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Unpacking the Dynamics of (Im)politeness of "*Mepa Wo Kyɛw*" ("*Please*") in the Ghanaian Context

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Abstract: This paper investigates the circumstances under which the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*) functions as an indicator of politeness and the extent to which gestures influence its interpretation within the Ghanaian Akan community. Using participant observation as the primary data collection method, the study qualitatively analyses the data through the politeness frameworks of politeness theory. The findings reveal that in the Akan context, '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*) does not always signal politeness; rather, it serves to mitigate potential threats to the hearer's negative face in certain utterances. Moreover, the study establishes that the expression of politeness in Akan interactions depends not solely on the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*), but also on accompanying gestures, contextual cues, and cultural knowledge. The research concludes that politeness is contextually and culturally bound, challenging the notion of universalism in politeness theory. Overall, '*mepa wo kyɛw'* (*please*) in the Ghanaian context functions primarily as a face-saving device aimed at emotionally minimizing potential communicative damage rather than as an inherent marker of politeness.

Keywords: Akan community; Akan speakers; gestures; Ghanaian context; politeness

1. Introduction

Within the Akan sociolinguistic context, politeness is a multifaceted construct expressed through both verbal and non-verbal means. The use of politeness markers such as *mepa wo kyɛw* ("*please*" or "*I beg you*") is often accompanied by culturally appropriate gestures—including hand movements, facial expressions, and tonal modulation—which signal humility, respect, or deference. These multimodal elements form a cohesive communicative system through which speakers negotiate meaning, manage face wants, and establish social harmony. Failure to combine appropriate linguistic and paralinguistic cues may result in misinterpretation or the perception of rudeness, even when polite words are used.

In the conversation of Ghanaians, especially Akan speakers, greater value is placed on linguistic routines. These include gestures, apologies, requests, greetings, paralinguistic features, and many others (Totimeh & Bosiwah, 2015). Most importantly, the word '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*) seems so common. In the general sense, '*mepa wo kyɛw*' connotes politeness. To put it simply, Totimeh and Bosiwah (2015) advance that being polite is an effort to make someone appear good. It may also be described as all actions taken to make someone feel good or to improve their appearance (Goffman, 1967). However, some researchers have established that the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' goes beyond its general or basic sense (Aijmer, 2009; Murphy & Felice, 2019; Jia, 2024).

In the Chinese context, Jia (2024) reveals that *please* is pragmatically borrowed, and its usage differs from the English context: "While it [please] retains the preference for clause-final positions and the politeness-enhancing function of its English etymon, it has become predominantly used with imperatives..." (Jia 2024, p.

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154). What appears significant and noticeable is that context and culture play a major role in language use and its interpretation.

Aijmer (2009) studied the different meanings associated with the use of *please* when translated into Swedish. Aside from the fact that Swedes do not have a routinised politeness marker for English, it is a standardised strategy in social situations. *Please* is tactfully used to indicate 'emphasis and power' and has an 'emotional side effect'. Darani and Moghadamm (2020), on the other hand, explored how Iranian learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) and native speakers of English conceptualise the use of *please*. In their study, impoliteness is associated with the use of *please* in the context of the Iranians. Though the study was conducted in the same context, the different conceptualisations of the groups can be attributed to cultural differences. Each group had to interpret language from the perspective of their worldview. This opposes the stance adopted by Brown and Levinson (1987) on the theory of politeness universalism. What appears to be linguistic medicine in one context may prove linguistic poison in another context (Kachru, 1986; Adogpa, 2022).

Language is socially realistic, and its social reality manifests in the socio-cultural norms, beliefs, and cultural practices of a speech community. In fact, behavioural norms, to some extent, influence the way in which an utterance can be considered polite or otherwise. Behavioral norms confirm their impact on the interpretation of emic knowledge. In order not to assume that the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*) has the same meaning and interpretation, the research limits the context to the Akan speech community. This speech community occupies appropriately half of the Ghanaian linguistic land space. The use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' also appears to be commonly associated with the native speakers of Twi.

Aside from the mere interpretation of utterance, this work seeks to find out how the use of gestures, together with the utterance of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' as a linguistic item, is pragmatically employed to indicate politeness, impoliteness, and any other semantic extensions associated with the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' in a socially realistic context of Ghana. Kita and Ozyurek (2003), examining the interface between gestures and utterances, argue that the two—gestures and utterances—are communicatively bi-directional. Based on the role of gestures in the role of communication in context, there is the need to examine the various functions of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' in the Ghanaian context.

In this study, we set out to examine how '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*), accompanied with gestures, is pragmatically employed in the Ghanaian context and the interpretations given to the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*'. We therefore seek to answer the following questions: Under what circumstances is the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' an indicator of politeness, and to what extent do gestures aid in the interpretation of '*mepa wo kyɛw*'?

2. Sociolinguistic Context of Ghana

Ghana is a linguistically diverse nation with over 80 indigenous languages spoken across its sixteen administrative regions. English serves as the official language and the principal medium of instruction in education, governance, and formal communication. However, in everyday social interaction, indigenous languages dominate as the primary vehicles of interpersonal and community communication. Among these, Akan stands out as the most widely spoken language, used as a lingua franca across several regions, including Ashanti, Eastern, Central, Western, and parts of the Bono areas (Dakubu, 1996; Obeng, 1997). The Akan language itself comprises mutually intelligible dialects such as Asante Twi, Akuapem Twi, and Fante, and it represents a rich repository of Ghanaian sociocultural values, norms, and communicative practices.

