

Requests in Traditional Rites of Passage: The Logba Perspective

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Abstract

This paper investigates the use of request expressions in traditional rites of passage among the Logbas¹¹³. Logba is a Ghana-Togo Mountain language spoken in the Hohoe District of the Volta Region of Ghana. The study aims at examining the use of request expressions in the language as used in rites of passage. Request expressions used in ceremonies of various rites of passage were recorded and examined. Interviews, participant observation and role play were used to gather data for the study. The theoretical framework adopted for this study is Watts' (2003) Politeness Framework. The study suggests that, requests expressions are key components of rites of passage among the Logbas. However, request strategy adopted in one rite of passage differs from the other. Strategies like the use of solidarity terms are employed to show oneness and to save one another's face in order for the requester to achieve his/her request goal.

Keywords: Requests, Face Threats, Strategies, Solidarity Terms, Rites of Passage.

Introduction

Request is a directive speech act performed regularly. Nevertheless, there are some formal institutionalised request forms for some socio-cultural events among the Logbas such as rites of passage. Since requests prepare the way for upcoming events (Agyekum, 2005) it is incumbent on the requester to couch his/her request appropriately depending on the rite of passage being performed among the Logbas. Of particular concern to this paper are marriage rites, naming rites/ceremonies, puberty rites and funeral rites.

113 Logbas are people found around the Ghana-Togo boarder in the Volta Region of Ghana. The language and the location (land) are called Logba. Logba is made up of seven villages namely; Tota, Klikpo, Alakpeti, Adzakoe, Akusame, Ogome and Vuinta.

In the light of the foregoing, this paper offers some significant preliminary findings on ways of requesting during these rites in the Logba context. The paper examines the style of request adopted by the requesters to the requestees in order to save face during the rites.

Requests fall under the category of directives, which are considered as attempts “to get the hearer to do an act which speaker wants hearer to do, and which is not obvious that the hearer will do in the normal course of events or hearer’s own accord” (Searle 1969, p.66). A request is thus defined as a directive speech act in which the speaker asks the hearer to perform an action which is very often for the exclusive benefit of the speaker (Trosborg, 1995).

The Logba verb for request is *bú*. Requests are considered potentially damaging for the addressee's negative face, that is, the individual's need to have his/her freedom of action unimpeded (Brown and Levinson, 1987). According to Sifianou (1992), requests consist of two main structures, the core request or head act and the peripheral modification devices. The head act consists of the main utterance which has the function of requesting and can stand by itself.

Requests may be expressed verbally or non-verbally in most cultures. Generally, request is more conveniently and effectively communicated through the linguistic medium, as a social behaviour (Odonkor, 2001). Though a universal phenomenon, its conceptualisation, norms of performance and interpretation may vary across cultures. In any speech community, request and its performance constitute a body of knowledge that members of the speech community must acquire in order to become socially integrated (Odonkor, 2001). Children at Logba are queried for going about requests inappropriately. The acquisition of the knowledge and skills for request performance becomes more important considering the fact that requests feature more prominently in our everyday verbal exchanges.

Requests are universal because “every language and speech community employs one form or the other during communicative encounters” (Agyekum, 2005, p.1). However, the way they are employed and structured may differ from language to language but their functions may be identical. Thus, their social function consists of “getting the hearer to do something for the speaker or a third party, which makes them beneficial to the latter and costly to the former” (Searle, 1969, p.66). Since requests threaten the hearer’s negative face by restricting his or her freedom of action (Brown and Levinson 1987), in order to make the requestee comply with a request, it is necessary to formulate it in a socially and culturally appropriate way.

In order for successful interaction to be accomplished and potential unwelcomed effects on the hearer to be reduced or softened, Bella (2012)

opines that, the formulation of requests call for a great deal of both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic expertise on the part of the users. Moreover, the requester needs to possess both the knowledge of the linguistic resources for formulating a request in a particular language and knowledge of the contextual and sociocultural variables that render a particular pragmalinguistic choice appropriate in a particular speech situation. Requests therefore, may present inherent difficulties for language learners, who need to know how to “perform requests successfully and to avoid the effect of being perceived as rude, offensive or demanding” (Uso-Juan, 2010, p.237).

