

# Face-Threatening Acts and Face Management in MTN Cameroon Text Messages: A Sociolinguistic and Pragmatic Approach

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**Abstract:** *Face-threatening act is ubiquitous in every single interaction. In conversations, speakers use linguistic strategies that may cause threats to their face or hearer's face revealing the underlying nature of face-to-face interactions. This paper explores face threats in MTN Cameroon text messages from a sociolinguistic and pragmatic approach. It is a qualitative study that grounds on Lakoff (1973), Brown and Levinson (1987) politeness theories. The data collected are 21 text messages from MTN mobile phones to which the content analysis method was applied. The findings reveal that MTN text messages, at the sociolinguistic level, embody social variables such as power and status, honorifics, solidarity, and code-switching, which distance the speaker from the recipient or socially link them, thus influencing their face positively or negatively. At the pragmatic level, face-threatening acts attack the hearer's negative face, the speaker's negative face and the speaker's positive face. Face threat acts range between orders, requests, advice, compliments, and flatteries. There is an overwhelming use of directives in text messages, advertisements in particular, implying that the marketing service of MTN influences customers' face negatively saving the face of the company. Very few messages, advice or warnings, carry markers of politeness inducing that MTN prioritises the company's profits over customers' ethos. The study infers that the language of MTN text messages persistently puts pressure on subscribers, imposes their choices and shows low insights of friendliness when it comes to messages of advertisement. As a result of the shortcomings observed, the researcher recommends that the marketing service reconsiders the language of the text forwarded to MTN subscribers while adopting a soft language to mitigate conflicts with customers.*

**Keywords:** face-threatening act, management, MTN Cameroon, pragmatics, sociolinguistics

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## INTRODUCTION

### Aim of the study

Face-threatening act is an area of pragmatics that overlaps to a degree with sociolinguistics. It is the feature of language use which in some way threatens the 'face' or self-image of another person in communication. Murakami (2011, p.7) describes it as an act that violates either kind of face, negative or positive. The act itself as a threat depends not so much on the intent of the speaker but on the perception of the hearer. If the hearer has a negative face, it shows that his/her wants or desire for freedom has been distracted. In case the hearer has a positive face, the act potentially can be incompatible with their wants and desires to be liked, admired, or ratified. Face-threatening acts is present in media including mobile telecommunication networks, where in monologic discourses, the marketing service interacts with subscribers, sending them, overnight, an incredible number of text messages such as announcements, advertisements, cautions, etc., requiring customers behavioral options that may damage their face positively or negatively. This study is worth pursuing regarding the plethora of works on politeness, grounded on pragmatic frameworks, to the detriment of face-threatening act studies intersecting sociolinguistic and pragmatic paradigms. The study falls within the framework of language and media, mobile text messages in particular, and influences on addressees.

The mobile telecommunication network in Cameroon is very rich, competitive and diversified as regards the number of brands and services. In total, four telecommunication mobile networks operate in the country, namely *MTN*, *Orange*, *Camtel* and *Nextell*, offering communication services phone way, digitally and visually and using assorted communicative strategies to lure, connect or bond a maximum of customers. The types of messages customers receive from the marketing service provide important linguistic resources useful for scientific exploration. Thus, this paper is a comprehensive study of face-threatening acts in MTN mobile phone text messages from the sociolinguistic and pragmatic perspectives. In other words, the study demonstrates how MTN text messages through announcements, cautions or advertisements damage customers' faces positively or negatively.

### Problem statement

Politeness is a social conversational norm that should drive interactions between participants in communicative situations. The language of media is not exempted from politeness norms, where consumers should feel considered, respected, unhindered and impeded. Unfortunately, MTN text messages, sometimes, defy politeness rules and challenge customers' faces unintentionally. Specifically, MTN speech acts occasionally veer away from Lakoff (1973) politeness rules articulated as follows: a) Do not impose, b) Give options, and c) Be friendly. The verbal construction and linguistic strategies encoded in messages trigger a feeling of impoliteness. In

addition, the nomenclature of the texts exhibits sociolinguistic variations that create a social gap between the MTN company and its customers.

## **Research questions**

The following research questions will serve as guidelines for this study:

1. What are the types of face-threatening acts in MTN text messages?
2. What are the sociolinguistic variants of MTN text messages?
3. How do MTN text messages speech acts manage customers' faces?