Akan communication is highly context-driven and relies heavily on pragmatic and paralinguistic cues such as tone, gesture, and body posture to convey meaning. As a speech community, Akan speakers place considerable emphasis on interpersonal harmony, respect, and social balance, values that are deeply embedded in the communicative code of the people. Speech acts are therefore not judged merely by their linguistic form but by how they align with established social expectations and relational hierarchies. This aligns with Goffman's (1967) notion of *face-work*, where maintaining social dignity and mutual respect is a central component of interaction.

The Akan communicative style challenges the assumption of universality in politeness theories such as those of Brown and Levinson (1987), Lakoff (1973b), and Leech (1983), which were largely developed within Western linguistic and cultural frameworks. In the Ghanaian context, politeness is not fixed to lexical markers like '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*) but emerges dynamically from the interplay between language, gesture, tone, and social relationships. The pragmatic value of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*), therefore, cannot be understood in isolation from the sociocultural realities that shape its use and interpretation.

Against this backdrop, this study situates the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' and its accompanying gestures within the broader sociolinguistic traditions of the Akan community. It explores how Akan speakers pragmatically employ '*mepa wo kyɛw*' to negotiate politeness, manage interpersonal relations, and convey emotional and cultural

meanings, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on context-dependent and culture-specific politeness phenomena.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the pragmatic theories of politeness as proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987)**,** Lakoff (1977)**,** and Leech (1983)**,** complemented by insights from multimodal and sociocultural pragmatics. Together, these frameworks provide the analytical lens through which the use of *please* and its accompanying gestures are examined within the Ghanaian Akan speech community.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory remains one of the most influential models in pragmatics. It is built on Goffman's (1967) concept of *face*, which represents an individual's public self-image that must be maintained in interaction. Brown and Levinson identify two aspects of face—*positive face* (the desire to be liked, approved of, or accepted) and *negative face* (the desire for freedom of action and freedom from imposition). Politeness strategies are therefore employed to manage potential *face-threatening acts* (FTAs) during communication. Within this framework, the word *please* is typically viewed as a negative politeness strategy—a linguistic means to reduce imposition, show deference, and acknowledge the hearer's autonomy. However, the current study challenges the assumption of universality in this interpretation by situating it within the Ghanaian Akan sociocultural context, where '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*) may perform nuanced functions beyond deference, including emotional mitigation, social bonding, or ironic politeness.

Lakoff's (1977) Rules of Politeness: "Don't impose", "Give options and "Make the hearer feel good", also provide a useful backdrop for this study. These rules emphasise politeness as a conversational strategy to maintain social equilibrium. In Akan communication, these principles manifest not only in lexical choices like '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*) but also in paralinguistic and gestural forms that communicate humility and respect. Lakoff's view that politeness must be interpreted through cultural lenses reinforces the need to understand *please* in the context of Akan social relations, where hierarchy, age, and kinship influence pragmatic choices.

Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle and its sub-maxims such as the Tact, Generosity, and Approbation Maxims further lends credence to this analysis. Leech proposes that politeness functions to maintain social harmony by minimising the expression of impolite beliefs and maximising expressions of politeness. In Akan communication, the *Generosity Maxim* (benefit to others) and the *Approbation Maxim* (praise of others) are especially salient, as they align with the communal and relational nature of Ghanaian sociocultural life. The study therefore applies Leech's framework to explain how '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*), supported by appropriate gestures, reinforces relational solidarity and social empathy.

Beyond these classical theories, the study draws on multimodal pragmatics (Kita & Özyürek, 2003; Norris, 2004) to account for the integration of verbal and non-verbal communication. Gestures, tone, and posture are viewed as semiotic resources that interact with linguistic expressions to co-construct meaning. In the Akan context, such multimodal features are not supplementary but central to the pragmatic interpretation of politeness. A gesture may reinforce, contradict, or even override the politeness intended by '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*), making a multimodal perspective essential for accurate interpretation.

Finally, the study adopts a sociocultural pragmatic orientation (Watts, 2003; Mills, 2011), which recognises that politeness is culturally and contextually situated. From this perspective, what counts as polite or impolite is determined by community norms, expectations, and interactional conventions rather than by universal rules. This approach enables the study to highlight how Akan speakers co-construct meaning and maintain social harmony through a culturally grounded understanding of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*) and its associated gestures.

In sum, the theoretical framework integrates classical politeness theories with multimodal and sociocultural perspectives to analyse how '*mepa wo kyɛw*' functions as a pragmatic and cultural marker of politeness, impoliteness, and emotional expression within the Akan speech community.

4. Empirical Review

Communication includes both verbal and nonverbal elements, with gestures serving as a vital aspect of interaction. Research highlights that a significant portion of communication occurs through nonverbal means, highlighting the importance of gestures in shaping interpersonal exchanges (Kelmaganbetova et. al., 2023). Gestures enrich communication by adding layers of meaning, often complementing or substituting verbal expressions.

According to Ekman and Friesen's typology (1969), gestures can be classified into several categories; adaptors, such as tapping a pencil or fidgeting, reflect personal habits and often signal internal emotional states like nervousness; emblem gestures, serving as substitutes for verbal communication; regulator gestures, such as

nods or handshakes, manage the flow of conversation and express attitudes; illustrator gestures, visually represent spoken content, enhancing understanding through movements that depict size, shape, or direction and affective display which expresses certain emotions through body movements and facial muscles (Kelmaganbetova et al., 2023). These classifications demonstrate how gestures function as essential tools in facilitating comprehension and emotional expression, particularly among younger individuals, where emblem and adaptor gestures are notably prominent.

Gestures derive meaning through iconicity, indexicality, or cultural conventions, with their interpretation varying significantly across cultures. In Ghana, gestures hold a particularly significant role in communication. Among Akan speakers, actions like bowing slightly or offering something with both hands are not merely polite but deeply rooted in cultural expressions of respect. These gestures, when combined with verbal elements like '*mepa wo kyɛw*' create a uniform of politeness that blends both verbal and nonverbal communication.

