

Politeness Strategies in Colloquial Cameroon English: Focus on Three Pragmatic Particles: *na*, *ya* and *eihn**

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine some politeness strategies in Cameroon English. A close monitoring of colloquial or informal Cameroon English speech reveals the use of a number of pragmatic particles for expressing a broad range of attitudinal functions, among which politeness. The most conspicuous of these particles are *na*, *ya* and *eihn* generally said with a rising intonation. This paper intends to show that these particles, which are comparable to numerous others documented in other varieties of English, are used by both male and female speakers, albeit with a general tendency by female Cameroon English speakers to use them more frequently than their male counterparts. The implication is that politeness strategies are universal and that speakers of each language in general and of each variety of English in particular make use of similar strategies to express a wide range of attitudinal functions, among which politeness.

Keywords: English language, particles, politeness strategies

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Cameroon English speakers make use of a number of pragmatic particles in very informal or colloquial speech to express a wide range of attitudinal functions such as persuasion, impatience, politeness, etc. These particles include *na*, *eihn*, *ya*. Among them, two, namely, *na* and *ein* have been mentioned in passing in the literature on Cameroon English as typical features of this non-native variety of English and are generally characterized as tag questions. In this study, they will be referred to exclusively as pragmatic particles. One reason why previous authors refer to them as tag questions is that they are appended to some statements which require more or less an answer or a feedback from the listener. For example when a speaker says “you will come *na*” with a rising intonation, this presupposes that he or she is asking somewhat for the interlocutor’s assent. But, it is not generally the case that the interlocutor is under coercion to provide an answer. Mbangwana (2004: 905) argues for example that in Cameroon English there is occasional use by speakers of other forms of tag questions like

* *Eihn* and *ein* will be used interchangeably in this paper, the latter spelling being proposed by Mbangwana (2004) and the former being my spelling

na, *not so*, *ein*, *is that*, *right* and *ok* in addition to the stereotyped question tag *isn't it* quite typical of Cameroon English as well as of other varieties of English. Similarly, Simo Bobda (2002: 118f) notes that *na* is a particle used in Cameroon English with a wide range of meanings such as in the following examples:

1. You are my friend *na*? (= You are my friend, AREN'T YOU?)
2. Oh, shut up *na*. (= Oh, shut up, WILL YOU?)
3. Mum, buy me this dress *na*. (= Mum, buy me this dress, PLEASE)

It is worth noting that in addition to the above meanings underlined by Simo Bobda (2002: 118f) this particle, as elaborated on in the present paper, is chiefly examined with reference to its politeness function, that is, its function of narrowing the social gap between the speaker(s) and the hearer(s). Worthy of note here is the fact that politeness in this case does not strictly imply sheer subordination of one speaker to another. 'Politeness' should rather be construed here as a strategy intended to reduce the social gap between the participants in the conversation and to create a sense of intimacy among them. As regards the three particles under study, it is important to note that their politeness function can best be captured in Cameroon English by examining their occurrences in narratives, in the same way as the particle *eh* has been documented for instance in New Zealand English as being common mostly in narratives (cf. Meyerhoff 1994). This is one respect in which this study differs from the account given so far of some of these particles in Cameroon English. The use of these particles in pieces of narration does not require any assent or feedback from the listeners but appears as a strategy used by speakers to narrow the social gap between them and their interlocutors. After a brief account of similar particles in other varieties of English, the methodology used for gathering and treating the data will be outlined. The last section will present the results of the data analysis as well as the discussion of these results.

2. SIMILAR PARTICLES IN OTHER VARIETIES OF ENGLISH

There have been accounts in many varieties of English, both native and non-native, of some pragmatic particles which also act as intonational markers and serve mainly as politeness devices (James 1983; Quirk et al. 1985; Brown and Levinson 1987; Crystal and Davy 1975; Lakoff 1975; Guy and Vonwiller 1984; Horvath 1985; etc.). Among these particles are *lah*, *lor*, and *you know* in Singapore English (Wee 2003), *eh* in Canadian English (Avis 1972), *eh* in New Zealand English (Meyerhoff 1994) and so on.