This research is significant for informative and corrective purposes. For the informative purpose, the study enlightens MTN subscribers and the general public on the insights of text messages received from their telecommunication network highlighting verbal constructions and conversational behaviours. As regards the corrective purpose, MTN Marketing service, through the findings of this research, should reconsider the way they design text messages to inhibit conflicts, disinterest in proposed services, and anger from the part of customers.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Face-threatening Acts in Pragmatics**

Building on the work of Goffman (1967), Brown and Levinson (1987) point out that all human beings are constantly at work in the process of maintaining different aspects of their own and others' "face", i.e., the public self-image that each individual projects to the world. They claim that "face" is "something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (p. 61). Brown and Levinson (1987) divide the face into two components: negative face, which is the basic claim to freedom of action and freedom from imposition, and positive face, the desire to be appreciated and approved of. They argue that certain kinds of communication acts intrinsically threaten some aspects of face of either the speaker, hearer or both. They call these face-threatening acts, or FTAs.

In pragmatics, social context and norms determine the social strategies of politeness in interactions. Every language has specific ways of expressing different speech acts that may threaten face positively or negatively. Brown and Levinson (1987) suggested four politeness strategies as a guide that controls everyday threats of face concerning social norms (Lambert, 1996, pp. 6-7). These strategies are: 1) bald on-record, 2) redress on-record, 3) off-record, and 4) do not do the act (Lambert, 1996, p. 7). The first strategy of bald on-record requires that the speaker be direct and clear in his expression of any speech act in any particular situation. This means that the speaker must use downgrades and upgrades to hedge his utterance.

As for the second strategy, Lambert (1996, p. 7) classified redress on-record into two forms of politeness: positive and negative. Following the redress on-record strategy, the speaker performs his action unambiguously. Also, he uses certain verbal actions to “minimize the damage done by the unambiguous commission of FTA” (henceforth facing threatening Act) (Lambert, 1996, p. 7). This can be achieved in terms of the two forms: positive and negative. The third strategy, the off-record act, means doing the act implicitly or indirectly. The fourth strategy, which is not to do the act, means that the speaker can avoid doing certain acts in a particular situation (Lambert, 1996, p. 7).

In an endnote, they offer examples of speech acts that illustrate threats to the four kinds of face: promises (threat to speaker negative face), warnings (threat to hearer negative face), apologies (threat to speaker positive face) and criticisms (threat to hearer positive face). While this grid provides a neat classification schema, Brown & Levinson point out that, for most FTAs, the situation is considerably more complicated than this grid suggests, since many FTAs can be classified as fitting into more than one category. Even with the seemingly straightforward examples provided above, it is evident that this is the case. For example, while a criticism primarily threatens the hearer's positive face, it is no doubt the case that the speaker's positive face is also on the line since the speaker runs the risk of being seen as overly critical or unjustified in his or her comments.

Despite the elaborate features and its application to many studies, Brown and Levinson's theory was not without criticisms. Their claims about the universality of politeness and face are arguable. Brown and Levinson (1987, pp. 161- 62) argued that it is right that the two types of face are subject to cultural and social variants, but still, they imply necessary social validity that may be applicable in different cultures and may overcome the cultural boundaries of the world. They feel that the variation of culture has no effect on the face to be positive or negative and that cultural variation governs only the evaluation of whether a certain speech act is positive or negative (Mao, 1994, p. 471). In reaction to this claim, Matsumoto (1989) held that for Brown and Levinson (1987) to generalise their theory, they should consider non-Western cultures as their theory seems to focus only on expressing politeness in Western societies and cultures. Similarly, Ide (1989) argued that Brown and Levinson centered their focus only on how individuals express their speech acts politely. They should also pay attention to the group identity within a society. Furthermore, they should take into account how politeness functions in non-Western cultures. Consequently, in agreement with Matsumoto (1989), Ide (1989) opined that Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory might not be adequate and suitable for a culture such as Japanese as the Japanese use politeness strategies in a way that is different from the Westerners.

Mao (1994)'s argument against Brown and Levinson's universality of face conceptualization likens to Gu (1990)'s opinion that threatening face-saving depends not only on the rank and reputation of the person isolated from morals in a given context but rather may depend on the reputation and respect that a person has through his coexistence with others in his community.