Gestures not only amplify the impact of spoken words but also carry independent significance. For instance, a verbal expression of gratitude paired with a respectful hand gesture strengthens the sense of sincerity, while dismissive hand movements can undermine verbal politeness. Gestures and language together demonstrates the diverse nature of communication in Ghana, where both elements are essential for conveying politeness and maintaining social harmony.

When considered alongside Lakoff's (1973a) politeness framework, the role of gestures becomes even clearer. Lakoff's rules—avoiding imposition, giving options, and showing sympathy—align with common Ghanaian practices. For example, the rule of avoiding imposition is often expressed through deferential gestures like a slight bow or the use of both hands when giving or receiving items. Similarly, showing sympathy through gestures such as a warm handshake or an inviting hand movement complements verbal expressions of friendliness.

Al-Duleimi et al.'s (2016) research reviewed key theories of politeness, like those by Brown and Levinson, Lakoff, and Leech, to assess how well they explain politeness in different cultures. They argue that while politeness is important in all cultures, how it is expressed varies, so no single theory can fit all cultures. Their study focused on the strengths and weaknesses of these theories, particularly in Eastern and Western contexts, and suggests that Leech's Grand Strategy of Politeness might be the most adaptable across cultures. The researchers emphasized that politeness is a social behavior, shaped by cultural norms and interactions, rather than something natural.

Hence, gestures are indispensable in effective communication, serving to enhance clarity and lead to meaningful connections. Through habitual adaptors, culturally significant emblems, or illustrative movements that clarify speech, gestures enrich interactions by blending verbal and nonverbal elements. In culturally specific contexts like Ghana, the integration of gestures with language not only reflects societal values but also reveals the need for a holistic understanding of communication that appreciates the use of all its components.

Proponents of universalism have possibly lost touch with the Tower of Babel. Linguistic diversity, cultural diversity, and social diversity are not expendable elements in language use and its appropriateness. What is appropriate in one sociolinguistic context might not seem appropriate in another context or culture. Even signs and gestures that accompany utterances cannot be accepted by all people to fit in the hole of one-size-fits-all. Social norms, cultural beliefs, and all other behavioural norms shape the worldview of each linguistic or speech community. Eventually, when utterances and gestures are combined, meanings and interpretations appear to vary according to the worldview of each group. Though many researches have been done on the use of *please* as a marker of (im)politeness, there appears to be little work done on how gestures accompanying the use of *please* are proven to be illustrating politeness or otherwise.

Sociolinguistic scholars of request design in realistic interactions have examined the usage of *please* as an indication of deference, politeness, or moderation (Chalfoun, Rossi and Stivers, 2025). They contend that it is related to the requester and the requestee's social distance, age difference, and rank. Few research studies provide a clear analysis of the specific functions and frequency of *please*. Rather, they blend "please" with several other linguistic characteristics, like address words, the past tense, and a soothing tone of voice, that are believed to decrease requests (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2005).

Foremost, Chalfoun, Rossi, and Stivers (2025) examine when and where interactants utilise *please* in routine requests in an effort to further investigations into politeness and expand on Goffman's theory of face-work. They argue that politeness expressions like *please* are important components of interactional behaviour that are specifically targeted during early socialisation and are influenced by cultural norms surrounding behaviour that is deemed desirable by others. They assert, meanwhile, that little is known about their precise interactional roles. According to the study, which used conversation analysis and meticulous coding, *please* is uncommon, appearing in only 7% of request efforts. Interactants employ *please* to handle face threats when a request is not appropriate for the present interactional context. Accordingly, they categorise two situations in which the phrase *please* is

typical: when the person making the request has shown that they are unwilling to comply and when the request is intrusive because it conflicts with their participation in another course of action.

Likewise, in their study addressing the adverbial *please*, Arita and Kusayama (2002) seek to offer a solution for handling the flexibility of *please*. According to the study, earlier research on the word "please" has been categorised into two distinct groups: "the study of its usage environment" and "the study of its function" (p.79). The study asserts that while scholars like Leech (1983), Stubbs (1983), and Brown and Levinson (1987) concentrate solely on the "politeness function of please", others like Gordon and Lakoff (1971) and Sadock (1974), who are highly concerned with the usage environment, have unanimously agreed that "the occurrence of *please* is restricted to the context which conveys a request" (p. 79). Thus, the study avers that the flexibility of *please* is dependent on the "variety of context" and the "variety of function" (p. 80). Though it is primarily used in the context of requests, Arita and Kusayama (2002, p. 79) believe that not all requests necessitate the use of *please*, and that the notion that it requires a "request context" alone does not adequately explain its distribution. Thus, it can be concluded that pragmatics, rather than grammar, is more responsible for the distribution of *please*. Nevertheless, it is still unclear which pragmatic considerations apply to it.

Again, using quantitative and distributional data along with qualitative analysis of text, cotext, context, and participant response, Wichmann's (2005) study explores the role of intonation in the expression of attitudinal meaning. It draws on naturally occurring data from the International Corpus of British English (ICE GB) (Nelson, Wallis & Aarts 2002). The study had two goals: first, it demonstrated how intonation may transform the word *please* from a common courtesy statement to an urgent appeal or a strong demand; second, it demonstrated how intonation systematically leads to a wide range of meanings from this example. The study makes the case that *please* is virtually always employed as a standard, formulaic way to show civility, acknowledging different levels of debt in addition to a request. It is employed when the right to request something is socially permitted, either due to the interlocutors' power dynamics, the event's fundamental nature, or the low level of imposition. According to the study, *please* is not always a neutral courtesy signal; rather, it might communicate connotations at the more emotional end of the interactional continuum, depending on its intonational realisation. Numerous local meanings, including an urgent plea, an assertive demand, an expression of scorn and mockery, and a stern rebuke, can be produced from a small number of intonational resources, primarily accent placement, terminal choice, and overall pitch range.

