Speaking the Unspeakable: 
Mitigating Cross-Cultural Miscommunication Through Understanding Communicative Strategies in African Society – The Case of the AFRICOM Request

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*If you sleep by the big beast you must know where its head is because when it wakes up you could be its next meal*  
(Akan, Ghanaian Proverb)
Aims

a) Explore request strategies

b) Demonstrate that the way requests are conceptualized in African Societies may be quite similar to and yet quite different from the way they are conceptualized in other cultures

c) Show that requests in African societies qualify the notions of language and power (Fairclough, 1989) in important ways.

d) Demonstrate that in African societies socio-political structure is closely linked with request acts.
Relevant Literature

• Much has been written about *request* in scholarship on pragmatics and sociolinguistics (Levinson 1983; Cenoz & Jose 1996).

• However, most of the studies were not based on natural data. They were based on intuitions, discourse completion tests, role-plays, and on controlled experimental situations. (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper, 1989)

• In most African societies, due to the high degree of interdependence among group members, requests may not be viewed as impositions or FTAs even if such acts cause discomfort (Nwoye, 1992; Obeng, 2003).

• [A 1993 Anecdote regarding request for a ride]
According to Obeng (1999; 2003):

a) The relationship between a “requester” and a “request recipient” is a key variable in structuring the request.

Excerpt: Using compliment as a request in a non-congruent interaction, (Obeng, 1999)

A: *Uncle Kofi, your shoes are really nice! They are very beautiful. Anyone who sees them can easily tell they were made abroad (Europe). I’m sure you’ll take them back with you.*

B: *I don’t think that I’ll take them with me. If you like them, you can have them.*

A: *Wow! Thanks very much.*
b) Superiors could, directly or indirectly, request subordinates to do certain things for them and the subordinates would not feel imposed on.

Excerpt: Obeng, 1999

A: KO, if you give the plantain support you must also support the banana.

Corn and Corn-Meal have a lot in common. Since the commencement of this funeral, I’ve never neglected your mother.

B: Mom I would have brought you ‘yours’ this evening. We’re in the street but take this small gift. I’ll come to home later.

[KO gives AB money]

A: Thanks, Small-Chief
c) However, superiors have a social obligation to help the subordinates

d) Political and socio-economic contexts play a significant role in determining the linguistic forms used, how such forms are used, and how they are interpreted by the request recipient.
Obeng (1999) notes, when a requestor:

a) uses an inappropriate speech form
b) is seen as unkind by the social group
c) is seen as a bully by the group
d) has a history of aggressive behavior
e) is seen as having disregard/disrespect to other members of the group.
How is Request Refusal Done?

(1) Direct and/or absolute refusal, usually with justification

(2) An ‘offer,’ with or without a piece of advice on proper group behavior

(3) Request for more time to think about the request act and requested item

(4) Wait and see how other request recipients (if any) react

(5) Cooperate ‘secretly’ while saying ‘no’ in public so as to be viewed as being independent-minded and standing up to someone with more power.
Why AFRICOM?

- Created on Feb 6, 2007
- Augment and protect US strategic and economic interests in Africa?
- Study and understand African conflicts?
- Increase Africa area experts at the DOD?
- Integrate USA forces into African armies?
- Plan military exercises, scenario, or operations and coordinate with African allies?
- Enhance USA fight on war on terror?
Data Source

- Newspaper featured articles
- Newspaper editorials
- Videos
- Political speeches
- Debates, etc.
Two Themes

(a) Support for AFRICOM
• Political actors and intellectuals e.g., Calestous Juma (Harvard University) calls for AFRICOM’s mandate regarding Security & Development in Africa

• An African Union Commission official, Brigadier-General Jean De Martha Jaotody, called for bilateral and multilateral cooperation on defense, diplomacy and development.
(b) Opposition to AFRICOM by

• Some African countries

• Some USA political actors (Cynthia McKinney - Green Party Candidate)

• Certain US Intellectuals e.g., Abiodun Williams (USC)

• Many African newspapers, scholars and politicians
Discussion

Reasons for Opposition to the AFRICOM Request

Miscommunication between DOD and its African partners.

A failed request due to:

a) A weak institutional discursive strategy -- a weak public relations drive/campaign resulting possibly from inattention to adequate consultation. **Who made the request? Where, when, and how was the request made?**

b) Misinformation about USA’s intentions due to USA’s past (cold war) record in Africa.

c) Request Recipients’ (Political actors and civil societies’) pronouncements about AFRICOM as a ploy to throw dust in the eyes of Africans for bigger US clandestine operations

d) The USA paying less attention to request recipients’ socio-economic status, political power, and political will.
Reasons for Opposition to the AFRICOM Request (cont.)

e) USA Aid -- Misjudging African countries’ dependence on aid vis-à-vis economic independence from the USA

f) Africans’ perceptions of/about AFRICOM -- e.g., foreign pressure, USA inducement, a destabilizing force, recipe for disaster (fear of attacks like those in Kenya and Tanzania), USA effort to counter excessive Chinese influence, USA involvement of African nations indirectly in the war on terror, etc.

g) The US already had presence in several African countries so asking for more permanent bases was seen as greed – *An attempt by the elephant to push the homeowner out and take over the house*

h) Impaling on Africans’ sensibilities due to inattention to Africans’ sensitivities
**Direct Request**

Given the high level of communicative difficulty and political risk involved in such direct requests:

a) Prefix requests with acts and activities needed and cherished by request recipients

b) Note that an offer (request approval) may be implicit or explicit

c) Pay close attention to the socio-political structure in Africa

d) Emphasize cooperation between the USA & African governments

e) Use *language & power and political ‘prestige’* wisely and effectively
Important Request Strategies

Indirect Request Strategy

a) Pay attention to the nature of the relationship between the USA and African countries – distance versus closeness

b) Pay close attention to the level of familiarity with the request recipients

c) Pay close attention to the public image of the request recipient’s socio-political group

d) Realize that there is a high degree of political and diplomatic difficulty involved in inherent political requests.

e) Employ triadic interaction (use proxies within & outside the country/party in power)
Important Request Strategies

f) Employ ambiguity, obscurity, and prolixity (Grice 1975; Searle, 1975; Obeng, 1994; 1999) in the request act.

g) Employ other speech acts that enhance the request act

h) Contact both the government in power and the opposition simultaneously. Many a time, uncertainty about the ‘other’ leads to request refusals

i) Get your voice heard in the local media, especially, those that have influence

j) Present your request as an offer: An offer is preferable to a request
Conclusions

• Linguistic ideology (Rosaldo 1982), the relationships and expectations of interactants as well as their political and sociocultural contexts are significant in their interactional management.

• To have a complete understanding of request events in African societies, one must have a thorough understanding of African communicational mores.

• The need to pay close and systematic attention to Africans’ perspectives and perception on request, their perception of the USA as a political and economic powerhouse, and their expectations of/from the USA.

• The need to state the purpose behind a request in a communicatively competent way.
Knowing what to say is important; but even more important, is knowing how to say it

because

Speech is like an egg, when dropped, it shatters!