"With all due respect, Mr. Chairman": Polite expressions as mixed messaging strategies in Ghanaian Parliamentary Discourse

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Abstract: This paper advances politeness theory, where the examination of polite and impolite acts is not realised as a straightforward interaction but as a means where expressions that contain features that point towards a polite interpretation are mixed with features that point towards an impolite interpretation. This study adopts *mixed messaging* (Culpeper et al. 2017) as an analytical framework to examine how surface-level politeness co-occurs with implicit hostility in Ghanaian parliamentary discourse. Specifically, the study investigates the strategic use of polite address forms and expressions as a means of tension management by Members of Parliament (MPs) when, in a practical sense, they are being hostile to an opponent. Additionally, the interpersonal deictic function that exists between the interlocutors is examined. Findings indicate that MPs use polite expressions as deference markers, strategic courtesy, familiarity/solidarity, and indirect address as a means to mask hostility. This study contributes to the broader understanding of discourse communities by illustrating how shared linguistic practices, such as im/politeness, regulate interactions in highly polarized environments.

Keywords: address forms, Ghana, impolite, mixed messages, parliament, polite

1. Introduction

Parliamentary communication is a unique form of institutional discourse where language serves both as a tool for governance and as a means for negotiating power. Unlike everyday conversation, parliamentary discourse follows strict rules of engagement with members expected to adhere to formal communicative structures, prescribed speech patterns, and respectful address forms (Kondratenko et al. 2020; Ilie 2021). However, while parliaments are expected to be arenas of rational debate, they are also deeply political spaces where persuasion, conflict, and strategic language use shape interactions. According to Sarfo-Kantankah & Arko (2019), Members of Parliament (MPs) use language to assert dominance, challenge oppositions, and navigate the balance between cooperation and rivalry.

A key feature of parliamentary discourse is its performative nature (Sarfo-Kantankah & Arko 2019), whereby MPs address one another or argue a point at plenary sessions, mindful that they are speaking for the record: they are aware that the public, the media, and future policymakers will scrutinise their words. As a result, the language used is often carefully selected by the members to maintain decorum while simultaneously advancing political interests. In this vein, polite address forms such as *Mr. Speaker*, *Honourable Member(s)*, *The Chair, Honourable Leader,* and other professional titles such as *Professor, Doctor, Engineer,* and *Lawyer* are used for this formal communication. These address forms are used to achieve the dynamics that serve as markers of institutional hierarchy and rhetorical devices.

In the Ghanaian context, polite phrases are used to introduce sharp criticisms and strict oppositions. This demonstrates how politeness is strategically deployed to mitigate tension while delivering an attack (Azzah & Mujiyanto 2023). Obeng (1997), Akuka et al. (2021), and Osei-Tutu et al. (2023) have argued that this approach reflects broader socio-cultural norms in Ghanaian communication. These authors posit that indirectness and respect are highly valued in the communication norms, even in confrontational settings.

In Ghana, for instance, the values of respect and politeness are introduced to children at birth.

For example, in the Akan culture, a child, on the eighth day after birth, is taken outdoors for the performance of a naming ceremony. Yankah (1998) explains that the child's tongue is initiated into the moral values of speaking with three drops of water and alcohol. This initiates the child into the essence of truthful, discrete, and respectful speech. Even though the child has access to free speech, he or she is restricted by these cultural norms. Ofori (2015: 24) notes that "don't insult an elderly person or people in power, especially in public" is a basic principle of conduct that is imbibed into every Ghanaian child. These socio-cultural norms of communication are ingrained in Ghanaian society, and the MPs are aware of them. Ultimately, MPs do not simply follow linguistic conventions. Fully aware of the societal norms of communication, they manipulate communication to suit their objectives, whether to persuade, to discredit, or to maintain a professional image.

The way language is used in the Ghanaian Parliament has been studied by various scholars over the years. For instance, Obeng (2019) took a grammatical pragmatics approach to explore how language, power, and freedom are connected. Obeng's work highlights how opposition politicians in Ghana often use specific language strategies to protect their freedoms – both positive and negative – while challenging the actions of those in power. Obeng (2019) argues that MPs use syntactic features such as factives, antithetic constructions, collocations, and voice, as well as discourse-pragmatic features such as political pronouns, presupposition, in-group anthroponyms, politeness, and metalanguage to seek liberty.

Similarly, Ghampson & Afful (2024) investigated how parliamentary discourse sometimes ignores the need to maintain "face" or respect using politeness theory and conversational maxims to explain why these breaches occur and what circumstances lead to them. Ghampson & Afful's (2024) study found that Ghanaian MPs frequently employ bald on-record politeness strategies, such as insults and commands. Ghampson & Afful (2024) contend that MPs often prioritise direct communication over the consideration of face needs, which are influenced by context and the standing orders governing parliamentary discourse.

Other researchers have approached Ghanaian political discourse through different lenses. For example, some have used corpus linguistics (Sarfo-Kantankah 2021b, 2022a/b; Sarfo-Kantankah & Agbaglo 2022), while others have applied discourse analysis (Akapule & Naaikuur 2024) or syntactic analysis (Logogye 2022). Despite the variety of studies, one area that has not been explored is how politicians, through interpersonal messages, strategically use polite expressions to disguise hostility during parliamentary debates. The strategic use of polite phrases as a means of tension management by members of the Ghanaian parliament when they are, in a practical sense, being hostile to an opponent is presented in this study. Additionally, the deictic functions of the polite phrases are explored in this study. The following questions serve as a guide for this study.

1. What deictic functions do polite forms of address serve in the Ghanaian parliament?
2. How do Ghanaian parliamentarians strategically utilise polite expressions to manage tension during hostile interactions?

The significance of this study lies in the fact that it reveals how MPs employ polite phrases as rhetorical tools to manage tension, assert dominance, and subtly challenge opponents without overtly violating parliamentary standing orders. This research contributes to the broader understanding of discourse communities by illustrating how shared linguistic practices, such as politeness, regulate interactions in highly polarised environments. Additionally, it offers insights into the performative and strategic dimensions of politeness in political discourse, which highlights the dual role of language in maintaining institutional order and advancing political agendas. The findings have implications for both theoretical frameworks and practical applications in political communication, particularly in contexts where indirectness and respect are culturally valued.

While it is acknowledged that the study foregrounds the performative and strategic dimensions

of politeness in Ghanaian parliamentary debate, it primarily operates at the level of second-order politeness, that is, analytically defined as politeness that functions pragmatically within institutional constraints and sociocultural norms, rather than on how these forms are evaluated by participants themselves during interaction (Grainger 2011; House & Kádár 2023). As such, the study does not systematically examine first-order politeness, understood as participants' own judgments, reactions, and metapragmatic evaluations of what counts as polite, appropriate, or offensive in parliamentary exchange (Haugh 2012). This constitutes a limitation as discursive politeness research emphasises that politeness emerges through interactional evaluation rather than being inherent in linguistic forms alone (Spencer-Oatey & Kádár 2020; Zhang & Wu 2025). Future research, therefore, could address this by incorporating multimodal and interactional data, such as responses from other MPs, audience reactions, interruptions, laughter, alignment moves, or retrospective commentary drawn from parliamentary discourse.

2.   Literature review

2.1.   *Ghanian sociocultural norms and cross-cultural politeness*

In many Ghanaian communities, especially the Akan society, age and institutional position command respect, and communicative behaviour is expected to reflect this hierarchy through respectful address forms, avoidance of confrontation, and careful management of disagreement (Obeng 1997; Agyekum 2007; Thompson & Agyekum 2016). From early childhood, individuals are socialised to recognise elders and authority figures as custodians of wisdom and moral order, and open verbal confrontation with such figures is considered socially inappropriate and morally questionable (Yankah 1998; Osei-Tutu et al. 2023). This cultural orientation, according to Ofori (2015), means that politeness in Ghana is not merely interactional but an ethical issue that is tied to notions of good character and social responsibility.