In the Ghanaian context, Totimeh and Bosiwa (2015) examine the varied methods used by native speakers of Ghana's Akyem Twi dialect of the Akan language to make courteous requests as well as the ways in which socioeconomic status, age, and gender affect these requests. An ethnographic research approach to qualitative design was employed. Twenty study participants were chosen at random using the purposive sampling technique, and their answers to the interview and observation of the topic problem were subjected to content analysis. The results show that the indirect strategy is the best approach for making a courteous request. The study posits that, comparatively, the Akyem speech community also favours the traditional indirect method as the most courteous way to make a speech request. Once more, the study maintains that Ghanaians have a requirement for requests: they think the person making the request should be reliable. Interestingly, it was discovered that, despite the fact that all indirect strategies are indirect, non-traditional indirect strategies have certain inherent characteristics that set them apart from conventional methods and more closely resemble direct techniques.

Lastly, using a practical approach, Acheampong and Kwarteng (2021) examine impolite natural Ghanaian discourses. They sought to find answers to the impoliteness techniques, describe the many kinds of impoliteness methods, and explain how they are linguistically expressed. They used a qualitative collection in their investigation. Ten authentic Ghanaian conversations served as the data, and they provide a unique picture of Ghanaian society in terms of relationships, status, power, and conventions. Positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm or mimic politeness, withhold politeness, and bald-on-record impoliteness are the five categories of impoliteness methods that interlocutors employ in the interactions, according to the study. It argues that the least common kind of impoliteness tactic is positive impoliteness, whereas negative impoliteness is the most common. The employment of vocatives, dismissal, threats, and silencers were linguistic representations of the impoliteness tactics. The most commonly employed answer is to accept impoliteness. This response is chosen by the interlocutors because it tends to stop any more face attack.

Though there has been some research on politeness in the Ghanaian context (Totimeh & Bosiwa, 2015; Acheampong and Kwarteng, 2021), '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*) as a politeness or impoliteness marker seems less researched. In other contexts where *please* is examined in the light of (im)politeness, politeness universalism was proven inappropriate and inadequate for its application in every context and culture. Politeness realism, to a large extent, is proven workable. For the establishment of the use of politeness as a politeness marker and its associated meanings and interpretations, there is the need to situate it in the Ghanaian context. As a result, the study aims to

investigate how '*mepa wo kyɛw*' is used pragmatically in the Ghanaian context, along with the meanings attached to it.

5. Methodology

5.1. Research Approach

We adopted a qualitative ethnographic approach, drawing heavily on our personal experiences and prolonged interaction with speakers of Akan within the Ashanti Region of Ghana—particularly in the Akenten Appiah-Menka University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development (AAMUSTED) community.

Our choice of ethnography stemmed from the need to understand how '*mepa wo kyɛw*' is pragmatically used, interpreted, and negotiated in real-life communicative encounters. Rather than relying on experimental or elicited speech data, our study was grounded in natural immersion in the Akan-speaking environment—an immersion that has shaped both our academic and everyday interactions. This insider perspective enabled us to capture subtle pragmatic cues and cultural meanings that would otherwise be inaccessible to an outsider.

5.2. Research Setting and Data Collection

The study was conducted in the Ashanti Region of Ghana, the cultural heartland of the Akan people and a vibrant sociolinguistic environment in which the researchers have lived, worked, and interacted for several years. Specifically, data were gathered from naturally occurring conversations observed in and around the Akenten Appiah-Menka University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development (AAMUSTED) campus in Kumasi.

As an educational institution that brings together individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, AAMUSTED represents a microcosm of Ghanaian multilingualism. Despite this diversity, Akan—particularly the Asante Twi variety—remains the dominant medium of informal and interpersonal communication across all social contexts, including classrooms, offices, cafeterias, and open compounds.

Our daily engagement as faculty members and active participants within the university community provided privileged access to a wide range of authentic communicative encounters. These interactions created an ideal environment for examining how '*mepa wo kyɛw*' is pragmatically used, interpreted, and negotiated in real-life discourse.

Data collection relied exclusively on non-participant observation and the use of experiential field notes compiled over a sustained period of immersion in the field. No audio or video recordings were made; instead, detailed descriptive and reflective notes were maintained to capture instances of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' in natural conversation. Observations were carried out in varied social settings within the AAMUSTED community and its surrounding neighbourhoods. These included lecture halls and corridors where students and lecturers exchanged greetings, requests, and clarifications; administrative offices where students and staff engaged in service interactions that often demanded politeness strategies; cafeterias and social gatherings where humorous, informal, and solidarity-driven uses of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' were frequent; and public spaces such as bus stops and walkways where spontaneous, situational uses of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' occurred among strangers.

During these observations, attention was paid to the linguistic environment in which '*mepa wo kyɛw*' occurred, the relationship between speaker and hearer in terms of age, role, and familiarity, as well as to the tone, posture, and accompanying gestures of the interactants. The perceived emotional or social effect of the utterance and the hearer's or audience's reaction were also noted as part of the interpretive process.

Our insider position within the community provided a dual advantage. It granted access to genuine speech situations and offered a culturally informed understanding of the subtle pragmatic meanings embedded in linguistic behaviour. This reflexive engagement further enabled the interpretation of silence, gesture, and prosody as integral components of politeness performance within Akan communicative practice.

In preparing the data for analysis, the field notes were systematically reviewed and organized thematically according to recurring communicative patterns and contextual features surrounding the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*'. Instances were categorized based on their social setting, speaker-hearer relationship, and pragmatic function. This process of iterative reading and reflection allowed for the identification of broader themes and interpretive patterns that inform the subsequent analysis and discussion of findings.