What they refer to is the morals and reputation that persons ascribe in life but not by their rank or position in society. In addressing this issue, Mao examined the differences between the Chinese face and Japanese, and Brown and Levinson's (1987) face. Mao's analysis revealed that the Chinese face is different from Brown and Levinson's face in two points: conceptualisation and structure (Mao, 1994). From the conceptual point of view, Mao (1994) stated that Chinese face refers to the reputation and respect an individual can acquire through his interaction with others in a particular community. To sum up, Mao (1994), in his study, revealed some points that cast doubt on the aspect of universality claimed by Brown and Levinson (1987). First, it has been shown that the universality of face proposed by them seemed to be inadequate and unjustified. Besides, the model of "face" as proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) was also not appropriate to be adopted by the Japanese culture. Consequently, Mao (1994) proposed the positive and negative face, in addition to "the relative face orientation construct" (Mao, 1994, p. 483). Wierzbicka (1991) claimed that Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory is a reflection of perspectives and beliefs they bear in mind about Anglo culture. In the same sense, it has been argued that independence as a characteristic of the negative face, according to Brown and Levinson, was based on placing a high value on the individual in American and European cultures, but is not a basic feature in East Asian culture.

In another study, Kitamura (2000) investigated how Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness might not account for non-goal-oriented interaction, though it could be adopted in such interaction. He adapted Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies in his study of Japanese interaction to assess the suitability of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory to non-goal-oriented interactions and goal-oriented ones. The roles of the interactors were assigned in the selected segment of conversations. One of the interactors represented the involvement of the speaker who had the right to express his situation gradually by showing his respect to the hearer. On the other hand, the other interactor showed his involvement as a hearer by completing or summarising what had been said by the speaker. The findings showed that both interactors exhibited features not found in Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness, rather they were considered forms of politeness because they met the criteria of politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Kitamura concluded that Brown and Levinson's politeness theory was also suitable for analysing politeness strategies in non-goal-oriented interactions. Taking this into consideration, it could be said that Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness was a theory of hearer orientation and not of the speaker.

### **Sociolinguistic Variation in Face-threatening Acts**

As Brown and Levinson (1987) demonstrate, there exist universal strategies in performing face-threatening acts. At the same time, there are cross-cultural differences in the realization of speech acts. People may transfer some culturally specific politeness strategies from the native language into the target language. They may accurately or inaccurately perceive linguistic differences

between their native language and the target language. Even if they accurately perceive differences, however, they may have difficulty producing what they perceive. And very often, the problem is that they do not perceive the differences accurately, or they exaggerate them (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989).

The politeness model, apart from being positive or negative, is also rational in its underlying idea of calculations (Hita, 1998). Thus, speakers choose a strategy after calculating: (1) the seriousness of the FTA and (2) the nature of social relationships of the participants. The seriousness is in turn calculated by considering three factors: (1) social distance, (2) relative power, and (3) the ranking of impositions in a particular culture. The strategy chosen will index the nature of the calculation and therefore of the relationship. To round off, face-threatening acts is both communicative and social, what the current research intends to demonstrate.

### **Face-threatening Acts in Cameroon Studies**

Scholarship on face-threatening acts in Cameroon exhibits studies on politeness strategies and functions in written or spoken conversations as outlined below.

Nkemleke (2008) analysed *please* as it occurred in 300 private (social) letters written between 1990 and 1996 in Cameroon and Kenya. Findings showed that *please* functions marked politeness in private (social) letters but with extended modifiers, a strategy that is perhaps largely influenced by the perceived social distance between the writers and the addressees. Please is also found to occur in contexts where a direct interpretation of politeness is not very evident. In both instances, however, the study argues that Cameroonian and to a lesser extent Kenyan private (social) letter writers appear to have clear choices and strategies of their own on how to make requests. These choices/strategies could be summarized essentially as the over-use of the form and function of please.

Otherwise, Mboudjeke (2010) examined how semiliterate of French in Cameroon encoded linguistic politeness in written job applications using Brown and Levinson's and Kerbrat-Orecchionni's politeness models. The study intersects between discourse analysis, pragmatics and sociolinguistics. Analysis of the data suggests the politeness strategies used by semiliterate job-seekers can be classified into three categories, namely explicit addressee-oriented "face flattering acts" (henceforth FFAs), explicit addresser-oriented "face-threatening acts" (henceforth FTAs), and implicit addresser-oriented FTAs. The paper contends that while the explicit FFAs and FTAs appear to be discourse strategies entrenched in the applicants' culture, the implicit FTAs on the other hand are ascribable to the applicants' poor mastery of the French language.