For Obeng (2003), indirectness occupies a central place in this moral communicative system, as speakers are expected to convey criticism, disagreement, or warning in ways that minimise public embarrassment and preserve social harmony. Rather than being interpreted as evasive, indirect speech in Ghanaian contexts is often evaluated positively as a sign of maturity, wisdom, and respect for social relations (Obeng 2003; Kádár & Haugh 2013). For example, the use of proverbs, hedges, honorifics, and deferential prefaces allows speakers to raise sensitive issues while signalling continued respect for the addressee's social standing (see Agyekum 2007; Obeng 2019). These practices align with broader African politeness systems that prioritise communal harmony and relational balance over direct self-assertion.

From a cross-cultural perspective, Ghanaian politeness norms challenge the dominance of Western-centric models that prioritise individual autonomy and directness (Acheampong & Kwarteng 2021; Nkirote 2024), particularly those grounded in the positive–negative face distinction (Brown & Levinson 1987). While face concerns are relevant in Ghana, they are often subordinated to communal harmony, respect for hierarchy, and preservation of social order, which align more closely with relational and collectivist orientations to politeness (Kádár & Haugh 2013). This means that indirectness in Ghana is interpreted as a morally appropriate way of managing disagreement and authority relations (Obeng 2019).

These norms are especially significant in institutional settings such as parliament, where political disagreement is expected but must be expressed within culturally sanctioned boundaries. Studies such as Sarfo-Kantankah & Arko (2019) and Akuka et al. (2021) have demonstrated that these sociocultural norms directly shape parliamentary interactional choices in Ghana, where Members of Parliament (MPs) operate within both institutional rules and culturally grounded expectations of respectful conduct. Thus, MPs operate at the intersection of institutional rules (standing orders) and

sociocultural expectations of respect, leading them to adopt polite address forms and indirect strategies even when engaging in hostile or adversarial exchanges (Akuka et al. 2021; Ghampson & Afful 2024). Politeness, therefore, becomes a strategic resource that allows MPs to criticise, challenge, and assert dominance without violating either parliamentary norms or societal expectations of decorum.

2.2. Politeness in Ghanaian parliamentary discourse

Swales (1990) conceptualises a discourse community as a group bound by shared communicative practices, goals, and mechanisms of intercommunication. Thus, the Ghanaian parliament can be considered a discourse community since it operates with established norms that regulate interactions among MPs (Akuka et al. 2021). MPs adhere to these conventions to frame their arguments, particularly when engaging in contentious exchanges. Akuka et al. (2021) and Sarfo-Kantankah (2021) observe that MPs often preface their statements with polite address forms before launching into criticism or presenting a controversial stance.

It is worth noting that Ghanaian MPs' use of these polite phrases, in some instances, does not necessarily serve the intended purpose of establishing a respectful tone, nor does it violate the maxims of politeness; rather, it operates as a strategic linguistic device to mask confrontation with a veneer of decorum. This phenomenon is founded on the concept of *mixed messaging*, as put forward by Culpeper et al. (2017: 323), which posits that "messages contain features that point towards a polite interpretation mixed with features that point towards an impolite interpretation".

Culpeper (2011) also notes that politeness and impoliteness are not mutually exclusive but can coexist in discourse. For instance, Akuka et al. (2021) contend that in Ghanaian parliamentary discourse, parliamentarians use more direct and explicit polite expressions than indirect and implicit ones, with the Speaker being the highest user of negative and bald-on-record politeness strategies. In a comparative study of polite forms of questioning in Ghanaian and UK parliamentary discourse, Sarfo-Kantankah (2022b) argues that the questioning in Ghanaian and UK parliaments differ in their indirectness, reflecting the adversarial and ideological nature of parliamentary discourse. Sarfo-Kantankah (2022b) further argues that these strategies are used for political point-scoring and an appeal to constituents. Similarly, Sarfo-Kantankah's (2021a) analysis of forms of apologies in the Ghanaian parliament indicates that MPs use a face-threatening act (loss of face) for the apologiser and a face-saving act (support) for the addressee. These face acts are used for the speakers to trade off the self-esteem of the speaker for the purpose of repairing broken parliamentary standing order (Sarfo-Kantankah 2021a).

2.3. Mixed messaging in communication

Politeness research has developed through multiple theoretical traditions that differ in scope, assumptions, and analytical focus. For instance, Grice's Cooperative Principle and conversational maxims (1989) were designed as a model of rational communication that explains how interlocutors generate implicatures through adherence to, or violation of, maxims such as quality, quantity, relevance, and manner. Although this framework helps account for pragmatic inferences, it does not address social norms, face concerns, or culturally embedded expectations of appropriate behaviour. Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle therefore emerged to extend Grice's work by explicitly incorporating social and interpersonal considerations into pragmatic analysis. Leech explicitly proposes maxims of politeness, including tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy, which regulate how speakers minimise social friction and maintain social equilibrium. Central to Leech's model is the idea that politeness is shaped by contextual factors such as social distance, relative power, and culturally specific norms, making it particularly relevant for analysing institutional and cross-cultural communication.

In furtherance, Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory is grounded in the notion of face

and face-threatening acts (FTAs), which explains how speakers select politeness strategies – bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, or off record – to manage threats to an interlocutor's positive or negative face. Although highly influential, this theory has been critiqued for its emphasis on individual autonomy and for its limited sensitivity to culturally grounded moral norms and institutional constraints (see Al-Duleimi 2016; Al-Hindawi & Alkhazaali 2016). While Grice (1989), Leech (1983), and Brown & Levison's (1987) respective theories offer valuable tools for analysing politeness, none fully accounts for communicative practices in which surface-level politeness systematically co-occurs with implicit hostility, strategic confrontation, or evaluative ambiguity, as observed in Ghanaian parliamentary discourse. It is this analytical gap that motivates the adoption of mixed messaging (Culpeper et al. 2017) as an analytical framework in the present study.

In Culpeper et al.'s (2017) exploration of the interplay between politeness and impoliteness, the researchers argue that impolite acts or forms can be a means of showing friendliness or solidarity, and that, conversely, ostensibly polite acts or forms can function as coercion or aggression in communicative events. This suggests that the researchers reject the more straightforward instances of the realisation of politeness or impoliteness as an exclusive phenomenon, arguing that it is clear that a notable proportion of communication does not in fact straightforwardly fit politeness or impoliteness.

Culpeper et al. (2017) define the mutually exclusive interaction between politeness and impoliteness as *mixed messaging*. Other studies also conceptualise this phenomenon as mock (im)politeness; the use of superficially polite language to subtly challenge or attack someone's face or social rights in a particular context, often with a mismatch between the polite words and the actual intent (Culpeper 1996; Haugh & Bousfield 2012). Additionally, terms such as banter (Shambaugh 2024), jocular mockery and jocular abuse (Haugh & Bousfield 2012; Xu 2024), ritual insults (Daniël Van Olmen et al. 2023), and insincere or manipulative politeness (Gómez 2020) are typically discussed as phenomena of the balance between politeness and impoliteness.

This study specifically adopts mixed messaging as an analytical framework for the analysis of the use of polite address forms and expressions in the communication of the Parliament of Ghana. Mixed messaging concerns the mismatch of interpersonal messages in communication that are incongruous on at least one level of interpretation or generate a sense of interpretive or evaluative dissonance. Mixed messaging is founded on the assumption that in communication, interlocutors employ strategies to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs) such as using indirect speech to soften or mask hostility (Brown & Levinson 1987).