5.3. Data Analysis

The analysis of the data followed an interpretive qualitative approach grounded in ethnographic observation and pragmatic analysis. The primary aim was to uncover how the expression '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*) functions within everyday Akan interactions, and how its meanings are shaped by contextual, relational, and cultural factors.

Because the data were drawn from naturally occurring discourse rather than elicited speech, analysis focused on describing and interpreting '*mepa wo kyɛw*' as it emerged in authentic communicative events.

The field notes were read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data and to identify salient patterns of usage. Through this iterative process, recurring communicative situations and linguistic forms involving '*mepa wo kyɛw*' were coded and grouped according to their pragmatic functions—such as requests, appeals, mitigations, and expressions of solidarity. Attention was also paid to how tone, gesture, and situational context contributed to shaping the pragmatic force and politeness value of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' in interaction.

Each instance was analyzed not only in terms of its immediate linguistic form but also with regard to the social and relational dynamics between speakers and hearers. The analysis therefore integrated both linguistic and paralinguistic dimensions, taking into account factors such as age, social role, familiarity, and setting. This holistic approach allowed for an appreciation of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' as a multifunctional and context-sensitive marker of politeness, emotion, and social alignment within Akan communicative practice.

To maintain analytical rigour, interpretations were continuously cross-checked against contextual details and cultural knowledge derived from our long-term engagement within the speech community. This reflexive stance helped guard against overgeneralization and ensured that analytical insights remained grounded in the lived communicative realities of the participants.

Ultimately, the analysis revealed that the pragmatic use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' in Akan is not limited to the expression of deference or politeness in the conventional Western sense. Rather, it performs a range of context-dependent functions that reflect the sociocultural norms of reciprocity, respect, and relational harmony embedded in Akan interactional culture. The subsequent section presents and discusses these findings in detail, highlighting the complex interplay between language, gesture, and social meaning in the performance of politeness.

5.4. Data Presentation

In this section, we present illustrations conveying observable scenes during the data collection and their interpretations.

In Figure 1, the gentleman is telling the lady that she is an animal and he does so by directly or straightly looking at her face. This conveys that idea that one is honest and not ashamed of telling another the truth, the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' is only to minimize the emotional effect it might have on the addressee. The addressee equally knows that the expected behaviour has been put up. The employment of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' though impolite in this context, pragmatically serves as a face-saving strategy for the speaker and an emotional minimizer for the listener. The shared knowledge that both interlocutors carry makes the utterance offensive; yet, the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' is meaningfully interpreted as an emotional minimizer.



Figure 1. Please you are an animal plus straight look in the face.

In Figure 2, the gentleman beckons the lady to have a seat with an open palm gesture. An open palm gesture communicates openness and sincerity. The use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' accompanying an open palm gesture signifies politeness and encourages the person to feel relaxed and welcome. In this regard, the visitor understands that his or her host is likely to have time and attention for them. In a situation where the communication is *"There is a seat"* without '*mepa wo kyɛw*' and the gesture involved, or '*mepa wo kyɛw*' without the open palm gesture, the interpretation in the light of politeness is positive, but it might suggest that the visitor is not as free to relax.

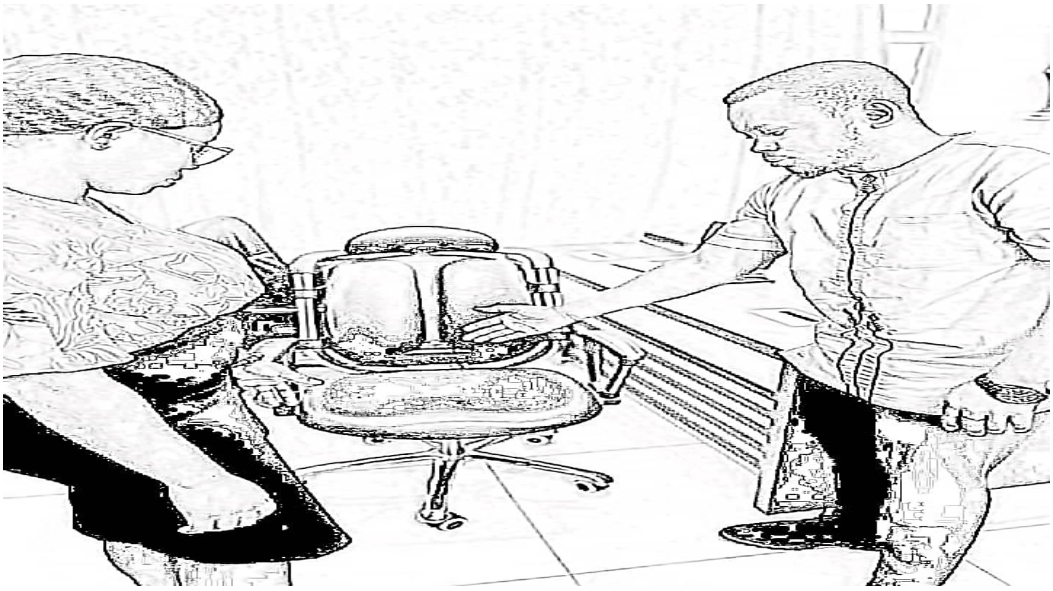


Figure 2. Open palm plus please.

In Figure 3, the gentleman points at the door with his left hand. The left hand in Ghanaian social life symbolizes disrespect. It is mostly associated with odd duties, leading to the perception that using the left hand to point at someone or indicate something is considered highly disrespectful. No matter the context in which '*mepa wo kyɛw*' is used, the gesture of the left hand makes whatever utterance follows impolite. For instance, offering someone a gift with your left hand is offensive. While the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' followed by an insult may be viewed positively in the light of politeness theory, the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' with a left-hand gesture brings about emotional escalation. The socio-cultural context and societal interpretation of communication have significantly influenced whether the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' can be polite, impolite, an emotional minimizer, or an emotional escalator—all of which are attributed to the type of gesture accompanying the utterance.