To end, Nkwain (2011) probed the use of appraisal speech acts in complimenting as a face-saving act in Cameroon Pidgin English, a language that transcends sociocultural and linguistic barriers. The data were obtained through a discourse completion task and participant observation of naturally occurring exchanges. The study adopted Giles' accommodation theory and is also based on Goffman's study on Facework, later elaborated by Brown and Levinson. Through the pragmatic-stylistic and descriptive-analytical approaches, the study identifies, classifies and describes appraisal compliments. Findings showed that complimenting entailed the pragmatic and discourse transfer of compliments to praise or show admiration, desire or envy, etc. The compliments were culture-specific and more expressive when they were characterized by markers that made them genuine and thus face-saving. In complimenting, the researcher discerned how complimenters and complimentees created and fostered solidarity ties thanks to the flexibility of the language and, above all, to the creativity of its users.

Unlike previous studies on politeness and face management that are essentially oriented towards pragmatics, the current study explores face-threatening acts in the language of MTN text messages from the perspectives of sociolinguistics and pragmatics.

### **Theoretical framework**

Face-threatening acts analysis of MTN text messages grounds on Brown and Levinson (1987)'s theory of politeness and face-threatening act complemented by Lakoff (1973)'s Politeness Principle.

Brown and Levinson (1987) present a detailed exploration into what kind of language use can be regarded as entailing a threat to the 'faces' of those engaged in a linguistic interaction. In their taxonomy of Face-threatening Acts (FTAs), distinctions are made along two axes: they firstly distinguish between the threats to the hearer's and the speaker's 'faces' and further between a 'positive face' and a 'negative face' of the two. Drawing largely on Brown and Levinson's seminal classification, Partington (2003) observes that the hearer's 'negative face' is threatened by putting "pressure on the hearer to do something" or driving him or her into the feeling of indebtedness (2003, p. 125). The hearer's 'positive face' can suffer from showing a lack of concern for his or her feelings and goals. In the meantime, the speaker's 'negative face' is put at risk by recognizing his or her debt, as in the case of expressing gratitude and thanks. The speaker's 'positive face' could be damaged by the admission of previous shortcomings and guilt.

**Table 1: TAXONOMY OF FACE-THREATENING ACTS (FTA)**

FTA to the hearer's negative face	Orders and requests, suggestions, advice and reminding, threats, warnings and dares;
FTA to the hearer's positive face	Disapproval, criticism, contempt and ridicule, reprimands, accusations and insults, challenges, contradictions and disagreement, bringing of bad news about the hearer or good news (boasting) about the speaker, showing non-attention to the hearer's needs;
FTA to the speaker's negative face	Expressing thanks, making excuses, acceptance of offers, unwilling promises and offers;
FTA to the speaker's positive face	Being disruptively interrupted by the hearer, apologies and self-humiliation, shuffling, cowering, acting stupid and self-contradicting, confessions, admission of guilts and ignorance, emotional leakage.

**Brown and Levinson (1987, pp. 65-68)**

Lakoff (1973)'s Rules of Politeness is a tryptic formula summarized in these terms: a) Don't impose, b) Give options, and c) Be friendly. The first rule (do not impose), means that the speaker needs to keep distance from the interlocutor. This can be in terms of age, family relations, occupation, etc. This rule of politeness is usually applied when there is much social distance between the speaker and the hearer. The second rule (give options), stipulates that the speaker should give options to the addressee to reply either by accepting or refusing. This is usually done by using indirect speech in which we use another language form that carries a different meaning with its syntax form. The last rule (be friendly) emphasizes closeness between the speaker and the hearer. It is believed that being nice and friendly to our interlocutor is a sign of courtesy. MTN text messages occasionally challenge these rules giving room to imposition, impoliteness, and unfriendliness. Lakoff designed the rules of Politeness to make people easily understand each other when they converse which can be achieved if people are involved in a cooperative transaction.

## METHODOLOGY

On a daily basis, MTN marketing service sends messages to customers requesting them to act quickly concerning the promotion of new gadgets or new services. Face-threatening Acts in MTN mobile phone messages is a qualitative study that deals with naturally occurring data collected from the researcher's mobile phone. A purposive sampling technique was used to select messages provided by MTN that displayed face-threatening acts. The content analysis method was also used to analyze the data that were collected. The messages that matched the purpose of the study were sorted and placed in their various categories.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Types of face-threatening acts in MTN text messages

Face-threatening acts in MTN text messages are perceived at three levels, that is, the hearer's negative face, the speaker's negative face and the speaker's positive face, as summarized in Table 1 below.