The arguments raised in this paper are framed on Watts’ (2003) Politeness Theory. This theory affirms that “all human cultures have norms of social behaviour that members will classify as mutually shared considerations for others” (p.14). He further explains that “a participant’s behaviour is evaluated as polite and impolite not merely on a matter of the linguistic expressions that he/she uses, but rather depends on the interpretation of the behaviour in the overall social interaction” (Watts 2003, p.8). The need to make this kind of distinction is also emphasized by (Eelen, 2001) when he opines that every community has some established norms or conventions regarding actions or reactions that are desirable in a specific context. In view of this, an individual is considered polite when his actions or reactions are in consonance with these social norms or conventions.

Members of a community are able to analyse and evaluate their own behaviour in the light of the behavioural norm which is expected to be shared by all in the community. Fraser (1990) refers to this phenomenon as the “social norm view of politeness” (p.220). The social norm view of politeness is measured along some historically established rules of behaviour.

Again, Watts (2003) stresses the acquisition of politeness as against being born with it as he puts it, “politeness is acquired; it is not something we are born with, but something we have to learn and be socialized into” (p. 9).

At the heart of Watts (2003) politeness model is the issue of politic behaviour. Watts describes politic behaviour as “socio-culturally determined behaviour directed towards the goal of establishing and/or maintaining in a state of equilibrium the personal relationships between the individuals of a social group” (p.20). He avers that, politic behaviour is that behaviour, linguistic and non-linguistic, which the participants construct as being appropriate to the on-going social interaction. The construction may have been made prior to entering the interaction, but is always negotiable during the interaction, despite the expectations that participants might bring to it (Watts, 2003). He continues to espouse that

... linguistic behaviour which is perceived to be appropriate to the social constraints of the on-going interaction, i.e. as non-salient, should be called 'politic behaviour' and the linguistic behaviour which is perceived to be beyond what is expectable, i.e. salient behaviour, should be called polite or impolite depending on whether the behaviour itself tends towards the negative or positive end of the spectrum of politeness (p.19).

He further argues for a radically new way of looking at linguistic politeness. He aims to show that, it is necessary to make a clear distinction between the common sense or lay notion of politeness and the theoretical notion of politeness. Watts (2003) classifies politeness into first order (politeness 1) and second order (politeness 2). He defines first order politeness (politeness 1) as the way lay members of a language community see politeness.

By first order politeness (politeness 1), we understand how participants in verbal interaction make explicit use of the terms 'polite' and 'politeness' to refer to their own and others' social behaviour. In contrast, he looks at second order politeness (politeness 2) as the forms of social behaviour preserving mutually shared consideration for others. Second order politeness (politeness 2) makes use of the terms 'polite' and 'politeness' as theoretical concepts in a top-down model to refer to forms of social behaviour. Locher and Watts (2005) also refer to first order politeness (politeness 1) as the participants' and others' social behaviour and second order politeness (politeness 2) as forms of social behaviour.

Watts (2003) looks at the terms *polite* and *politeness* and their varied equivalents in other languages in terms of the meanings associated with them from one group of speakers to another and even from one individual speaker to the next. Thus, his division of lay politeness (politeness 1) versus theoretical politeness (politeness 2) is especially critical for cross-cultural politeness research. According to Watts (2003), people might resort to the use of polite language expressions like the language a person uses to avoid being too direct, language which displays respect towards or consideration for others, or language that displays certain polite formulaic utterances like 'please', 'thank you', 'excuse me' or 'sorry'. On the other hand, some people may consider the polite use of language as, for example, 'hypocritical', 'dishonest' or 'distant'. As regards a general level of polite behaviour, some people feel that polite behaviour is equivalent to socially correct or appropriate behaviour, while others consider it to be the hallmark of the cultivated person.

There were no fixed number of participants because; the researcher's motive was to gather data wherever any rite of passage was going on among the Logbas. The setting was Logba Tota and Logba Alakpeti. Logba

Alakpeti is the commercial hub of the Logba traditional area. It has a market where Logbas and other peoples with different linguistic backgrounds come to buy and sell. Due to its strategic location, there are many non-natives (settlers) living among the Logba Alakpeti people. This has partly brought about variety in the Logba language spoken in these two towns, hence my choice of the two towns. The study employs qualitative research method. A research is qualitative if it “describes events and persons scientifically without making use of numerical data” (Best and Kahn, 2006, p.79). Specifically, the ethnography of communication approach was deemed the appropriate approach to this study because it enabled the researcher to record by participating in some activities or observing the people from their own cultural perspective as they go about the rites of passage. This gives the researcher the opportunity to analyse the subject or issue from the cultural actor’s point of view (Silverman, 1993).