Figure 3. Please plus left finger pointing to the door.

In Figure 4, the gentleman is looking down while speaking to the lady. *Mepa wo kyɛw*' (*Please*) combined with looking down, as in *"Please*, *how can I help?"* while looking down, is symptomatic of disinterest in the presence of the listener. While *mepa wo kyɛw*' in this context can be considered a marker of politeness, the gesture communicates the contrary. Analyzing the discourse within the Ghanaian context reveals that this use of *mepa wo kyɛw*' serves as a cover but does not actually open up the conversation for continuation. Whatever intention the listener wanted to communicate to the speaker may be held back, or the person may hesitate to continue the conversation. In effect, while *mepa wo kyɛw*' may pretend to show concern and politeness, the accompanying gesture is classified as a "communication freezer."



Figure 4. Please plus looking down.

In Figure 5, the lady looks away while using the word '*mepa wo kyɛw*'. Looking away and the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' can convey differing meanings. For instance:

- "Please, I can't help you."
- "Please, I can help you" (looking away).

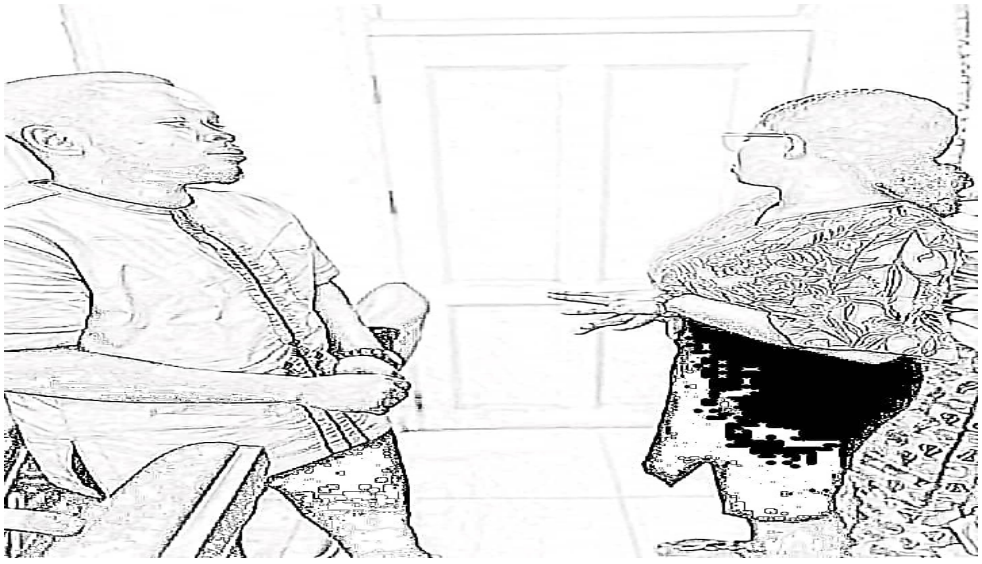


Figure 5. Looking away and the use of please.

While the first example may be considered a sincere expression of politeness and inability, the second example, combined with the gesture of looking away, communicates otherwise. Looking away typically conveys disinterest and lack of concern. Hence, the second example indicates impoliteness due to the accompanying gesture.

In Figure 6, the lady has an open and outstretched palm. '*Mepa wo kyɛw*' combined with open palms is not unusual in Ghanaian expressions such as:

- "Please, you are welcome."
- "Please, good morning."



Figure 6. Please plus open palms.

Although these sentences might seem unnecessary, they are meaningfully interpreted as extra-linguistic markers of politeness. A greeting alone is a marker of politeness, so the addition of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' becomes an extra demonstration of politeness. Despite the admission that '*mepa wo kyɛw*' is used as a polite marker when greeting and receiving someone, any gesture accompanying these phrases offers further interpretation. An open palm gesture signifies acceptance, while crossed or folded arms communicate something different. For example, *"Please*, *you are welcome"* (with open palms) clearly communicates acceptance and even joy in receiving the person, whereas folded arms suggest cold acceptance. Despite the positive face illustrated in *"Please*, *you are welcome*", folded arms are symptomatic of a negative face. It is essential to note that gestures and other paralinguistic features in communication are critical when considering what constitutes politeness.

Aside the pragmatics and the interpretations of *please* in the Ghanaian context, the semantics of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*) cannot be ignored.

Firstly, '*mepa wo kyɛw*' is used as an attention drawer/seeker. The Ghanaian hardly greets without adding '*mepa wo kyɛw*'. It is not uncommon to hear, "*Please*, *good morning*." Apart from its politeness as indicated early, it is used to draw a listener's attention. In other words, '*mepa wo kyɛw*' is seen as an attention drawer especially when it concerns greetings.

Furthermore, '*mepa wo kyɛw*' has been employed as an emotional minimizer as discussed earlier. For one to appeal to the emotions of a listener, '*mepa wo kyɛw*' is normally employed. In a context in which '*mepa wo kyɛw*' is to appeal to the emotions of a listener, the utterance that follows appears negative. Despite the negative utterance, '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*) seeks to call the listener's attention to an unpardonable mistake. Since the person realizes that an unavoidable mistake was committed, '*mepa wo kyɛw*' appeals to the emotion of the person.

Another use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' that has been realized is the existential use. In the existential use, '*mepa wo kyɛw*' does not actually play any role. For instance, one is likely to read or hear statements such as: okay, *please*. In this statement, the use of *please* is needless; yet, it becomes part and parcel of the people's conversation.