However, when these messages are overused or misapplied, they result in mixed messages. For example, excessive politeness might be perceived as insincere or sarcastic, which leads to interpretive dissonance. Additionally, the violation of the maxim of quality (Grice 1989), whether intentional or unintentional, as noted by Culpeper et al. (2017), can create mixed messages. This framework is particularly relevant to the current study in that parliamentary discourse often involves statements that combine politeness with implicit criticism or sarcasm. This can create dissonance where the literal meaning of a polite expression differs from the intended implication.

According to Culpeper et al. (2017), the functions of mixed messages are broadly divided into affective, instrumental, and interpersonal functions. These functions are not mutually exclusive. The authors opine that the affective function allows interlocutors to express emotions like annoyance or amusement, for instance, in a way that can be ambiguous or deniable, as seen in sarcasm or mockery (Haugh & Bousfield 2012). The institutional function, on the other hand, enforces social norms, subtly asserts power, or critiques behaviour without confrontation. Finally, Culpeper et al. (2017) distinguish the interpersonal function as a mixed messaging strategy that helps analyse the relationship between in-group solidarity through shared humour or conversely by excluding others. These interpretations are heavily dependent on the context of the communication and the relationship between the communicators.

This framework is particularly relevant to this study because it analyses the institutional and interpersonal relationship between the two opposing sides (majority and minority) of the Parliament of Ghana. The theory serves as the foundation for the analysis of the various politeness strategies that have been subverted by the MP to achieve their personal and political point-scoring, such as the adherence to parliamentary standing orders, mitigation of conflicts, maintenance of decorum, and management of public perception.
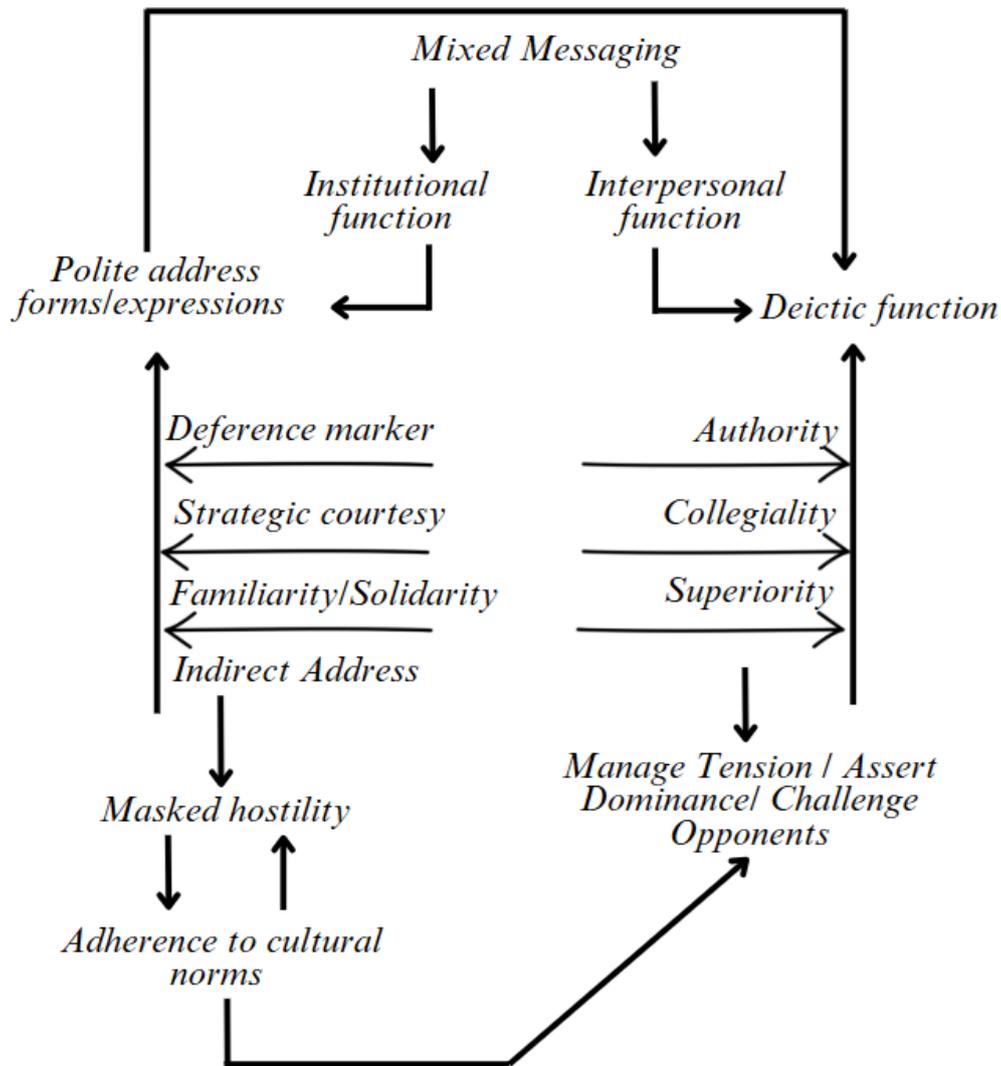
2.4. Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework, as constructed by the authors, is made up of concepts gleaned from the politeness theory (Brown & Levinson 1987), the concept of mixed messaging (Culpeper et al. 2017), and empirical literature (Kim et al. 2021; Al-Adaileh 2023; Rudneva 2024). The researchers argue that MPs use politeness strategies in four distinctive ways. First, MPs use politeness strategies as a deference marker – a linguistic feature used to show respect, often indicating a speaker's acknowledgment of the other person's status or position – followed by subtly softened impact of a forthcoming challenge or disagreement (Kim et al. 2021).

Secondly, politeness is used as a familiarity and solidarity marker. Here, informal references are used to establish a sense of rapport even when the ensuing remarks are combative (Rudneva 2024). The next strategy is strategic courtesy. We argue that MPs sometimes exaggerate politeness as a rhetorical move to subtly undermine an opponent's stance while maintaining civility. Lastly, politeness is used as an indirect address where, instead of directly confronting an MP, speakers may do so through the Speaker of Parliament without direct personal attack (Al-Adaileh 2023). Therefore, the conceptual framework underscores that polite language, while conventionally associated with social harmony, can be employed in parliamentary discourse to subvert expectations and strategically navigate tensions.

In addition to the aforementioned strategies, scholars such as Ningsih & Megawati (2022) and Kondratenko et al. (2020) have argued that the particular expression used has the potency to position interlocutors in a discourse relative to each other. The framework, therefore, incorporates deictic functions of address forms and expressions to capture how speakers position themselves to their interlocutors. We therefore conceptualise the deictic functions of the polite address forms and expressions as a means to manage tension, challenge opponents, and assert dominance. We argue that the use of polite expressions brings about the realisation of authority, collegiality, and superiority between the speaker and the interlocutor. According to Fernández-Mallat (2020), speakers acknowledge the authority, establish friendly relations, or exert dominance within the social hierarchy based on the particular address forms used. The integration of deictic functions highlights how MPs use politeness strategies to maintain decorum and assert power dynamics within institutional communication.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework for the strategic use of polite expressions (Brown & Levinson 1987; Culpeper et al. 2017.)

The conceptual framework of this study draws on mixed messaging, as articulated by Culpeper et al. (2017), which examines how interlocutors employ language to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs) in social interactions, such as using indirect speech to soften or mask hostility and mitigate FTAs. Visualisation from the conceptual framework demonstrates that mixed messages operate through surface-level adherence to polite conventions, such as the use of polite address forms and expressions (deference markers, strategic courtesy, familiarity, and solidarity, and indirect address). This strategy creates a respectable atmosphere to mask hostility and adhere to cultural norms to allow speakers to undermine their interlocutors (Al-Adaileh 2023).

