

Address Terms among University Students in Ghana: The Case of Descriptive Phrases

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Abstract

Address terms are acknowledged to be a key verbal behaviour among interlocutors in various social institutions. However, it is only recently that it has been explored in academic settings. This paper explores one particular form of address terms, descriptive phrases. Using an ethnographic-style design, I examine the use of descriptive phrases as address terms by students in a Ghanaian public university. Analysis of these address terms suggested three key findings. First, four categories of descriptive phrases were noted in the fieldwork. Second, these address terms were conditioned by context of situation and socio-cultural indices such as solidarity, gender, age as well as pragmatic factors. The final finding suggests the warm and convivial nature of African culture, even in an institutional setting. These findings have implications for inter-cultural communication, language use at an educational institution, and further sociolinguistic research on address terms.

Key words: address terms, descriptive phrase, students, university, Ghana

Introduction

In the last decade the verbal behaviour of various groups of people in different socio-cultural settings has garnered much attention in sociolinguistic studies, with lively discussions erupting on both academic and other public fronts. On the academic front, earlier studies on verbal use, especially, among students, in the 1960s and the 1970s had focused on profanity and swear words in the informal speech of college students (e.g. Cameron, 1969; Nerbonne & Hipkin, 1972). More recent studies have focused on interruption (Brooks, 1982), conversations (Eckert, 1993) gossip (Cameron, 1997), as well as jokes and insults (Kiesling, 1997) among students.

As can be seen, address terms acknowledged to be one of the most interaction-oriented utterances among humans (Kielkiewicz-Janowiak, 2000) continue to be under researched in educational institutions in general, and among students, in particular. This is surprising given that address terms have not only been largely examined in several socio-cultural settings (e.g. Goodenough, 1965; Fang & Heng, 1983; Fitch, 1991; Aceto, 2002), following the most frequently mentioned study by Brown and Gilman's (1960) work, but also been studied in social institutions and practices such as politics (Jaworski & Galasinski, 2000; Fetzer & Bull, 2004), religion (Sequeira, 1993; Dzameshie, 1997; Wharry, 2003), and the media (Edu-Buandoh, 1999). Together with Brown and Gilman's work, these studies, ranging from the Anglo-American to the African context, have highlighted the power and solidarity postulates and the situatedness of address terms.

It is, however, interesting to note the emerging but increasing interest being shown in the use of address terms in academia (Walsh, 1996; Dickey, 1997, Afful, 2006), with some attention paid to students' use of address terms. It would appear that the most pertinent studies to the present study are Dickey (1997), Li (1997), Afful (1998, 2006), Kiesling (1998), and Wong and Leung (2004). Through detailed interviews and questionnaires administered to undergraduates in Hong Kong, Wong and Leung (2004) found that although addressing each other in Chinese is more common than in the past, the students' choice of English address forms reflect an identity predicated on the field of study, the culture of secondary school, peer group pressure. In addition, Kiesling's (1998) work focuses on one specific address term, *Dude*, reported to be common among American male students in a fraternity in a college; it was used as a solidary term and an identity marker of an in-group. Li (1997) in explores

the bicultural identity of Hongkngers , among whom were university students in their use of address forms. As part of a wider study, Afful's studies highlight the socio-pragmatic factors that underpin the use of university students in a non-Anglo-American setting, drawing on a lexicon of eight forms of address. A follow-up of the earlier study (1998), Afful's (2006) identify four address forms frequently used. In both studies, however, Afful (ibid) suggests that the linguistic resources used as address forms by university students reflect a vivacious culture. Further, we have had illuminating studies such as Crozier and Dimmock (1999) and De Klerk and Bosch (1997, 1999) dealing with students utterances such as address forms, although they have tended to focus on nicknames. De Klerk and Bosch (1999) associate nickname formation with linguistic creativity and verbal playfulness and interpret the pervasive use of nicknames among students (especially adolescents) as indexical of peer group membership and peer group cohesion. Moreover, to the extent that Anwar's (1997) deals with address terms among only Malay/Muslim undergraduates, it provides limited data for any meaningful comparison.