Meyerhoff (1994) reports the use of the pragmatic particle *eh* in the English of New Zealanders. She argues that this feature has a primarily ethnic connotation and is prevalent mainly in the speech of Maori, the "out-of-power" or "underprivileged" ethnic group in New Zealand. Meyerhoff (1994) conducted

a survey in New Zealand with seventy-five (75) informants of which sixty (60) belonged to the working-class and fifteen (15 women in all) to the middle-class. She claims that this feature correlates more with age and ethnic group as evidence shows that it is used more frequently by men than by women. Note that the gender distribution in Meyerhoff's study is inconsistent with other studies on similar particles in other English varieties which show females' use of the particle to override males'. Meyerhoff (1994: 373) summarizes the use of this particle by pointing out that it is a feature quasi-diagnostic of the speech of young Maori male speakers. She further accounts for the use of this particle by the Maori people by submitting that it is a sign of solidarity because these people are underprivileged in the country in terms of socio-economic power.

Stubbe and Holmes (1995), in a similar study, set out to establish the frequency rate of the occurrence of four pragmatic devices among which *eh* and *you know* in New Zealand English. They found a total of 51 occurrences of *eh* and 283 of *you know*, which reflected again the trend observed in Meyerhoff's (1994) study. The most interesting point about their findings is that they observed that *eh* was a salient marker of working-class speech as well as of young people. Again, like Meyerhoff's (1994) survey in which male speakers' use of the particle *eh* far outnumbered female speakers', males are also the prime users of the particles in Stubbe and Holmes's study. Their interpretation of this pragmatic device is in agreement with that advanced by Meyerhoff, namely that it serves as "positive politeness strategies to convey solidarity and to establish shared understanding with the addressee".

Another study on a similar pragmatic particle is that carried out by Avis (1972) on Canadian English. He was concerned with demonstrating that the particle *eh* which both the English and the American can identify at the end of his or her sentence like in "it is hot, *eh*?" is not actually a Canadianism, but a universal particle found in other varieties of English, a finding which was challenged by Bailey (1983) who argued that the particle was indeed a Canadianism. Avis maintains that Canadians append this particle to the end of statements as an equivalent of the disjunctive-question tag and marked by rising intonation. Note here that in the case of Australia, the same particle was reported to be generally spoken with a falling tone (Meyerhoff 1994). Avis further states that the particle is very prevalent in "narratives" and especially in the speech of the little educated.

Wee (2003) reports the birth of a new particle in colloquial Singapore English, namely, *know* which adds to the list of many particles already existing in this variety of English such as *lah*, *lor*, *meh*, *ma* and *wat*. He argues that the main characteristic feature of these particles is that they are typically "found in clause-final position, are monosyllabic and are used for discourse pragmatic functions (p. 6)". Quoting Schiffrin (1994: 294), Wee (2003) maintains that *you know*, a discourse particle used in other varieties of English, serves the function of indicating knowledge that is shared between speaker and hearer. This statement somewhat concurs or tallies with the interpretation that Brazil (1997) gives to the falling-rising or referring intonation, namely that it shows the shared

grounds or the mutual belief space of speaker and hearer(s). It follows from the foregoing that speakers use these particles either to reduce the social gap among them or to show some sort of intimacy or simply to express politeness. The next section focuses on the methods of data collection and treatment.

3. METHODS

3.1 DATA COLLECTION

It should be recalled again that the three pragmatic particles under study occur only in very informal or colloquial speech. This implies that the collection of data must involve a lot of speech monitoring and will have to be done in a surreptitious way even though this method of data collection is not ethically accepted in linguistic research. The point is that for the particles to occur, speakers have to feel free or relaxed and once they know their speech is being recorded they tend to pay a lot of attention to it and are inclined not to use these particles any more. The subjects whose extemporaneous speech constitute the raw data for this study were either very familiar with the investigator through long and sustained monitoring or were people very familiar with one another and not aware that their speech productions were being tape recorded by the investigator. In all, 20 female and 20 male Cameroon English speakers were recorded but eventually due to some acoustic deficiencies, the speech of only 16 females and 14 males could be analysed. These Cameroon English speakers were university students and graduates as well as secondary and high school pupils. The younger speaker was 16 years old while the older was 36. Among the topics they talked about were 'the salary of high school teachers' and 'students' life at the University of Yaounde I'. Generally a conversation with a speaker could last about 10 to 15 minutes.

3.2 AUDITORY ANALYSIS OF DATA

All the data for this study were analysed auditorily. They were written down with the purpose of establishing the frequency of occurrence of the three target particles, *na*, *ya* and *eihn*. A systematic count was done of their occurrence in both the male and the female data.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Statistically, out of the fifty-two (52) occurrences of the particle *na* in the data, thirty-three (33) feature in the data produced by females and 19 in the male data.