Aside from the use of the polite expressions strategically, the concept also highlights how address forms are used to achieve deictic functions where speakers position themselves relative to their interlocutors on the interpersonal functional level. From the framework, it is realised, through the use of polite address forms, that speakers acknowledge the authority of their interlocutors, express collegiality, and exert superiority as a deictic function. Through these strategies, speakers are able to manage tension, assert dominance, or challenge opposition without explicitly being impolite or adversarial.

3. Method and data

3.1. Study area

Ghana's parliamentary discourse has historically been marked by deep polarisation (Osei-Tutu 2021), primarily due to the entrenched two-party dominance of the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP). Since the turn of the Fourth Republic and the adoption of Constitutional Rule in 1992, political power has alternated between these two parties (Ofosu & Washew 2024). For Bentil and Aidoo (2018), this has encouraged a legislative environment where adversarial politics often supersedes bipartisan cooperation. Owusu-Mensah et al. (2024) contend that the structural division between the majority and minority sides in Parliament, with the Speaker acting as a referee, has further institutionalised this polarisation. According to the authors, this adversarial nature has frequently led to legislative gridlocks where the majority side leverages its numerical advantage to either push through or block key government initiatives, depending on which party holds the executive.

The 1992 general election saw the shift from military to civilian rule, with the National Democratic Congress (NDC) dominating the political space. The party won the presidency and a majority in parliament. Following the 1996 elections, the NDC retained executive power and continually maintained a legislative majority. This relegated the National Patriotic Party (NPP), which had made its first appearance in parliament, to a minority position with only 63 out of 200 parliamentary seats. In the 2000 elections, the NPP secured both the presidency and parliamentary majority, and sustained it until the NDC's resurgence in 2008 (Walraven et al. 2008; Braimah & Bawah 2019). The NDC subsequently controlled the executive and legislative branches until 2016, when the NPP regained power and retained it until the 2024 electoral transition (Ofosu & Washew 2024).

This pattern of alternating hegemony between the two dominant parties has reinforced Ghana's duopolistic political landscape and institutionalised a legislative environment where partisan allegiance frequently supersedes bipartisan policymaking (Agomor 2019). From the foregoing argument, there is no gainsaying that the persistent oscillation of power between the NDC and NPP underscores the adversarial nature of Ghanaian parliamentary politics, wherein the majority party leverages its numerical advantage to either advance or obstruct legislative agendas.

Indeed, the escalating tensions between the NDC-NPP divide often manifest in the vetting of nominees for national and international offices, such as ministerial positions, where opposition MPs aggressively scrutinise and sometimes try to undermine candidates proposed by the incumbent government (Owusu-Mensah et al. 2024). This adversarial approach is particularly evident in the workings of the Appointments Committee of Ghana's Parliament, which serves as the study area for this research.

Sittings of the Committee are considered an extended official parliamentary sitting as they follow the same guiding orders (i.e., the Standing Orders of the Parliament of Ghana) which are used in plenary sittings of parliament. The committee is made up of the Chair and Vice Chair, who are selected from the incumbent party. To acknowledge balance and accountability in the formation of the committee, the Ranking and Deputy Ranking members are selected from the opposition party. In the case of the current Appointments Committee, the Chairman and his Vice belong to the NDC party, which won the presidential election and garnered a majority in parliament in the 2024 general elections. On the other hand, the Ranking and Deputy Ranking members are of the NPP minority caucus.

In addition to the leadership of the committee, MPs from both caucuses are selected based on their expertise in the subject matter area for a particular nomination, to ask questions under the directives of the Chairperson. Based on the formation of the committee, the sittings are replicas of the parliament, where discourses are marked by adversarial intent and political point-scoring while

adhering to all parliamentary standing orders. The sittings of the committee are broadcast live on major television stations and other social media platforms due to the public interest attached to such sittings.

3.2. Research design

Descriptive qualitative research design is employed in this study to systematically identify and analyse how Ghanaian parliamentarians strategically use polite address forms to manage tension during hostile interactions, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the "who, what, where, and how" of these linguistic phenomena (Elliot & Timulak 2021: 16-18). This approach is particularly relevant because it captures the subjective and context-dependent nature of parliamentary discourse. This enables the researchers to examine the deployment of politeness strategies and their deictic functions in mitigating conflict while maintaining parliamentary decorum, as highlighted in prior studies (Ilie 2018, 2021; Sarfo-Kantankah 2021b). This design is acceptable because it provides a detailed understanding of how politeness operates in adversarial political settings.

3.3. Study paradigm

The study is rooted in the interpretivist research paradigm that emphasises the understanding of social phenomena through the subjective meanings individuals assign to their actions and interactions (Alharahsheh & Pius 2020). The paradigm rejects the idea of a single objective reality by arguing that reality is socially constructed and context-dependent (Creswell & Poth 2018; Saunders et al. 2023). This paradigm is relevant to the current study because the researchers subjectively interpret the strategic use of polite address forms to mask hostility and adhere to cultural norms. Additionally, the analysis is focused on the situated use of politeness in adversarial parliamentary debates, which requires an understanding of Ghanaian cultural norms (e.g., respect for hierarchy) and institutional rules (e.g., Standing Orders). Interpretivism prioritises such contextualised understanding.

3.4. Population and sampling

The population for this study is the 2025 sittings of the Appointments Committee of the Parliament of Ghana. The committee is responsible for vetting ministerial nominees (Ministers and Deputy Ministers Designates) of the Republic of Ghana. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the data from seven (7) sittings of the said committee in the year 2025. The criteria for the selection of the sample sittings were based on the premise of the contentions that arose between the majority and minority caucuses serving on the committee. Particularly, the ministerial and deputy ministerial nominees in the sample sittings constitute NDC members who were vocal and had, over the years, mounted strict opposition to the NPP caucus when the NDC was in opposition.

As NDC turned incumbent, the same oppositions were mounted against them during their respective vetting sessions by the NPP minority caucus. These sittings, therefore, offer a rich ground to analyse the adversarial nature of parliamentary discourse and how polite address forms are used strategically. Table 1 details the sittings that were sampled for the study. For easy identification of the sittings from which the data were drawn, reference codes were assigned to the sittings.

Table 1. Details of sittings of the Appointment Committee.

| Reference Code	Appointments and Vetting Committee Sitting of the Parliament of Ghana	Link to the sittings	Date
Ref. ACS 1	Vetting of Minister Designate for the Ministry of Communication, Digital Technology, and Innovations (JoyNews 2025b)	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmtXP1G4jes&t=139s	30th January, 2025
Ref. ACS 2	Vetting of Minister Designate for the Ministry of Health (JoyNews 2025d)	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZtoPUPK0N0	31st January, 2025
Ref. ACS 3	Vetting of Minister Designate for the Ministry of the Attorney-General and Minister of Justice (JoyNews 2025a)	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otlIQijym2A	13th January, 2025
Ref. ACS 4	Vetting of Minister Designate for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration (JoyNews 2025c)	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCq65KFp2kc&t=7155s	31st January, 2025
Ref. ACS 5	Vetting of Deputy Minister Designate for the Ministry of the Attorney-General and Minister of Justice (JoyNews 2025g)	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_lvkHvVcMBE	26th February, 2025
Ref. ACS 6	Vetting of Deputy Minister Designate for the Ministry of Interior (JoyNews 2025e)	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGYpvMMfPCI&t=1058s	24th February, 2025
Ref. ACS 7	Vetting of Deputy Minister Designate for the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (JoyNews 2025f)	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZM_wwW0sZ7c	25th February, 2025

Vetting of ministerial and deputy ministerial nominees 2025 (YouTube.com)

3.5. Data collection procedure

The data for this study were collected from transcripts of the sampled sittings of the Appointments Committee of the Parliament of Ghana. Video recordings of the sittings were sourced from YouTube. The platform has a closed-caption feature that allows automatic transcription of audio into text. These texts constitute the primary data for the analysis of polite forms of address in parliamentary proceedings. No ethical procedures were followed for the data collection since videos of the settings are available on a free-to-air platform (YouTube) that can be accessed by the public. Therefore, no permission was needed to obtain these videos.