Data collection instruments used for this study are participant observation, where I employed the “rapid and anonymous survey method” (Coates, 1993, p.5). Other methods included interviews and role play.

2. Requests During Marriage Ceremonies/Rites

Among the Logbas, marriages are contracted not only between the couples involved but the families of the bride and the groom as a whole. For this reason, during the marriage ceremony, only friendly language and one devoid of face threats is used. The rationale is that, should anything be said that poses face threats to a family, it also affects the other family in the long run. Only people who are communicatively competent in the culture are allowed to be the main speakers for both sides to prevent any communicative blunders as per the Logba culture.

In the example below, the spokesperson for the bride chooses his words painstakingly to request for the rest of the items (the required number of items expected to be presented to the bride’s family were not up the number), yet avoiding face threats to promote solidarity between the two families. I recorded the excerpt below at a marriage ceremony held at Logba Alakpeti on 28th March, 2015. The participants were the families of the bride and the groom.

1. *I blɔ tɛ atsú egúwɔ̀ a má tanyi n ivà a pétéè là gu ukló ɛ nù. Iyɛ okplè atsí bí tá ogbá tɛ a tó inà okpè tɛ ò dɔ̀ ukló ɛ nù dzè.*

“It seems that, our husbands could not bring everything down from the vehicle. For this reason, we want to ask (request) them to send someone to check again.”

(Logba Alakpeti 28/3/15)

Example (1) above was said at the point of the marriage ceremony when the groom and his family were to present all that they were supposed to

give to the bride's family as part of the marriage rite. It must be reiterated that, utterances during marriage ceremonies are full of several speech acts including commissives such as promises and declaratives. The researcher's preoccupation was to decipher the aspect of the speeches having to do with requests. The request in (1) is found in the words ...*té a tó inà okpè té ò ḍò ukló é nù dzè* '...that they send someone to check in the vehicle again.'

By saying, '*I bḷò té* 'it appears that' is suggestive of the fact that, he could be corrected if he was making a mistake. This is a friendly and face saving approach to requesting them to provide the items on the marriage list¹¹⁴ in full. On the other hand, if he had said *ivá a mi fón* 'the items were not up to the required number, that would have been a direct attack with its accompanying face threat consequences.

Apart from this, the speaker also uses solidarity term *atsú egúwò a* 'our husbands' referring to every member of the groom's family present, be it male or female, even before the marriage is formally contracted. It is to reiterate the fact that the marriage is almost contracted (due to some rites performed prior to the grand marriage ceremony) and that they have become one people, except that the right thing must be done. He did not also emphatically say the other family should provide the remaining item, he only asked that someone should be sent to check if some of the items were left in the vehicle. During the period of rechecking, a representative of the groom's family can then explain the anomaly to the bride's family behind closed doors.

3. Requests During Naming Ceremonies

Seven days after delivery, the nursing mother, the child, husband and other family members of both sides (paternal and maternal sides) converge in the house of the head of the man's family to formally recognise and welcome the arrival of a new member of the family. This ceremony is important, in that, until this rite is performed, the child is still seen as a stranger or visitor who could leave them at any time.

Though the child at this period is completely oblivious of the goings on around him/her, this ceremony is significant because it is the first point of socialization and teaching him/her some morals. For instance, the child is told to be truthful at all times irrespective of the consequences. Usually a drop of alcoholic beverage and water are used. The child is expected to decipher between the taste of the two drinks which also means he/she must be able to draw the line between right and wrong at all times. The above are some of the major goals of naming ceremonies among the Logbas.

114Marriage list comprises all the material things the husband to be is supposed to buy for the bride and her family as part of the marriage ceremony.

Mostly, requests in this domain are made to the babies, the entire gathering and the ancestors. I recorded the excerpt in example (2) below during a naming ceremony held at Logba Tota on 5th March, 2015.

2. *Atsí bú gu awúvǎ dzí idzè tsú tɛ a dǎ ikpá ogbámá ibèshibè nù.*

“We request you that, you remain truthful at all times.”