**Table 2: Overview of face-threatening acts in MTN text messages**

Face-threatening acts (FTA)	Speech acts	Frequency	Percentage
FTA to the hearer's negative face	Commands	15	71.43%
	Advice	3	14.29%
FTA to the speaker's negative face	Flattery	1	4.76%
FTA to the speaker's positive face	Compliments	1	4.76%
	Request	1	4.76%
<b>Total</b>		21	100%

The findings show that MTN text messages highly influence the hearer's negative face meaning that the recipients of such messages are always bossed or put under pressure to act. The overuse of commands (71.43%) shows that the communicative service of MTN violates customers' freedom and constantly maneuvers them to adhere to the advertised services; the level of imposition is high. It is an indication that the marketing service of MTN does not bother much about politeness norms when they address customers. In short, their verbal behaviour is rude though it may not be intentional. Huang (2017) acknowledges that impoliteness is not always a deliberate or intentional act inducing that the interlocutor does not always intend to attack the

recipient's face. It may be that MTN marketing service uses a persuasive strategy that they think can produce effective results immediately to the detriments of subscribers' feelings.

### **Sociolinguistic Variants of Face-threatening Acts in MTN Text Messages**

MTN messages on some occasions create social distance between the speaker and hearer or establish social differences between subscribers to save face. The nature of speech acts uttered therefore threatens the customers' faces negatively or positively manifested in social variables such as power, honorifics, solidarity and code-switching, discussed in turn below.

#### **a) Power and status**

MTN messages, in some circumstances, establish power relationships between the company and subscribers by upgrading them and therefore prompting them to rush to the services the multinational company offers.

*(1) You are the champion with a SURPRISE gift if you choose to pay by MoMo. When you subscribe to your MTN cm/deal/mtn-mifi-notion/to get yours and unleash the continent in you.*

The customer is treated in a grandiose style in the above assertion. The customer will be vested 'champion' and 'continent' in case he/she pays by Momo. Subscribing to the new MTN gadget advertised will permit the customer to discover the greatest power looming over him or her. The hyperbolic expressions used in the marketing language propels the status of the customers and threaten their faces negatively, whereby putting pressure on them to try out the new product.

Another uplifting metaphorical attribute for customers is used in the following MTN message:

*(2) Deal for heroes! Your internet modem at 9900 F + 60GB valid 2 months for free. Quickly go to the nearest MTN agency and unleash the continent in you.*

Those customers who buy the modem advertised in the above message are portrayed as "heroes". The lexeme of grandeur used in the aforementioned message establishes a social distance between those who afford the service and those who cannot. Additionally, power is asserted through the imperative "quickly go" asking the customer to rush to the nearest MTN agency to buy their modem to unleash the greatness hidden in them. The message is emotionally appealing as it creates a situation of emergency pressing the customer to decide instantly without wasting time.

### **b) Honorifics**

Honorifics are terms of address that convey honour and respect. They revere interlocutors while expressing a social distance between them and the speaker as portrayed by the following text messages.

*(3) It keeps getting better with MTN! Dear Customer, you are now eligible to borrow your call and data bundles and pay back later. Dial \*121# to find out what's new.*

*(4) Dear Customer, enjoy every moment with high speed connectivity, with MTN home. Unleash the full potential of your home internet by renewing it at \*222#.*

The speaker in the above messages adopts a professional and affectionate tone. The use of the honorific 'dear' means that the speaker and addressee do not belong to the same social scale. Again, it shows that MTN company loves, estimates and values their subscribers who on reading this text feel heightened and automatically may react positively to the speaker's call. The level of formality and intimacy used in the discourses scrutinized confers MTN customers a special relationship with their telecommunication network.

### **d) Solidarity**

The following MTN message emotionally asserts that the recipient has won 1500F bonus to persuade him/her to engage in the action requested.

*(5) Ash! Momo pays cash! You have won 1500 F bonus. Dial \*237\*2#*

The use of the informal style "Ash! Momo" establishes a link between the speaker and the recipient. The speaker through her style invokes closeness and credibility pushing the recipient to act immediately.