The data collection procedure consists of six stages, where the lead researcher watched the videos on YouTube. The transcripts of the audio were copied into MS Word (docx) and edited by combining sentences into a meaningful whole. The data were further reviewed for polite address markers, which were classified. Here, the texts were screened for the identification and marking of dialogues that contained polite address forms, as these were deemed central to the study's investigation of strategic politeness use in parliamentary discourse. The analysis and interpretation of the strategic use of these address makers were also conducted. The flowchart below illustrates the data collection procedure.

Figure 2. Data collection procedure.
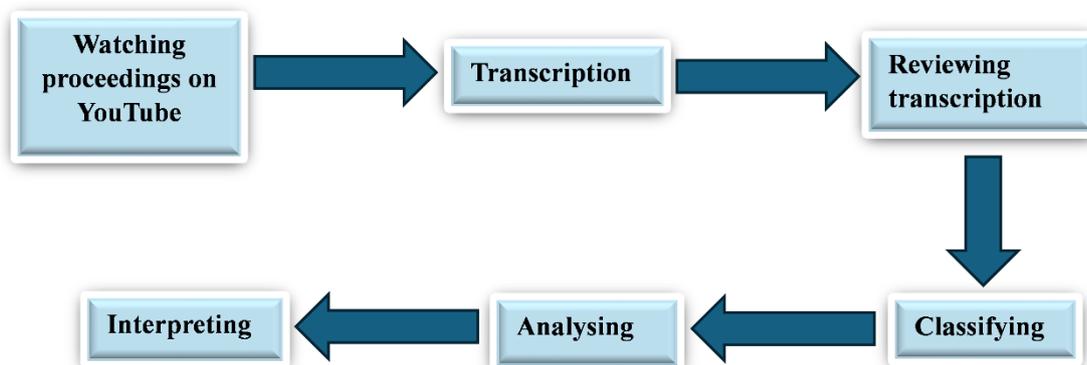
3.6. *Data analysis procedure.*
The analysis of the transcribed data was mainly based on Culpeper et al.'s (2017) concept of mixed messaging. The first step involved identifying and categorising the various polite expressions used by MPs during the vetting sessions. These expressions were then analysed for their deictic functions. The analysis also considered the context in which these expressions were used, particularly the content of the statements that followed. For instance, polite prefaces such as "with all due respect" were examined to determine whether they were used to soften criticisms or introduce adversarial arguments while engaging in hostile exchanges. To further explore the strategic use of politeness, we analysed the data with the conceptual framework gleaned from the mixed message theory, which posits that superficially polite language can be used to mask hostility and adhere to cultural norms. This approach allowed for an examination of how MPs used polite expressions not merely as a face-saving strategy but as a rhetorical device to frame adversarial discourse within parliamentary standing orders.

4. Findings
Key findings of the study are presented and discussed in this section. In the first part, we explore the deictic functions of polite address forms in parliamentary discourse to illustrate how these linguistic strategies help MPs uphold institutional norms, foster solidarity, and subtly assert dominance. Subsequently, how parliamentarians strategically use polite expressions to manage tension during hostile interactions while engaging in adversarial exchanges is examined.

4.1. *RQ1: Deictic functions of address forms in parliamentary discourse*
The locutionary relationship between speakers in conversation is often presented in the positioning of the speaker to the interlocutor (Stevani et al. 2023). The relationship is expressed through context-dependent linguistic markers – deictic functions (OED 2008) that allow the speaker to reinforce hierarchy, familiarity, or superiority (Ningsih & Megawati 2022). From this, the investigation sought to explore the deictic functions that polite address forms and expressions serve in parliamentary discourse. The analysis identified the use of three deictic functions: authority, collegiality, and superiority. Linguistic elements that trigger the realisation of these deictic functions have been discussed. From the analysis, it is realised that MPs established a relationship with their addresses through the adoption of various polite address forms that allow them to either respect authority, find common grounds, or exert dominance over the interlocutor. In lucid terms, MPs acknowledged authority, collegiality, and superiority in the particular address form used.

4.1.1. Authority

The power and authority within parliamentary systems are often reflected in the linguistic and social hierarchies that emerge among MPs. This is not different from the MPs who served on the Appointment and Vetting Committee of Parliament. Even though all MPs share the same formal status as elected representatives, their roles within parliament and parliamentary committees create implicit power differentials that are reinforced through language and the particular address forms employed. This phenomenon is not merely a matter of protocol but is deeply rooted in the symbolic and functional authority vested in these roles. As such, MPs holding leadership roles are accorded a level of respect and recognition that distinguishes them from their peers. Address forms such as *Mr. Chairman* and *Honourable Ranking* and *Minority Leader* in extracts 1 and 2 are used to establish parliamentary hierarchy.

(1)   *Mr. Chairman,* respectfully, with your permission, in Honourable Mintah Akandoh, I'd be referring to him as Kwabena if you'd permit me (Ref. ACS 2)

(2)   Honourable member, with all due respect to *the Ranking and Minority Leader*, we have a clear mandate, and no amount of questions and answers would be worthy to deserve this committee proceeding to suspend sitting is suspended until information is provided. Our procedure doesn't end at this committee…So I am unable to grant the suspension with all due respect (Ref. ACS 1).

In extract (1), an MP recognises the authority of the Chairman by asking for permission before using the kinship name of a nominee. The address form, "Mr. Chairman", followed by the polite request "respectfully with your permission", positions the MP chairing the committee as an authority who has the power to grant or deny a request. In (2), the authority of the Minority Leader who doubles as the Ranking Member of the committee is also recognised. Even though he shares the same status as other MPs, he is addressed as "Ranking and Minority Leader". These power dynamics have been studied in scholarly works on political discourse and institutional power. For instance, Joullié et al. (2020) explored how linguistic practices (including forms of address) serve to construct and reinforce power relations within institutions. Joullié et al. (2020) argue that titles, though, are neutral descriptors, are imbued with authority to signal the speaker's deference to the institutional role rather than the individual.

Moreover, the symbolic power of these address forms is underscored by their ability to shape perceptions and interactions within the parliamentary context. According to Xu (2022), political symbols, including titles and honorifics, are important in shaping public and institutional perceptions of authority. This means that when an MP is addressed with formal titles, their peers implicitly acknowledge the legitimacy of their leadership roles, even if those roles are temporary or context-specific. Xu (2022) acknowledges that this recognition is not merely a matter of courtesy but integral to the maintenance of institutional order and the effective functioning of parliamentary proceedings.

4.1.2. Collegiality

From the analysis, it is also realised that the use of polite address forms did not only serve the purpose of establishing authority. It also served as a means to foster collegiality and camaraderie among peers. MPs employ kinship address (3), relational titles such as *friend* and *brother* (4, 5), and *first names* (6).

(3)   *Kwabena*, congratulations to you. We, just like my leader has directed, are showing good faith, and we in the minority will continue to show good faith (Ref. ACS 2).

(4)   I am guided and minded by *my brother*, who has been vetted and approved by the house (Ref. ACS 1).

(5)   Mr. Chairman, he is *a colleague, a friend, and a brother*, but this vetting is supposed to bring the best out of our appointees (Ref. ACS 1).

In (3), the nominee is addressed using the kinship term *Kwabena* (a name traditionally given to Akan males born on a Tuesday), which serves to highlight the personal relationship between the speaker and the interlocutor. This use of a culturally specific kinship name personalises the interaction and reinforces a sense of shared identity. Similarly, the speakers refer to fellow MPs as "brother" and "friend". For instance, in (4), the speaker states, "my brother who has been vetted and approved by the house", while in (5), the nominee is addressed as "my friend and brother". These address forms are incidentals that aim to invoke a relational framework that transcends the formal institutional roles of the participants.