The present study, therefore, attempts to explore one category of address forms least identified and explored in the sociolinguistic studies on address forms. I focus on the use of such address forms among university students, given their potential in revealing interesting findings. Specifically, the study has two main objectives. The first is to identify the various forms of descriptive phrases typically used by university students to address one another. The second, and more important, objective is to demonstrate the factors that underpin their use.

Methodology

Research Design

An ethnographic approach is adopted in the present work. I find it appropriate given its potential to "emphasize the localized, microscopic, particular, context-bound features of given settings and cultures" (Baxter, 2003:85). From the ethnographic perspective, the present study seeks to utilize the advantage of studying a particular group of students from multiple research tools, with the aim of recording the complexity, subtlety and diversity of the discursive practice – address form – in a given period.

Research Site

The study took place within an English-medium public university in Ghana, University of Cape Coast (UCC), established originally in 1962 to train teachers for the country's secondary and training colleges but now shares that role with University of Education of Winneba. UCC conducts its teaching, learning, and research through five faculties, namely Education, Humanities, Sciences, Agriculture and Social Sciences, enabling the university to provide several academic programmes to nearly 15,000 local and international students. I chose this setting because of my familiarity with its members, notably students, faculty, and non-academic staff. Besides, I had spent eight years as a student (undergraduate and postgraduate) and three years as a lecturer. In this paper, my interest lies with Ghanaian students whose ages ranged from twenty to forty-five years and come from different ethnolinguistic backgrounds in Ghana (see Bodombo (1996) for a discussion on the ethnolinguistic groups in Ghana). They were additionally offering both undergraduate and postgraduate courses. I focus on undergraduates and postgraduate students from the regular stream and the "mature" group (who had completed their statutory schooling while also caring for their homes and families).

Data Collection and Analysis

The data upon which the study is based were derived from observation of spontaneous speech and interviews of university students, supported by my intuition. The spontaneous speech of university students was obtained from both participant and non-participant observation of actual usage of address terms in 256 dyadic situations at two different periods on the university campus: first, June-December, 1998; and second, December-April, 2003. Observation took place at a variety of locations throughout the campus of UCC, including lecture theatres, cafeteria, taxi stations, residential halls, Junior Common Rooms (JCRs), departmental offices, focusing on both academic and non-academic interactions. Throughout my observation I noted that interactants used English (the only official language and the medium of instruction in all educational institutions in Ghana), Ghanaian languages, Pidgin English (a code among Ghanaian male students widely used in informal contexts, and code-switching. The interview, which were semi-structured and audio-taped lasted between thirty minutes and one hour and

involved fifty students. The primary goal in the interview was to uncover “local” meaning from the participants’ point of view (Geertz, 1973) regarding the use of address forms. Equally informative and illuminating were conversations I had with students during lunch, the university recess, and at hallways.

Following data collection, the analysis, which was reflective and cyclical, involved the following procedures: a) coding the observation which had been recorded in field notes and noting emerging patterns, and b) transcribing interviews and coding the observation and interview data for themes and patterns. There was the need for assistance in coding the interview data, though both the observation and interview data had been collected single-handedly. I first transcribed the interview and later asked a second person to check for accuracy. Emergent themes were then discussed in periodic consultation with the research assistant. As well, further consultation was made with a selected number of interviewees to check on the interpretation behind the use of address terms.

Data analysis and discussion

As the name suggests, a descriptive phrase (DP) provides a description of a person to enable him/her to know that s/he is being addressed; that is, it functions principally as an attention getter and identifier. In most cases, when addressers are not known by their names but ought to be distinguished from others around, DPs are used. Four groups of DPs are found in my data set. To ensure anonymity, the names of interactants in the illustrated communicative encounters have been replaced.

Group 1

The most interesting group of DPs involves three terms, which are denotatively and culturally pejorative: *Kwasea Boy* (‘stupid boy’), *Naughty Boy* and *Foolish Man*. *Kwasea Boy* tended to be used reciprocally among male students of either the same or similar age. Its English equivalents, *Naughty Boy* and *Foolish Boy/Man*, were used in a similar vein. There was very little evidence of the pervasive use of this third instantiation, except among younger male students. Neither was there overwhelming evidence of such use of DP among the female students. Ordinarily perceived as insults, this category of DPs contains no element of denigration as the below exchange shows:

1. Ato: Foolish Boy! Foolish Boy! Foolish Boy!
Kwabena: Ye-e-e-s! Who is that foolish boy disturbing me this morning?
Kwabena: Oh I see! Good for you! Still sleeping? Wow!