This evidence shows that, everything being equal, female Cameroon English speakers are more inclined to use this particle than their male counterparts. It can be said that female Cameroon English speakers, as well as their male counterparts, use this particle to reduce the social distance between them and their interlocutors. For the sake of illustration, the first conversation on the recording features a female high school teacher and the investigator and the setting is the Ministry of National Education, the meeting point for many primary, secondary and high school teachers who gather at the end of every month to collect their paystubs or payslips. Actually, the setting is one propitious for relaxed conversation because the same people who are very familiar with each other meet there. It can be noted that during this brief conversation between the investigator and the female informant, the latter uses the particle *na* as many as four times and the particle *eihn* once:

Female speaker: I did not go to my *station* (Cameroon English word for ‘place of work’). I have just seen my principal *na*. I ran.

Investigator: Why?

Female speaker: Because I did not want him to see me *na*.

Investigator: If he sees you, what will happen?

Female speaker: You see *na*, you see *eihn*, [...]. I have not been teaching.

He can say you are coming to *cash your salary* (Cameroon English expression for “get one’s salary paid” meanwhile [sic] you have not been teaching and see those people to cut [sic] my salary. You see *na*.

It follows from the context that the speaker begins narrating a story- how she did not go to her place of work- and all of sudden she uses the particle *na* at the end of the sentence with a rising intonation.

With regard to the particle *eihn*, it is important to point out that it is also used predominantly in narratives in order to sustain the hearers’ continued involvement in the conversation. There were only five occurrences of *eihn* of which 4 were found in the female data and 1 in the male data. Consider the following example from a female speaker: “When I was in that my [sic] state, *eihn*, my blood pressure rises [sic]. See, *eihn*, if you have never been in a given state, you will never ...”. Here, it can be noticed that the female speaker uses the particle *eihn* in a context where she is narrating a personal story and the setting confirms again the point that it is a particle used mostly in casual contexts. Regarding the incidence of the two particles in the data, it can be noted that *eihn* occurs far less frequently than *na*. This particle occurs five times only in the whole data and among the five occurrences, four are in the female data. Even though *eihn* occurs less frequently in the female data, it is clear that it is used more often by female than by male speakers.

There were 24 occurrences of the particle *ya* in the data, 16 of which featured in the female data and 8 in the male data. For the sake of illustration, consider the following sentence uttered by a male speaker: “Male: I am telling you man. Because it is only Dschang remaining there *ya*.... That’s how those guys were celebrating *ya* after they had succeeded in putting the scripts back

there”. Table 1 displays the distribution of these particles in both the male and female data.

Table 1. Distribution of pragmatic particles *na*, *ya* and *eihn* in female and male data.

<i>Particles</i>	<i>Na</i>	<i>Ya</i>	<i>eihn</i>	Total
Female	33	16	4	53
Male	19	8	1	28
Total	52	24	5	81

Table 1 confirms again the point mentioned earlier that female Cameroon English speakers are more inclined to use the three pragmatic particles in colloquial conversation than their male counterparts. It can be said that giving the generally natural inclination by women to be more ready to share their intimacy with others, their use of the particles more frequently than men once more confirms the idea that female speakers are more disposed than male to reduce the social gap between themselves and their interlocutors. This analysis therefore corroborates the idea that some linguistic phenomena go beyond circumscribed national boundaries. In other words, the findings of this phenomenon in Cameroon English support the fact that there are universals in language and some phenomena, even though they may be expressed through different means in various linguistic communities, are very similar. The use of the particle *eh* in New Zealand English (cf. Meyerhoff, 1994), is a case in point. New Zealand English speakers and Cameroon English speakers have no geographical, historical, cultural or sociolinguistic ties, except that they use English as a medium of communication. If New Zealanders use the particle *eh* to express similar attitudinal functions to the particles *na*, *ya* or *eihn* in Cameroon English, it means that human linguistic behaviour is a universal phenomenon and no matter the language that people speak in a given speech community, they tend to express certain feelings that are also expressed by other groups of people living in other communities thousands of miles away using similar or quasi-similar strategies.

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to report a phenomenon which exists in colloquial Cameroon English. This phenomenon is the use of a number of pragmatic particles generally appended to sentences and spoken with a rising intonation to express a wide range of attitudinal functions, among which politeness. The auditory analysis of data obtained in casual contexts from 16 female and 14 male speakers of Cameroon English revealed that the particles *na*, *ya* and *eihn*

are used by both female and male speakers, but with a propensity by females to use them more frequently than their male counterparts.

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