This practice aligns with Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which posits that the use of relational terms and positive politeness strategies helps to preserve social harmony and mitigate potential tensions. This linguistic strategy is particularly significant in parliamentary contexts, where formal hierarchies and institutional roles might otherwise create distance or tension among participants. The use of kinship and relational terms serves as a bridge between the formal and informal dimensions of parliamentary discourse, which enables MPs to maintain interpersonal rapport.

In Example (6), the speaker establishes a sense of collegiality with the interlocutor by addressing him using his first name, *Sam* (short for Samuel).

(6)   So, *Sam,* take it easy and relax. These vetting proceedings can be as short as possible, depending on your posture (Ref. ACS 1)

This example illustrates the speaker's cordial and approachable demeanour, as the use of the addressee's first name, devoid of any formal titles, conveys a sense of endearment and mutual fraternity. Such informal address forms serve to humanise the interaction and reduce formality and tension associated with institutional proceedings. Simply, the speaker signals a shift from the formal, hierarchical structure of parliamentary proceedings to a more personal and collaborative interaction. Scholars such as Fernández-Mallat (2020) have argued that the use of informal address forms, much like referring to an MP by their first name, functions as a "relational lubricant" that eases the rigidity and stress of institutional interactions. This practice also aligns with broader research on the strategic use of language in political discourse. For instance, Hu et al. (2024) expound on how MPs use language to navigate the dual demands of institutional authority and interpersonal relationships.

4.1.3. Superiority
In one instance, an MP sought to position himself above his interlocutor to assert a sense of superiority over the addressee. This was evident in his statement (7).

(8)   I am not the one to obstruct your career path. In the least, I should be a guide as your *senior brother*…I have seen a lot you are yet to see (Ref. ACS 1).

In (7), the MP frames himself as a mentor or senior figure, invoking a hierarchical relationship that positions him as more experienced and knowledgeable. The address, "senior brother", implicitly asserts authority and superiority over the interlocutor. This linguistic strategy allows him to claim a higher status within the interaction.

4.2. RQ2: Strategic use of polite address forms in parliamentary discourse
The analysis of the data reveals that Ghanaian MPs serving on the Appointments Committee employed polite expressions in a strategic manner to achieve diverse communicative purposes, while adhering to the established Ghanaian cultural communicative norms and parliamentary standing orders. The researchers analysed the strategic use of the polite expressions based on the four categorisations based on the conceptual framework: deference marker, strategic courtesy, familiarity and solidarity, and indirectness. A notable example of the use of polite expression as a deference marker is the recurrent deployment of the phrase "with all due respect" by both questioning MPs and responding nominees, as exemplified in (8).

(8)   *Mr. Chairman, with all due respect*, if you decide to be whimsical and capricious, it will not advance the work of this committee (Ref. ACS 5).

In (8), the speaker accused the addressee (the Chairman) of being "whimsical and capriciou*s*" in the exercise of his discretionary powers. He, however, levels this accusation by prefacing the statement with the address, "Mr. Chairman"*,* and a polite expression, "with all due respect". This phrase served as a linguistic tool to frame the criticism in a manner that conveyed deference to the Chairman by acknowledging that he (the speaker) accords him (the Chairman) respect. This strategy is employed to facilitate constructive dialogue and mitigate potential and subsequent confrontations from the addressee. Such a linguistic strategy underscores the speaker's awareness of the dual imperative to adhere to cultural values of politeness and respect and parliamentary standing orders while unleashing the contentious statement against the Chairman of the committee. This realisation comes as no surprise since Culpeper et al. (2017) argue that since mixed messages involve recourse to both politeness and impoliteness, participants inevitably must have some degree of awareness of how a message understood literally as polite, for instance, may at the same time be indicating an impolite attitude. Other notable findings have been discussed in the sections that follow.

4.2.1. Deference marker
Analysis of the data reveals that MPs serving on the committee consistently recognised the authority of the Chairman and extended respect towards him, irrespective of any underlying hostility toward his decisions or actions. Notably, MPs frequently employed appropriate forms of address and prefaced their statements with expressions of respect for the Chairman's authority before articulating any critique. For instance, in (8) and (9), while the speaker critiques the Chairman for being "whimsical" and "capricious", as well as for other actions the speaker deemed unacceptable, the speaker explicitly acknowledges the Chairman's authority by using a polite address form: "Mr. Chairman", and the polite expression*,* "we respect you" (9).
        Similarly, in (10), the speaker expresses strong opposition to the Chairman's decision to allow other committee members to interrupt his line of questioning. In (11), he further criticises the Chairman for the unfair treatment of other members of the committee from the Minority Caucus. However, before launching his critique, he addresses the Chairman politely. This polite expression reinforces the norms of deference even in moments of contention (Ilie 2010).

(9)   *Mr. Chairman, we respect you*, but where you are acting in excess of discretion, we'd express it (Ref. ACS 4).

(10) *Chairman, Chairman with respect, Chairman with respect*, if my opportunity to ask questions would be interrupted, the Ghanaian people have had a problem with how we did our thing. It is not at this time that the Majority Chief Whip will be applying for "I want to do a follow-up,

follow-up, follow-up…" What is this interference that he needs to do follow up? If he wants an opportunity for himself, I am ready to stop so that you can give him the full time to ask his questions. This thing of follow-up, follow-up is not acceptable! (Ref. ACS 5).

(11) *Chairman, with the greatest respect*, I have observed consistently the way you go at my members, especially the young ones, the new ones. It's not the right way…but the way it is going, I think it is too right to the extent that your co-chair also keeps interrupting. (Ref. ACS 3).

In extract (12), the Chairman of the committee also demonstrated recognition of the authority vested in the leadership of the Ranking Member and Minority Leader by using the phrase "with all due respect" as a prefatory remark before denying him a motion to suspend the siting.

(12) *Honourable member, with all due respect to the Ranking and Minority Leader*, we have a clear mandate, and no amount of questions and answers would be worthy to deserve this committee proceeding to suspend siting is suspended until information is provided. Our procedure doesn't end at this committee…So *I am unable to grant the suspension with all due respect* (Ref. ACS 1).

In (12), the Chairman declined the Minority Leader's request to suspend the committee's sitting. While the Chairman was aware of his inability to exercise discretionary authority to overrule the Minority Leader's application, he strategically used a polite expression as a discursive mechanism to justify the denial of the request. This rhetorical approach highlights the Chairman's adherence to normative conventions of deference, even in instances where his decisions may conflict with the preferences of the Minority Leader.

4.2.2. Familiarity and solidarity

The use of polite address forms and expressions also served to foster solidarity and friendship among interlocutors (Zhou & Larina 2024). In such instances, speakers employed terms of address that conveyed collegiality and camaraderie, even when making accusations, issuing warnings, or asserting dominance over others (Ilie 2010). This strategic use of language is illustrated in (13) and (14). In (13), the speaker critiques the investigative prowess of the addressee – a move that could potentially escalate tensions. However, he softens his critique by using the polite and solidarity-building phrase, "my good friend". This is followed by a suggestion that more thorough work is needed regarding the investigation that the addressee claimed to have conducted. Additionally, in (14), the Chairman of the committee uses a friendly address form and polite expression to deny a member the opportunity to continue his line of questioning.

(13) *Clearly, my good friend the Hon. Assafuah* has to do more work. As for this work he has done, *with all due respect*, least much to be desired (Ref. ACS 4).

(14) *Hon. Assafuah, with all due respect*, said he has done some work, and you, too, have done some work. The amount being outrageous was based on the assessment of the work he has done, but not your own! So, the way you're going about the question is calling for worry (Ref. ACS 4).