Face saving is so important in politeness theory. The Ghanaian utilizes '*mepa wo kyɛw*' as a face-saving strategy. Whenever a speaker knows very well that what is going to be said is not pleasing to the listener, *please* becomes a communicative strategy to be employed. '*Please*, *what can you do?*' Though the question is not offensive, the use of *please* becomes a strategy for the speaker to feel at ease in asking the question.

6. Findings and Discussion

The use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*) and its accompanying conversational actions is classified as part of the sociocultural traditions and norms of Ghanaians, judging from the data gathered in the Akan speech community. A critical look at the data shows that the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' in the Akan speech community depends on context, and the meaning associated with it is linked to the act of being polite, (im)polite and emotional (mostly through the addition of gesture and tone). Its use is understood properly by the interactants within which the conversation is taking place, based on the social relationships that exist between these interactants. The findings of the paper are understood under each research question as follows:

6.1. Under What Circumstances Is the Use of '*Mepa Wo Kyɛw*' (*Please*) *an Indicator of Politeness?*

The use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*) is an indicator of being polite as it minimises the negative face of the hearer in utterances that seem to threaten the face of the hearer. Speakers add '*mepa wo kyɛw*' to their utterances and go off-record during a conversation. As found in the data, using '*mepa wo kyɛw*' as part of a statement or an utterance that is likely to cause offence to the hearer reduces the level of offence and brings harmony (Figure 1). The use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' in this circumstance, along with the impolite utterance attached to it, is a strategic way for the speaker to show that a relationship exists between the interactants. This, in linguistics, is what is considered as a mismatch between expressions that are considered to be polite and impolite and is understood as "attitude clash", a situation where a "polite" and an "impolite" utterances are seen as parts of the same utterance (Leech, 2014, p. 238).

Although the main idea of the utterance in Figure 1 suggests an interpersonally negative speech since it is possible to invoke a negative face of the hearer, the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' reduced its negativity and made the conversation cordial. In the general sense, '*mepa wo kyɛw*' has achieved its purpose of reducing the threat on the face of the hearer. This is a negative politeness strategy in Brown and Levinson (1987) and aims at minimising the imposition of the level of impoliteness on the hearer. In addition to this, '*mepa wo kyɛw*' has been used, in this context, to bring out what is understood to be a conversational irony as explained by Leech (2014). This is a situation where someone says something that appears to be polite on the surface but is more subtly or "deeply" regarded as face-attacking—that is, as being impolite. Using '*mepa wo kyɛw*' before an insult, on every normal day, demanded offensive response, but since the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' was to reduce the friction the second part of the utterance may bring, there may be no issue of offence. It is evident, as Leech (1983) suggests, that if one must offend, it is preferable to do so in a manner that does not directly contradict the principles of politeness. Instead, one should employ implied meaning to guide the listener to the offensive aspect of the statement.

This explains that in the Akan society, individuals use '*mepa wo kyɛw*' in situations where they do not want to activate the negative face want of the hearer when their utterance is possible of causing the negative face of the hearer. It further explains that speakers of the Akan dialects understand the significance of politeness of Brown and Levinson (1987) and regard the essence of using negative politeness to reduce the tension that (im)politeness might cause.

Another use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' as an indicator of politeness is understood in its use as a concept of giving gifts as found in Figure 2. In order for the speaker to minimise the threat on the face of the hearer, the speaker owes it a duty to give gifts to the hearer for the hearer to feel satisfied. Gifts in this circumstance is not only linked to tangible objects but can refer to instances where the speaker makes the hearer feel listened to, cared about, understood and admired (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

The use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' in giving a seat to the hearer makes the hearer feel liked and welcomed. Although, the speaker could have made the full statement or utterance of the request he or she wanted to make in wanting to give a seat to the hearer without the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*', the speaker chose to be polite in this circumstance based on the rapport that is understood to be created. In that regard, introducing '*mepa wo kyɛw*' in the conversation made the hearer feel comfortable and wanted to contribute to the subsequent discussions. This maximises the want of the hearer and can therefore be said to make the hearer feel wanted and welcomed.

The use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' in this circumstance (Figure 2) can be linked to Leech's maxim of generosity, which states that all interactants try to be generous when speaking, and this generosity goes in favour of the hearer. In the Ghanaian context, since being polite is understood to be a part of the culture of the people, failure to add polite expressions to utterances amounts to disrespect and a lack of "common sense". The speaker's use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' and point to a seat suggests a form of making an offer to the hearer which will, in the long run, be beneficial to the hearer. In such an environment, the presumption that subsequent discussions will be fruitful and very interactive is very high because the hearer has, at the initial state of the conversation, felt welcomed and liked due to the speaker's generosity.

6.2. To What Extent Do Gestures Aid in the Interpretation of '*Mepa Wo Kyɛw*' (*Please*)*?*

The Ghanaian usage of *please* as a politeness marker goes beyond linguistic form and covers non-verbal communication. As the current research has proved, in the Ghanaian scenario, body language and context are crucial in encouraging or discouraging the practical usage of the word '*mepa wo kyɛw*' In concordance with the hypotheses of Lakoff (1977), Brown and Levinson (1987), and Leech (1983), the analysis confirms that body language is crucial semiotic resource in interpreting politeness in communication, the process being culturally mediated. In the scenario of communication in Akan, body language forms the unwritten social indicators, which attend or metamorphose spoken communication.