As can be seen, the use of DPs both in terms of their lexicon and their denotation as insults is similar to name-calling (Farb, 1973) and negative nicknames (Crozier & Dimmock, 1999; De Klerk & Bosch, 1999). However, DPS as insults in the present study differ from name-calling and negative nicknames because their sociolinguistic import as evidenced in the fieldwork and checked with interviewees is one of neutrality and at best indicative of a pleasurable mood.

Similar to the apparent denigratory use of DPs was the creative use of ethnic-related terms among young male students in non-academic interactions. This involved the use of terms such as *Fantsenyi* (a person of Fante origin) *Awonanyi* (a person of Ewe origin) or *Nkrannyi* (a person of Ga origin) to identify the ethnic background of an addressee as indicated below:

2. Michael: *Nkranyiba* (child of a Ga person) you de there? (are you there?)
Robert: *Fantsenyi* (A person of Fante origin) Hei, who tell you sey a no de. I
dey like rock (Who told you I am not around. I am as solid as a rock)

In the example above involving two male students who met each other at the taxi station, the reciprocal exchanges were accompanied by loud shouts and other non-verbal features such as snapping of fingers. Indeed, addressing a mate by such ethnic-related terms illustrates what Doran (2004: 107) calls “ethnic specificity”. Given that ethnicity has been a grave source of political instability in many countries in Africa, the use of these ethnic-related terms openly as an instance of ethnic particularism among university students in Ghana affirms ethnicity as a legitimate aspect of identity. Further, by re-configuring terms for ethnicity, and using them in playful ways, students divest them of their negative social signification in mainstream Ghanaian discourse, thus creating a semantic field of address terms

within which ethnic origins could be benign. Thus, using such ethnic-related address forms was a means of performing solidarity with, and belonging to, a specifically "multi-ethnic" student community.

Group 2

Yet another interesting set of DPs concerns those with a definitive morphology. Specifically, this set is constituted of a head-word and a modifier; the head-word "mate", implying a sense of companionship, while the modifiers identify the unifying denominators such as number of room, the name of a student religious group, a lecturer whose surname is *Edjah*, and a discipline. These include, for example, *Hall Mate*, *Oguaa* (the name of a residential hall) *Mate*, *Room 28*, *Room Mate*, *Mate*, *BASU* (Baptist Students Union) *Mate*, *Edjah Mate*, *JCR Mate*, and *Philosophy Mate*.

We may consider this illustrative exchange between course mates, a male and a female student, in a mixed residential hall:

3. Johnfia: *Room 327! 327! 327!* Are you in?
Adabie: Yes!

In the above exchange, it is apparent that the interactants are students in the same residential hall and that the addresser wants to initiate discourse. This descriptive term, which identifies the addressee by his/her room, is often heard among both male and female students in residential halls.

In contrast, the other DPs (e.g. *BASU Mate*, *Edjah Mate*, and *Philosophy Mate*) are utilized in residential halls and elsewhere on the campus. It is worth noting that because students engage in co-curricular activities by joining different groups (political, social, sports, subject, etc), it is the case that students often tend to make references to their shared identity or sense of belonging as indicated below:

4. Mary: Knocking! *BASU* (Baptist Students' Union) *Mate!* Are you not coming to church today?
Selina: Hm, *BASU Mate*, I would have loved to come, especially as it's the climax of the week long evangelistic outreach program. But I am not well.
Mary: Okay, don't worry, *BASU Mate*, you'll be fine. I'll tell the other cell members so we pray for you. What about if we come to see you after church. Take care.

As observed, the ages of students do not exert any strong influence on the use of this set of DPs; neither does gender. Perhaps, the most significant point in the use of this second group of DPs is that it is less face-threatening; hence, its pervasive use among students of all ages.