(Logba Tota 5/3/15)

Though the child cannot make anything out of what is said, the belief among the Logbas is that, the child imbibes every word spoken. The request is made as if it were to someone who has the ability of responding to it. Below is also an example requesting the protection of the ancestors and everybody present, to make it a point to bring up the child in the right way according to the norms of the Logbas.

3. *Anye ke atsi bú gú etsíwǎ a pétéé kpé inàshínà ò tsí umè ɛ tɛ, atsí pétéé atsí dǎ tɛ ebítsi ɛ ó dú inà dǎkpá ozúmé.*

“We also request the ancestors and everybody here present to help in bringing up the child so that he will be useful to us in the future.”

(Logba Tota 5/3/15)

In example (3) above, the speaker is making a request to the ancestors and formally bringing all and sundry on board, to make the child grow into somebody who will be an asset rather than a liability to the entire community.

4. Requests in Puberty Rites

Puberty rites form important part of the lives of females in Logba. It is performed to formally introduce the ladies who are mature for marriage to prospective suitors. Though some of the core values of it are lost, it is still performed for females as a key component of the Logba culture. In the past, this rite was meant for only virgins (K. Akumah, personal communication, March 5th, 2015). In recent times however, people who are even already married take part.

This rite is revered so much among the Logbas that, should a female not go through it before she passes on, it is still performed for her on the day of burial before she is finally buried. The belief is that in the next world (the belief among Logbas is that, there is another world after death), she will only be married if she passed through the puberty rite in the world before. In the past females were supposed to dress half naked, however, the initiates must cover themselves very well these days. The participants are all females of a particular family, be it biological sisters or females belonging to the same extended family, go through it at the same time. One significant moral lesson about this rite is that it teaches the females the virtues of a good wife.

Older and respected women are those who take them through the lessons. This stems from the fact that, among the Logbas, like in many

African communities, the elderly are regarded as “the custodians of culture”, “the symbol of wisdom”, and “society’s memory databank” (Agyekum, 2004a, p. 137). Rababa’h and Malkawi (2012), also aver that, “old people have more experience and broader communicative competence than young people” (p. 26).

Whether one is already married with children or not, the message is the same for all of them. It is the puberty rite that makes one a member of the community of women. Request for good behaviour from the initiates towards everybody especially their husbands is said mostly when beads are being tied around their wrists, necks and knees. Let’s consider example (4) below:

4. *Dzĩ idze tsú zó, a dzú ina udzé. Dzagbagba té a dzè awú gù kpé awú ebitwo a vá enzhi. Tò tá té ogò ó nya a. Dú ogà dũkpá.*

“Henceforth, you have become a woman. Endeavour to look after your husband and children very well. Don’t allow them to be famished. Be a good wife.”

(Logba Tota 29/12/14)

These kinds of requests do not have conspicuous address terms, respect terms, etc. As stated earlier on, the aged are also not obliged to use respect terms to those they are older than. The last request statement in example (4) *dũ ogà dũkpá* ‘be a good wife’ also comes last as the summary of all the virtues of a good wife. That is to say that, if you are a good wife, you will keep the home clean, cook for your husband and children, not commit adultery, and stay clear of anything abhorred by a virtuous wife.

5. Requests in Funeral Rites

Another area where requests are used is in the organisation of funerals. Like in many Ghanaian communities, funerals are considered crucial among the Logbas. For this reason, different anniversaries/ceremonies such as the first anniversary, tenth anniversary, etc. are marked for the dead. The essence of these anniversaries is to show how much of a loss the departure has caused the family. More importantly, it is to tell people that the departed was a very good person to the family in particular and to others as well.

It is also believed that, when the necessary rites are not appropriately observed, the dead out of anger could wipe out the entire family. Due to the communal feelings among the Logbas, every family gets involved in the funeral of a dead person in the community. The excerpt in (5) below comes from an informant (the requester) reminding another person (the requestee) of the first anniversary of a departed person of the community.

5. **Requester:** *Até n tá wú ikpè go té ozume a bá dá atsú tsí ε, Kwami, ékpé ε.*

“I am to inform you that, tomorrow marks the first anniversary of the death of our father, Kwami.”