Even though the statement may not be warmly accepted by the member concerned, the use of the address forms (Honourable) shows a friendly relationship between the interlocutors in the dialogue. According to Ibrahim & Aminu (2024), familiar address forms indicate intimate linkages between the speaker and the addressee, as exhibited in (13).

4.2.3. Strategic courtesy

In (15), the leadership of the Minority Leader was further acknowledged as evidenced by the use of polite address forms directed toward him. However, this politeness did not stem from a genuine acknowledgment of the Minority Leader's authority; rather, it was strategically employed to align with the established principles of parliamentary discourse. Within this context, the speaker's reaction to the Minority Leader was marked by underlying hostility. Nevertheless, he prefaced his critique with the polite expression, "With all due respect to the Minority Leader", to mitigate the harshness of his tone.

(15) *With all due respect to the Minority Leader*, I am also a leader, so the 'what is this' should be withdrawn. I am not a nuisance (Ref. ACS 5).

This strategic use of politeness reflects the speaker's awareness of the procedural rules and norms governing committee interactions, which mandate mutual respect among members. By the use of such a polite expression, the speaker (the Majority Chief Whip) adheres to the formal expectations of parliamentary standing orders while simultaneously advancing his opposition. This illustrates the performative and strategic dimensions of politeness within parliamentary settings, where linguistic choices serve to uphold procedural norms and to manage interpersonal dynamics (Ilie 2018, 2021).

Additionally, the Majority Chief Whip challenges the Deputy Minority Chief Whip for what he perceives as the latter's insufficient familiarity with the procedural rules of proceedings of the Parliament of Ghana. This remark carries a tone of harshness and offensiveness, as it appears designed to assert dominance over the Deputy Minority Chief Whip. Therefore, the Majority Chief Whip employs a polite expression to frame his criticism, so as not to temper the confrontational nature of his rebuttal. This strategic use of politeness serves to mitigate the potential for escalation while simultaneously allowing the Majority Chief Whip to assert his position within the bounds of parliamentary standing orders.

(16) *With all due respect to Honourable Habib*, you have not demonstrated the establishment of a commencement and decision-making quorum. Mr. Chairman, with all due respect, this is a very serious business for the state, so the leader should comport himself if he wants to come in (Ref. ACS 2).

In a striking instance of vetting proceedings, the second Deputy Minority Chief Whip posed a highly confrontational and arguably inappropriate question to a nominee, inquiring whether he was "stingy" in (17). This remark, delivered under the formal scrutiny of parliamentary proceedings, was notably framed within the polite address form of "Honourable".

(17) *Honourable nominee,* are you stingy? (Ref. ACS 6).

The use of this honorific title underscores its strategic deployment as a discursive tool that enables the Deputy Minority Chief Whip to introduce such harsh and critical language while ostensibly adhering to the norms of parliamentary standing orders. It is evident that the title "Honourable" was employed not merely as a marker of respect but as a rhetorical device to mitigate the perceived impropriety of the remark.

During the vetting process for the Minister Designate for Foreign Affairs, an MP from the minority caucus used a subtle approach to express strong criticism. Instead of directly confronting the Minister Designate about their alleged tendency for political theatrics and propaganda, the MPs framed their critique in a way that softened the blow while still making their point clear. This strategy is highlighted in example (18).

(18) *Honourable Samuel Okudzeto Ablaka, MP for the good people of North Tongu*, you are on the verge of becoming the number three diplomat of this great country of Ghana after His Excellency John Dramani Mahama, the President, and Her Excellency Jane Naana Opoku Agyemang, the Vice President. *Honourable*, permit me to remind you that the international arena that you are going to operate in is very different from the political terrain that you have been *dancing with propaganda theatrics* (Ref. ACS 4).

In this situation, the MP starts off by showing respect – using polite and formal language to honour the nominee and the people he represents. The MP even sprinkles in some compliments to make it seem like he is building up the nominee with "you are on the verge of becoming the number three diplomat of this great country of Ghana…". However, out of nowhere, the MP hits hard with sharp criticism, accusing the nominee of being a propagandist. The strategy of starting with all that politeness was to allow the MP to manage and keep the chairman, who has the power to overrule any harsh or unparliamentary language, from stepping in. It is clear from the statement that the MP is not trying to be kind to the nominee but to use polite address forms to mask the intention of being adversarial.

4.2.4. Indirect address

The data show frequent use of indirect address strategies as a means of signalling caution or marking hostility. This is often done through the Chairman of the committee rather than addressing their colleagues directly. For instance, in (19), it is alleged that certain members of the committee were making disparaging remarks about the Minority Leader while he had the floor to pose questions to the nominee. Aware of these actions, the Minority Leader chose to issue a cautionary statement through the Chairman to avoid confrontation with the other members in question. Similarly, in (20), the speaker identifies the specific recipient of his caution but does so by directing his remarks through the Chairman of the committee. This strategic use of indirect address not only distances the speaker from personal attacks but also reinforces the hierarchical and procedural norms of parliamentary discourse, where the Chairman serves as a mediator and focal point for formal communication.

(19) *Mr. Chairman*, before I proceed, I want to suggest to you to kindly reiterate an earlier call by the Chairman of this Committee, which call was to *some of my colleagues who have just joined us but are not members*. I don't want to mention a name, … you may say something not for the record, but when I hear, I will respond to you. If you attempt to act in a manner on becoming a backbencher who has just joined parliament, you will be schooled to know the courtesies that are accorded leaders (Ref. ACS 7).

(20) *Chairman, with respect*, Chairman, something has been said not on record, but those who view…*the learned Attorney-General is somebody he knows I respect*, and I don't want him to be on this table, when I'm asking questions, he says 'what is the relevance.' This thing must be stopped! (Ref. ACS 5).

In the aforementioned statements, the speaker adopts a strategic approach to addressing fellow members, deliberately avoiding confrontation. Specifically, he refrains from explicitly naming the individuals he is cautioning, opting instead for the generalised referent form, "some of my colleagues". On occasions where he does reference a specific member, he does so indirectly by invoking the authority of the committee Chairman, thereby framing his remarks through an institutional intermediary rather than as a personal attack. This use of indirect address forms and expressions serves to distance the speaker from any perception of personal animosity or direct

hostility, while still enabling him to convey his cautionary message effectively.

Similarly, the Majority Chief Whip addressed the Minority Leader indirectly by channelling his remarks through the Chairman of the committee. Although the Minority Leader is the subject of the statement, the use of the third-person pronoun "him" indicates that the Majority Chief Whip deliberately avoided direct address. In framing his remarks in this manner, the Majority Chief Whip maintains a level of formality and respect, even as he critiques or challenges the Minority Leader. This strategic use of indirect address underscores the importance of procedural propriety in parliamentary discourse, where the mediation of the Chairman and the avoidance of confrontation serve to preserve the institutional order and mitigate interpersonal tensions.

(21) *Mr. Chairman, with all due respect to Ranking,* you are interrogating a nominee alleging certain matters. He has given answers; you may not like the answers. It is up to you to put him to the further and better particulars …*with all due respect to him*, if he hasn't got information he may still make progress but if he wants to stay on this course, he should be providing information by way of material particulars so the honourable nominee can speak to so [that] we can make progress, with all due respect (Ref. ACS 1).

5.   Discussion of findings

The strategic use of polite address forms by Ghanaian MPs in parliamentary proceedings has been explored. The analysis of the data sheds light on how MPs maintain the balance between adherence to parliamentary standing orders while advancing their political agenda through incongruous communication. It is argued in this study that contemporary politeness and impoliteness research (Culpeper et al. 2017) does not underscore a binary or mutually exclusive phenomenon but is a dynamic and evaluative practice that is influenced by context, intention, and interpretation. The findings of the study align with this shift by demonstrating that polite address forms and expressions in Ghanaian parliamentary discourse frequently co-occur with implicit hostility, confrontation, and power assertion.