### **d) Code-switching**

Code-switching is another technique of face-threatening acts used in MTN short messages. Code-switching (CS) refers to the mixing, by bilinguals (or multilinguals), of two or more languages in discourse, often with no change of interlocutor or topic (Poplack 2001, p.2062). Such mixing may take place at any level of linguistic structure, that is, at the phrase, clause and sentence level. The instance of code-switching presented in the corpus below is done at the sentential level. It mingles both Cameroon Pidgin English and English language as showcased below:

*(6) Na dem that don go with their million for their bag! Unleash your luck this week with a bundle or a Momo payment of at least 237. Dial \*237#*

The mixture of Cameroon Pidgin English and English language sparks an overtone of humour and invites undecided customers to make a Mobile money payment with a chance to gain millions as other lucky winners. Cameroon Pidgin English is a lingua franca or language of wider communication widely spread in western Cameroon so this persuasive code choice by MTN suggests membership with the customers and in a comical mood pushes customers to subscribe to the service advertised.

Below is another code-switching that interweaves English, Pidgin and Camfranglais.

*(7) Y'ello! MoMo Helep chases away ngueme by advancing you up to 100000F. Subscribe on \*126\*61# and get your advance and pay it back later.*

The speaker uses the language of youths in the assertion “*Y'ello! MoMo Helep chases away ngueme by advancing you up to 100000F.*” “Helep” is a pidgin lexeme which means “help” while “ngueme” is a camfranglais lexis which stands for “poverty”. The MTN marketing service in this speech act uses the language of youths to persuade them. The use of both pidgin and camfranglais in the MTN text message expresses a bond of solidarity between MTN company and customers.

The following code-switching intertwines the mother tongue and the English language.

*(8) A shower of smartphones is on us now, maaama! MTN is slashing prices this new year. Rush to an agency and get your smartphone at a gift price. Limited stock.*

The above speech acts are assertive, directive and expressive. The speaker asserts that there is a great number of smartphones on sale in MTN agencies this year and the prices are affordable. Customers are required to rush to an MTN agency to buy one at a cheap price. It is urgent because the stock is limited. The speaker, in a mixed code, uses the expressive “*maaama!*”, a dialectal expression to convey excitement and enthusiasm. The dialectal choice operated by the speaker establishes friendship and togetherness with the recipients.

### **Pragmatic Analysis of Face-threatening Acts and Face Management in MTN Text Messages**

The pragmatic analysis of face-threatening acts encoded in MTN text messages considers threatening to the hearer’s negative face and threatening to the speaker’s positive and negative face. The analysis demonstrates how MTN communication service alternates between imposition and face-saving during the interactional processes.

### **FTA to the hearer's negative face**

Face-threatening Act (FTA) to the hearer's negative face is an act that affirms or denies a future act of the hearer and creates pressure on the hearer to either perform or not perform the act (Brown and Levinson, 1987). A great number of MTN messages threaten the face of customers negatively. Announcements, advertisements and cautions forwarded to customers force subscribers to perform actions desired by the MTN company. The speech acts include orders and advice.

#### **a) Orders**

MTN text messages leak a great number of requests, especially commands, that order subscribers to perform actions, without giving them options. These messages do not carry markers of politeness but urge customers to act instantly as the following speech act shows:

*(9) Discover the new Awesome A70 up to 256 GB ROM, 5000 Mah battery, 30GB offered by MTN, affordable price and much more. Get it here [wa.me/678876713](http://wa.me/678876713)*

The speaker, with imposition, orders the customer to discover the new gadget *A70* through the link [wa.me/678876713](http://wa.me/678876713), without using the word *please*. Pressure is put on the customer to head to the new product without giving him/her options. The interlocutor's face is utterly ignored and the priority is given to the advertisement at hand. This speech act sounds as impoliteness, to align with the words of Lakoff as '[It] does not utilise politeness strategies where they would be expected, in such a way that the utterance can only almost plausibly be interpreted as intentionally and negatively confrontational' (Lakoff, 1989, p.103). According to Lakoff's definition, impoliteness combines the speaker's intention and the hearer's expectation if they disagree. Impoliteness constitutes the communication of intentionally gratuitous and conflictive verbal face-threatening acts (FTAs) which are purposefully delivered: (1) unmitigated, in contexts where mitigation is required, and/or, (2) with deliberate aggression, that is, with the face threat exacerbated, 'boosted', or maximised in some way to heighten the face damage inflicted (Bousfield, 2008, p. 72). However, the message scrutinized shows that the marketer does not deliberately damage the face of the customer but is more preoccupied with the importance of the product than the form of the message delivered.

The following message is another instance of a face-threatening act where the communicative service sounds unfriendly. Once again, the receiver's face is damaged.

*(10) Experience the convenience of a non-stop connected home with the new MTN home No limit bundles. Go to an agency to enjoy and browse stress-free.*

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No politeness strategy is used in the above message. The customer is requested to experience unlimited internet by buying the new MTN gadget. They should go to an MTN agency to obtain the product. The speaker behaves as if the service is costly free whereas it requires a financial expenditure.