Requestee: *Yòo ma nú. Wa a té má nyá umó.*

“I hear, tell them that I will be there.”

(Logba Alakpeti 11/1/15)

Requests in this way are very common especially when they have to do with funerals. The informants (requestee) most often than not are younger than the requesters but the use of overt politeness markers by these younger informants are mostly absent. It is also believed that the one who sent the informant is either older or higher ranked, say, a chief, an elderly person in the family, etc. so the language used to make the report must not deviate from the language used by these people.

Although example (5) is not formally making a direct request to the hearer, the understanding is that the family of Kwami is requesting him to be part of the first anniversary celebration. The statement, *a té n tá wú ikpe go té* ‘I am to inform you that’, can be seen as informational but it is a request utterance. The hearer, having the pragmalinguistic knowledge of the Logbas and for that matter the utterance, treats the information as a request to him to be present at the venue of the ceremony. He answers thus, *yoo ma nú, wa té má nyá umó* ‘I hear, tell them that I will be there’.

It is also possible that, the hearer would have been aware of the impending anniversary but, as per the culture of the Logbas, formally informing the person is tantamount to the fact that, his presence will be highly appreciated.

6. Conclusion

The findings of the study reveal that requests form a major part of rites of passage among the Logbas. The language of request in one rite differs from one to the other. Moreover, the use of mitigators, downtoners and solidarity terms as strategies to lessen the illocutionary force in requests to avoid face threats is seen to play a significant role in the requests during rites of passage among the Logbas.

The study also identifies that, as a form of socialization of a newly born baby into the Logba culture, the child is requested to remain truthful at all times. The parents and everyone present during the naming ceremony are requested to be part of the child’s upbringing process.

Absolute care is taken during requests in marriages to prevent any forms of face threats. This is because, should the groom and his family feel uneasy because of directly requesting them to do something or the other, the

bride and her family also suffer the same face threats due to the oneness of the community members.

Finally, the study shows that, initiates who are formally introduced to prospective suitors are requested to be virtuous women and be submissive to their husbands and take utmost care of their children.

APPENDIX I

TRANSCRIPTION (META DATA) OF SELECTED RECORDINGS

1. The spokesman during a marriage ceremony strategically requests the groom and the entire family to provide the items on the marriage list in full. This was recorded at Logba Alakpeti on 28th March, 2015.
I blò té atsú egúwò a má tanyin ivà a pétée là gu ukló ε nù. Iye okplè atsi bí tá ogbá té a tó inà okpè té ò dḡ ukló ε nù dzè.
'It seems that our husbands could not bring everything down from the vehicle. For this reason, we want to ask (request) them to send someone to check again.'
2. Naming ceremonies are important in the Logba culture. They formally welcome the child into the members of the community. An old man (aged 72) speaks on behalf of other people gathered during a naming ceremony requesting the child to remain truthful at all times. This was recorded at Logba Tota on 5th March, 2015.
Atsi bú gú awú vá dzí idzè tsú te ta dḡ ikpá ogbámá ibèshibè nù.
'We request you that, you remain truthful at all times.'
Anye ke atsi bú gú etsiwo a pétée kpé inashina ò tsí umè ε te, atsi pétée atsi dḡ te ebisi ε ó dú inà dḡkpá ozúme.
'We also request the ancestors and everyone here present to help in bringing up the child to become useful to us in the future.'
3. Puberty rites are observed to usher girls into womanhood. An old woman (aged 78) requests initiates during a puberty ceremony to be good and virtuous wives. This was recorded at Logba Tota on 29th December, 2014.
Dzí idze tsú zó, a dzú inà udzè. Dzagbagba té a dzè awú gù kpé awú ebiwo a vá enzhí. Tò tá té ogò ó nya a. Dú ogà dḡkpá.
'Henceforth, you have become a woman. Endeavour to look after your husband and children very well. Don't allow them to be famished. Be a good wife.'
4. A male informant (aged 38) delivers a message to an older man (aged 72) concerning the first anniversary celebration at Logba Alakpeti on 11th January, 2015.
Até n tá wú ikpe gò té ozúme a bá dá atsú tsí ε Kwami ékpé ε.

‘I am to inform you that, tomorrow marks the first anniversary of our father, Kwami.’

Yòo ma nú. Wa a té má nyá umó. ‘I hear, tell them that I will be there.’

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