In the Akan way of communication, these are the non-verbal social cues that add or change verbal communication. Both speech and gesture are two-way communication acts that negotiate perception and construction of meaning (Kita and Özyürek, 2003). The findings of the study make it unmistakably clear that the pragmatic power of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' depends heavily on the hand gesture that accompanies it. For instance, '*mepa wo kyɛw*' with an open palmed gesture (Figure 2) generates the feeling of transparency, integrity, and deference. This confirms Leech's approbation maxim and tact maxim, which form hearer benefit maximisation and hearer cost minimisation. The gesture goes beyond the language expression of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' and turns into an action of bodily politeness.

But the action violates the politeness in the word '*mepa wo kyɛw*'. The expression of the word '*mepa wo kyɛw*' by the left hand is an example (Figure 3). Even while the person utters the word '*mepa wo kyɛw*', the action eliminates the politeness in the word because in the majority of Ghanaian cultures, the left hand is an indication of insult or disrespect. This confirms Lakoff's (1977) proposal that politeness has to be examined in the context of sociocultural environments: what in a certain situation seems respectful, in another, does not. Even though there is a linguistic clue in the case, the action circumvents the final interpretation, labelling the word as unfriendly.

Similarly, the interpretation is highly mediated by non-verbals such as the glance direction. When a person utters the term '*mepa wo kyɛw*' and looks nowhere or away, the speech sounds as being insincere or lacking interest, thus making an otherwise polite motion a dismissive or indifferent movement (Figures 4 and 5). The explanation goes into detail about the idea of "face" as outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987), focusing on how individuals navigate their own face as well as that of those they are conversing with. The downward gaze, along with the use of the term '*mepa wo kyɛw*', serves to soften the intensity of the positive face request while simultaneously posing a threat to the social status or "face" of the listener.

In contrast, open-handed and comforting poses (Figures 2 and 6) attest to the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' as honest and welcoming. Used in the context of greetings, open-arm actions produce an open face orientation and carry with them inclusiveness and good intentions. These are good illustrations of Leech's principles of generosity and sympathy, whereby politeness is constructed by both words and non-verbal friendliness. Hence, the production of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' in the context of inclusive action leads to a Ghanaian- appropriate politeness display.

These findings also underpin the suggestion that politeness is multimodal and culturally constructed socio-linguistically. In Akan society, politeness involves the deployment of the entire scope of communication motion, that is, tone, gesture, and body placement, as well as the deployment of the right words. Through their function as interpretive filters, gestures can either render the word '*mepa wo kyɛw*' more or less courteous. Through Kelmaganbetova et al. (2023), the use of gestures enhances meaning and provides emotional as well as visual indicators that influence perception. Through the data gathered, it is seen that to comprehend the full scope of the meaning of '*mepa wo kyɛw*', Ghanaian speakers depend on the use of gestures.

In summary, gestures are crucial in determining how to interpret the word '*mepa wo kyɛw*'. They are cultural regulators who determine whether the word '*mepa wo kyɛw*' is interpreted as being emotionally charged, polite, or disrespectful. Because of this balanced relationship between verbal and non-verbal indicators, gestures offer the cultural and pragmatic information needed to deduce the speaker's true intention. Given Ghana's multimodal and culturally rooted communication style, which by definition requires multimodal processing, gestures are not only convenient but also crucial for deducing the pragmatic power of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*).

7. Conclusions

The study set out to examine the circumstances under which the use of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*) serves as an indicator of politeness and the extent to which gestures influence its interpretation within the Ghanaian Akan speech community. The findings reveal that the interpretation of '*mepa wo kyɛw*'in Akan communication extends beyond its lexical meaning and is deeply rooted in the sociocultural norms, values, and relational dynamics of the people. The study confirms that '*mepa wo kyɛw*' is not inherently polite but rather functions as a strategic communicative device employed to mitigate face-threatening acts and to maintain social harmony. Its pragmatic force, therefore, lies in its ability to minimise offence, soften directives, and preserve interpersonal relationships, particularly through Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework of negative politeness.

Furthermore, the research underscores that gestures, tone, and contextual cues are indispensable in determining the pragmatic interpretation of '*mepa wo kyɛw*' in the Ghanaian context. Non-verbal actions—such as hand gestures, gaze direction, and posture—serve as semiotic resources that either reinforce or contradict the linguistic expression of '*mepa wo kyɛw*'. When harmoniously aligned with speech, these gestures convey sincerity, respect, and inclusion; however, when misaligned, they can invert politeness into impoliteness or disrespect.

Overall, the study concludes that politeness in the Akan community is a multimodal and culturally constructed phenomenon. The word '*mepa wo kyɛw*' operates not as a universal marker of politeness, but as a culturally embedded expression whose meaning and effect are mediated by social context, relational dynamics, and accompanying non-verbal behaviours. The findings thus challenge the universality of traditional politeness theories, affirming instead that politeness must be interpreted through the lens of local sociocultural practices and communicative norms.

8. Recommendations

Based on these findings, the study recommends that future research on politeness and pragmatics should adopt a culturally grounded and multimodal approach that integrates both verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication. Researchers should pay closer attention to how context, gesture, tone, and body orientation interact to construct meaning and politeness in African and other multilingual settings.

In practical terms, educators, interpreters, and communicators should recognise that politeness is not universally encoded in words such as '*mepa wo kyɛw*' (*please*) but is interpreted through local sociocultural frameworks. Language education and intercultural communication training in Ghana and similar multilingual contexts should therefore include pragmatic and non-verbal dimensions of meaning-making. Finally, the study calls for further comparative investigations across Ghanaian languages and cultures to deepen our understanding of how politeness strategies evolve and function within Africa's diverse sociolinguistic landscapes.

Author Contributions

J.N.A. conceptualized the study, designed the research framework, and supervised the overall project. J.E. contributed to data collection, performed the formal analysis, and assisted in interpreting the results. S.L.G.A. participated in the literature review, manuscript drafting, and editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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We are willing to share and make data concerning this work available.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Use of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

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