This is a further experience of pressure MTN puts on their customers as follows:

*(11) Hey, hurry up!4 hours left to enjoy your 5000F birthday Bonus for your MTN calls and internet, valid till 11:59PM. Dial \*177\*0#*

MTN orders the customer to quickly use the 5000F birthday Bonus for his MTN calls and internet, valid till 11:59PM. The intonation pattern used threatens the face of the customer thereby causing him to act quickly. The message makes the customer feel that he or she is late and above all causes the customer to panic.

In the following advert, MTN gives opportunity to customers to win 10 millionaires every week with a bonus of up to 10 gigas. Customers are requested to grab the chance of being rich offered to them. Emotionally, the speaker orders the receiver to seize this big opportunity.

*(12) Unleash yours!10 millionaires every week +up to 10 gigs Bonus.*

On hearing this kind of message, the customer psychologically feels compelled to take his/her chance.

The message that follows begins with a prompt that hooks the customer's attention. The context is well chosen, it is the Weekend! This strategy is enough to persuade the recipient to bend to the speaker's request.

*(13) It's the Weekend! Relax while keeping in touch with your loved ones. Dial \*123\*11# and find the most generous bundles 200U =1950 U/24h +1500MTN/1day. Just to enjoy.*

The customer should relax given that the context is the weekend. The speaker forces the receiver to keep in touch with their loved ones while subscribing to the so-called generous bundles. The strategy employed in this context forces the receiver to follow the instructions.

MTN marketers procure joy and blessings so the company in the following messages encourages subscribers to share their calls with customers of different communication networks with their best

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MTN Plus bundle. For it to be effective, they should dial \*222\*0# as shown by the speech act below:

*(14) Share the joy and blessings! Call CHEAPER and to all networks at the SAME PRICE with your best MTN Plus bundle. Dial \*222\*0#*

Calling other networks invariably at cheaper prices is a blessing. That said, *Orange, Camtel and Nextell* subscribers who receive incoming calls from MTN customers are blessed because they enjoy the services of MTN for which they did not subscribe. Overall, through this command, it is clear that MTN puts pressure on their customers and conditions them to have better services, therefore damaging their face negatively.

It also happens to MTN marketing service to apostrophe their customers when they are distressed as it goes:

*(15) WALTER, Never worry about running out of airtime again. You can now BORROW ANY BUNDLE YOU WANT. Quick! Dial \*121# now to enjoy.*

The above speech act is both assertive and directive. The speaker emphatically informs the addressee directly that he should not bother when he is running out of credit. He can borrow the bundle he wants. There is an exaggeration concerning this advertisement because it does not fix the loan limit. The speaker orders the receiver to quickly dial the suggested code to enjoy the service. The use of the imperative “Quick!” forces the hearer to act urgently. The hearer’s face is damaged negatively as the communication done here is blunt, without friendship or politeness.

In summary, from what precedes, MTN text messages are highly impudent, rude or discourteous, for they lack politeness strategies like please, can you..., would you, ..., etc, likely to cause conflictual relationships with the recipients of the message. MTN text messages do not intend to hurt the recipients but it is just that they are more concerned by gains than receivers’ reactions. These findings on impolite language match with Brown’s and Levinson’s bald on-record impoliteness type, where the use of impolite language is not to attack the recipient’s face.

### **c) Advice**

The following message intends to salvage MTN subscribers from scammers.

*(16) Never give out MoMo PIN or bank details with the hope of receiving a prize. It’s a scamming technique. Service providers never request client’s PIN.*

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The speaker in this message threatens the face of customers positively by cautioning them against crooks. MTN company would like to avoid disagreement with customers and decline responsibility for any action calling customers to reveal their MoMo PIN or bank details with the hope of receiving a prize. Thus, any customers who are requested to unveil their PIN code and who do it will have himself to blame.

Another piece of advice requires customers to continue trying a chance to win millions.

*(17) Don't give up, the MILLION is waiting for you! Buy your bundle or make a MoMo payment of at least 237 U. Dial \*237# and try to unleash.*

The marketer encourages MTN subscribers to Buy a bundle or make a MoMo payment of at least 237 U. Subscribers have the chance to win a huge amount of money. It shows that MTN is not only concerned with business but also with customers' welfare. The company threatens the face of customers negatively by creating a solidarity bond between the multinational and service subscribers.