Group 3

Unlike the earlier two groups of DPs, this group of DPs ranged from simple noun phrases to more complex ones such as *Lady*, *Gentleman*, *Young Man*, *Form One girl*, *Lady in Red*, and *The Lady Laughing in the Corner*. A student would non-reciprocally address a colleague during a tutorial or discussion as found below:

5. Stephen: Okay, with the background given, can we move on? *Gentleman in the extreme corner*, what's your take on the extract?
Alberta: Well, for me, there are a number of problems with the definition on 'ethnicity'

Obviously, the use of the term, *Gentleman in the extreme corner* serves an explicit communication function: eliciting participation of every student in class. Interestingly, in group discussions student facilitators similarly and often deploy DPs such as *Gentleman*, *My Friend*, and *Bespectacled Gentleman* in addressing group members, which would appear to be patronizing, though one would expect personal names to be used. Clearly, such DPs have a strong deictic function.

But while these forms were typically and often deployed in academic settings, they could also be used in situations where the addresser does not know the name of the addressee but declines to use the zero address form, considering it a sign of disrespect. Additionally, where the leader of a group discussion used DPs such as *My Friend*, *Lady*, or *Gentleman*, rather than more descriptive terms such

as *Gentleman in the extreme corner*, one could observe a coaxing effect, thus softening the threat that would have been associated with a request

Group 4

The last interesting sub-group of DPs concerns the addressive use of *Old Boy*, *Old Girl*, and *School Mate* among both male and female students. Used very often among alumni of the same secondary schools prior to commencement of their university education, the first two terms take into consideration the gender of the addressee. This sense of belonging to the same school can be invoked sometimes as an ingratiation for a persuasive end as demonstrated in the exchanges below:

6. Stephanie: (knocks and enters a friend's room) *Old Girl!*

Akosua: *Old Girl!*

Stephanie: Oh, sorry, you have a visitor. Can you spare me a few A4 sheets? I've run short of them.

Akosua: (Stands up and looks around). Okay, here you are. Hope that's enough for you.

The setting for the above exchange is in a residential hall. But even more importantly is that in both examples *Old Girl* is strategically used as an antecedent to the addresser's request. Though this form of DP is used in a requestive context, it is difficult to conclude that their use is always restricted to such a context.

A less frequently used form among alumni is *School Mate*. Unlike the earlier terms used among alumni, this form of DP is gender inclusive. Nonetheless, both sets of linguistic expressions used by alumni of secondary schools or training colleges (that is, *School Mate* as well as *Old Boy* and *Old Girl*) assert the interactants' identity and sense of belonging. It may be argued at this point that this last form of DPs represents a much more explicit avenue of excluding other students than what is seen in DPs that are realized as apparent insults.

In general, all four forms of DPs enhance social interaction, even where the interlocutors are mere acquaintances. It could be said that DPs offer interactants in UCC a creative, commonsensical, and pragmatic way of not only initiating, but also establishing a sense of identity and belonging, based on a past or current association.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have focused on one key category of address forms used among university students in Ghana (refer to Afful 2006 for other forms of address) and secondly the range of factors that explain their differing uses.

Findings from the analysis indicate that university students at UCC utilized four forms of descriptive phrases, as evidenced particularly in the use of those with the head word "mate" and the apparent denigratory terms. Second, although the students in the present research use English as a major means of communication, for socio-pragmatic purposes the use of descriptive phrases suggested the use of other languages, thus lending credence to the view of UCC as a multilingual community. The third point to note concerns the varied use of address terms as a tool for the university students to construct themselves as social beings, to signal who they are and who they are not. The last point that emerges from the discussion is the creative and playful nature of language use exemplified in the addressive use of descriptive phrases.

The above findings notwithstanding, there is need for further research. The extent to which the use of descriptive phrases as address forms reported here corresponds with other forms of address used by Ghanaian speakers of English in the other public universities can be ascertained in a future study. Further, descriptive phrases used in other English-medium universities outside Ghana could be investigated to identify any commonalities and differences. Given the increasing pace of globalization and the attendant interest in exchange programs involving students in several English-medium universities, such knowledge of address terms in universities could enhance intercultural communication. Also, the increasing attention being given to verbal behaviour among university students (Salami, 2006) suggest the possibility of a comparative study of address terms in academic and non-academic institutions.

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