni' is a Yoruba particle. The function of 'ni' can be described in terms of identification focus. It integrates pre-constructed domain; test scripts are not marked before giving a new one. The polite response of the teacher is in line with the maxim of agreement as the teacher shares similar views on the test and promised to get it marked.

Sample 17

Student: Ma, my question paper is blank on the second page.

Teacher: Let me have the paper. Pass the question.

Student: **They** are calling you, **they** said you should pass the paper.

The title of the teacher here is female indicated by the use of "Ma" to address her and as such takes the 3rd person singular pronoun. The pronoun 'they' is the first-person plural form but its use reflects the status of the teacher and the attitude of the student towards the teacher. The pronominal 'they' to show reverence to elders is still in place in the above sample. There is a mutual operative interpretation of the pronoun 'they' in the Nigerian English. This interpretation links what is social to what is individual. The pronoun 'they' does not refer to persons but a person with whom honor is attached and an indication of the relationship between the teacher and her students. The teacher uses the tact maxim to give an instruction and a command in response to the complaint of the student while the student approbates the place of the teacher using a referential honorific.

Sample 18

Student: **Uncle**, all the plants and animals are living things.

Student: **Uncle**, there is a big iroko tree at the middle of the market, **they** put food for **him**. It is because the iroko is a living thing.

Student: Yes. **Uncle**. When you pass there sometimes, **they** tie white cloth for **him**.

Teacher: All animals and plants are living things, some are visible and some are invisible.

There is an assumptive commitment about the environment in the interaction that ensues in the classroom. Student were given freedom to contribute to class discussions and the student uses a striking repetition of the kinship term, 'uncle' in the sample of interaction presented. Apart from getting the attention of the teacher, it enhances students' confidence to contribute to the discussion. A teacher has a generic title to names such as 'Mr' or 'Mrs'. the teacher here has been accorded a kinship term to establish familiarity between teacher and student for them to be able to contribute to class discourse. The bystander honorific accords preference to non-participants in a conversation. The use of 'they' and 'him' in the interaction is a reference to the iroko tree described by the student. The pronouns give the iroko tree more than the status of a living thing but a construed social status of an important entity in the society, honored as either a deified or a metaphysical entity.

Honorifics and Creativity

Creativity provides innovations and new expressions inspired by the background of the interactants. Ideas can be drawn from experiences and sociocultural environment to create expressions. The dictionary defines “creativity” as originality, expressiveness, imaginativeness—all obviously good things anyone would want to be or want the objects they make or own, or the ideas they propose, to display. Such words imply that these things embody uncommon qualities. We don’t usually think of something produced routinely, every day, as original or special. When we use a word like “creative” to describe something rare, we imply that it is also valuable,

Sample 19

Teacher: **Your exam is knocking on the door, don’t** forget to study at home. **Don’t** think it will work **like magic**. **I have said my own**.

The teacher in the sample above shares his opinion on a forthcoming examination. The peculiarities of the opinion include the use of hedging and can be described as an opinion reticence maxim which is often used as a negative politeness constraint. Also, the declarative contains direct transliteration from the native language, where the meaning the teacher is trying to achieve is situated in the native language. The phrase “I have said my own” has its source in the native language, it is a creative use of language to suit the discourse. The expression became operative in the indigenous society and function as a warning to heed instruction. The teacher employs metaphor in his declarative tact maxim to soften the force of the instruction to the students on the need to study for their examination.

Sample 20

Teacher: I have said nobody should come and submit assignment on my table after the first period.

Student: Ma, please, our house is far and we were inside go slow for long. Sorry ma. that’s why I did not submit. I am sorry ma.

Teacher: So what do you want me to do? It’s gone already.

Student: Please ma, sorry ma.

Teacher: Are you the only one? If I talk now, they will say my mouth is smelling. As if others live in the school. You cannot come and infect others with your lazy attitude o.

Student; Ma, please. You can ask them Awotayo in B, we got to school together this morning; we had to enter another keke.

In the sample, items of Nigerian English include the repetition of “Ma”, “please” and “sorry”; it includes correctional and chastising expression such as “my mouth is smelling”; direct transliteration of native tongue into English, as “you cannot come and infect others” and in coinages such as “go slow” and “keke”. The discourse marker “o” and the inclusion of pidgin- “you can ask them Awotayo” are also included in the Nigerian English expressions in sample 20. The pleading, explaining and requesting are made with polite expressions and presented to the teacher by the student who could not meet the deadline for the submission of her

assignment. The student uses “go slow” to explain that she was held up in traffic and “keke”, a vehicle smaller than the car that move within jams of traffic. In belittling the status of the student, the teacher uses a negative politeness principle to dilute the effect of her abate response, for a corrective purpose.

6. Conclusion

The study concludes that the use of honorifics in teacher-student interactions in Nigerian schools reflects a complex interplay between language, culture, and social structure. It reveals that Nigerian English has evolved to include culturally specific expressions of respect, modesty, and hierarchy, influenced by indigenous languages and societal norms. This finding is important as it demonstrates that language in educational settings is not only a tool for instruction but also a medium through which cultural values are transmitted. The study explores how honorifics serve both polite and impolite functions, demonstrating how students and teachers co-construct meaning within a shared cultural context. It addresses the research goal of identifying how socio-cultural values shape language use in classroom interaction, and answers the research questions on how honorifics function beyond respect, the role of Nigerian English in the school environment, and how cultural creativity is expressed in linguistic choices. The study contributes to the existing literature by revealing how Nigerian English is not merely nativised but culturally innovated to accommodate dynamic social relationships in the classroom. Practically, it emphasises the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy and suggests that educators should be aware of the communicative norms their students bring from home. Theoretically, it contributes to sociolinguistic and pragmatic studies on language variation and cultural embedding in postcolonial Englishes. However, the study is limited by its focus on a single sociolinguistic setting and would benefit from a broader cross-regional analysis. Based on these results, practitioners should develop language policies and teaching methods that respect and incorporate students’ cultural backgrounds. Further research should explore honorific usage across different regions and educational levels to gain a better understanding of how language and culture continue to shape educational experiences in multilingual societies. These findings are valuable for improving teacher-student communication and promoting inclusive, culturally aware educational practices.

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