The emotional state of MTN subscribers is also attended to as shown by this text message.

*(18) Burn out charging circuit? Don't panic! Take out an insurance package and we pay up to 95% of the repair costs. Meet at the MTN agency.*

The speaker uses a rhetorical question to introduce the context '*Burn out charging circuit?*'. The customer is advised not to panic in case the charging circuit has burnt out. So, the idea is that the customer should take insurance for the purpose and the company promises to pay 95% of the repair costs. To benefit from this service the customer must go to the MTN agency. The message lacks politeness strategies and once again the customer's face is hurt because he/she is both cautioned and imposed through the use of imperatives such as "take out" and "meet".

#### **FTA to the speaker's negative face**

Face-threatening acts to the speaker's negative face are instances where the speaker humbles his face or accepts debt to maintain the hearer's face and make good for the hearer (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

#### **d) Flattery**

*(19) Your home, your digital playground. With new Home No limit bundles, harness the power of unlimited connection and enjoy. RDV in agency to appreciate.*

The speaker pampers customers to buy the new gadget Home to enjoy unlimited connection. In a poetic and romantic move, the speaker submits his/her will to the customers giving them a margin of maneuver in these words “RDV in agency to appreciate”. They are free to go to the agency to appreciate their product without imposition. The new gadget is their home, their digital playground. In other words, the gadget is relaxing and fun. The marketer does not want to obstruct the customer’s freedom. Hence, an indirect form is used to maintain the hearer’s face.

### **FTA to the speaker’s positive face**

Face-threatening act to the speaker’s positive face refers to communication actions carried out by speakers that threaten the desire to be liked or approved of.

### **e) Compliments**

*(20) Congratulations! You have received 200 MB valid up to midnight. Dial \*159\*7# to check your balance and continue enjoying Ayoba on <https://i.ayo.ba/YgBb/i>*

The customer is congratulated for receiving 200 MB, of free data from MTN. The speaker threatens the negative face of the winner making him/her happy, a stimulus to encourage the customer to continue using MTN service and perceive the MTN company as a generous organisation.

### **f) Request**

Below is a piece of announcement intended for MTN subscribers.

*(21) Yello! You will shortly receive a configuration message. Kindly save it to configure your device.*

The speaker informs the subscriber of an imminent message that requires serious attention and management. Given the nature and importance of the message for MTN users, the speaker uses a formal style. The speaker saves his face while using the polite expression ‘kindly’ to avoid conflict with the reader.

### **Implications to Research and Practice**

The findings on face-threatening acts and face management in MTN messages are informative of the nature of the relationships between the company and consumers. The implications of this research are social, psychological and cultural. The marketing service of MTN would benefit from

keeping their consumers by pampering them while avoiding authoritative messages that persistently put consumers under pressure. The language of marketing and advertisements in mobile telecommunication networks therefore must be tainted with high levels of politeness to connect themselves with users and limit anger on the part of customers.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to do a sociolinguistic and pragmatic reading of face-threatening acts of MTN Cameroon text messages. Using the content analysis method, Brown and Levinson (1987)'s politeness framework added to Lakoff (1973)'s politeness theory, a corpus of 21 selected texts was analysed and the major findings revealed that MTN text messages carried face-threatening information that influenced the recipient's face negatively or the speaker's face negatively and positively. The sociolinguistic variants of the texts investigated encapsulate power relationships, social distance and solidarity. At the pragmatic level, face-threatening acts to the hearer's negative face proved dominant with the overuse of commands that constantly manipulate MTN subscribers or customers showing no inclination for politeness. The overwhelming use of imperatives in MTN speech acts tally with Brown and Levinson's bald on-record strategy where the speaker does not attempt to minimize the threat to the hearer's face although there are means to do so implicitly. The researcher concludes that MTN text messages do not deliberately harm the recipient's face just that the marketing service prioritizes the company's business profits over customers' face or psychological health. This study is an appeal to MTN marketing service to revisit text messages forwarded to subscribers or customers having regard for politeness etiquettes helpful to minimize insidious conflicts with service users.

## Future research

The study "Face-Threatening Acts and Face Management in MTN Cameroon Text Messages: A Sociolinguistic and Pragmatic Approach" examined face-threats in MTN messages and concluded that customers were constantly put under pressure by the marketing service of MTN which restricted consumers' freedom and rights. Further research perspectives can be envisaged in the study of impoliteness in other telecommunication advertisements present in Cameroon.

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