From the analysis of the study, it is realised that Ghanaian MPs often employ polite prefaces not as a genuine face-saving strategy (Brown & Levison 1987), but as a performative act to frame adversarial discourse within acceptable parliamentary norms. This is a strategy that is employed by both the majority and minority caucuses of the Appointments Committee of Parliament. Notable findings from the study revealed that MPs use polite address forms and expressions as deference markers, familiarity and solidary, strategic courtesy, and indirectness.

The use of difference markers such as *Mr. Chairman, Honourable, Leader, Ranking Member, Chief Whip,* among others, to acknowledge the authority of people in power finds its root in the Ghanaian traditional norms of respect (Yankah 1998; Agyekum 2007; Ofori 2015; Thompson & Agyekum 2016) and institutional practice and standing orders of the parliament of Ghana (Sarfo-Kantankah & Arko 2019). These strategies are not exclusive to Ghana's parliament. Globally, studies such as Ilie (2015), Furkó (2020), and Cuenca (2023) have established that members of parliaments' interventions (which include asking questions, signalling caution, or raising an opposition in the case of the vetting of the ministerial nominees in the current study) have to comply with basic institutional constraints and discursive practices. According to Ilie (2003), even though an overt political confrontation permeates MPs' offensive and defensive moves, they are often accompanied by polite expressions of presenting these oppositions. Another aspect of the strategic use of polite address forms is to establish familiarity and solidarity before a hostile remark is made. From the analysis, it is realised, for instance in (13), that the expression, "my good friend", and the title, "Honourable" (Hon.) in (14) were used to establish a tone of familiarity and solidarity before criticising the addressee. In extract (13), the speaker lashes out a very sharp criticism of the purported investigation the address

has conducted, inadvertently questioning his analytical prowess. To soften this criticism, the speaker uses the polite and friendly expression "my good friend".

Additionally, MPs used polite addresses without necessarily conforming to the positive face (Brown & Levinson 1987), the maxim of modesty (Leech 1983), or the maxim of quality (Grice 1989). The use of politeness this way is neither seen as adherence nor violation. Polite forms of address are used strategically as a means to mask hostility and adhere to cultural norms. The speaker, fully aware of his intentions to be hostile towards the interlocutors, uses polite addresses to front or mask the hostility. This strategy was realised in the use of polite addresses as strategic courtesy, where the Majority Chief Whip, in extract (15), prefaces his hostility with "With all due respect to the Minority Leader" before his confrontational criticism, "I am also a leader, so the 'what is this' should be withdrawn. I am not a nuisance". Similarly, the Deputy Minority Chief Whip confronts another member of the committee aggressively ("…the leader should comport himself if he wants to come in"), something that can potentially escalate tension between the interlocutors. However, this confrontation is toned down with the polite expression "With all due respect to Honourable Habib".

It is further noted that MPs often channelled their criticisms through the Chairman of the committee to avoid confrontation with their opponents. For instance, in (19), the speaker addresses and cautions other colleague MPs serving on the committee with a stern warning through the Chairman. The use of this indirect approach preserves the institutional order of cooperation and allows MPs to assert their positions without appearing overtly aggressive. It is acknowledged that studies have analysed the use of politeness in various forms (see Lewis & Yoshimura 2017; Dianitami 2024). It differs from the findings of these studies by establishing that MPs' use of polite addresses and expressions does not necessarily serve the intended purpose of establishing a respectful tone, nor does it violate face-saving acts (FSAs); rather, it operates as a strategic linguistic device to mask confrontation with a veneer of decorum.

The deictic functions of polite address forms, which examine how these address forms position speakers to their interlocutors within the hierarchical structure of parliamentary discourse (Fernández-Mallat 2020), were examined in this study. The analysis revealed that MPs frequently use address forms such as *Mr. Chairman* and *Honourable Ranking* and *Minority Leader* to acknowledge the authority of their colleagues, particularly those in leadership positions. For instance, the study notes how MPs often ask for permission from the Chairman to grant them some privileges. This positions the Chairman as an authority figure who has the power to grant or deny requests. However, the use of polite address forms is not limited to acknowledging authority.

The findings of the study also highlight how these forms promote collegiality and camaraderie among MPs. Terms such as relational addresses, such as *brother*, *friend*, kingship names, and first names, are used to create a sense of solidarity and mutual respect even amid adversarial exchanges. It was additionally found in this study that the use of polite address forms is employed to exert superiority. An example is provided in the data where an MP positions himself as superior with the address form *senior brother* to claim a higher status within the interaction. This aligns closely with Sarfo-Kantankah & Edu-Buandoh's (2022) findings on how MPs strategically weaponised polite address forms to undermine opponents while maintaining procedural decorum. Specifically, this study mirrors Sarfo-Kantankah & Edu-Buandoh's observation that MPs exploit unparliamentary language through pragmatic indirection where surface-level politeness masks underlying hostility. Even though the use of "senior brother" may not necessarily be unparliamentary and hostile, the speaker strategically uses it to establish his power over the addressee.

Empirically, the data indicate that politeness in Ghanaian parliamentary discourse functions less as a face-saving strategy and more as an institutional requirement that enables criticism to be voiced without procedural sanction (Ilie 2010, 2021). This pattern reflects broader Ghanaian communicative norms in which indirectness and deferential language are morally valued ways of managing disagreement, particularly when addressing elders or authority figures, rather than signs of

evasiveness or weakness (Obeng 1997; Kádár & Haugh 2013; Ofori 2015). The data further illustrates how MPs draw on culturally grounded relational practices to soften confrontation, thereby aligning adversarial political action with expectations of communal harmony and respectful conduct (Agyekum 2007; Fernández-Mallat 2020). At the same time, the co-occurrence of polite forms with implicit hostility reveals that politeness does not necessarily signal cooperation or mutual respect but can operate as a rhetorical resource for asserting dominance, resisting authority, or discrediting opponents within acceptable institutional limits.

These findings suggest that neither Gricean cooperation, Leech's social equilibrium alone, nor Brown and Levinson's face management fully captures the communicative reality of Ghanaian parliamentary interaction, where politeness and impoliteness are routinely layered rather than alternated. Within the institutional context of parliament, these sociocultural norms are reinforced by formal rules of address and mediation through the Chair, making indirect address a preferred interactional choice for issuing warnings, criticism, or challenges while maintaining institutional order.

One notable observation from the analysis of the data indicates that findings from the study refine existing understandings of face (Brown & Levinson 1987). Classical politeness theory treats face primarily as an individual possession that speakers seek to protect, enhance, or threaten through strategic linguistic choices (see Al-Hindawi & Alkhazaali 2016; Al-Duleimi 2016; Brinton 2023). However, the data from the current study suggest that face is not always the primary or immediate concern of speakers in institutional political interaction. Instead, MPs frequently engage in utterances that knowingly threaten the face of opponents while employing polite address forms and expressions that satisfy institutional and cultural expectations of respect. This indicates that face is not simply preserved or attacked but is strategically suspended, redistributed, or subordinated to broader political and institutional objectives.

Moreover, the data show that polite expressions such as "Mr. Chairman or with all due respect" do not necessarily function to mitigate face-threatening acts in the conventional sense. Rather, they operate as procedural and moral tokens that license confrontation without breaching parliamentary rules or sociocultural norms of decorum. This challenges the assumption that politeness strategies are primarily face-saving devices and instead positions face as a negotiable and contextually contingent resource in adversarial institutional discourse. The findings also provide a significant extension to Leech's (1983) notion of social equilibrium. Leech conceptualises politeness as a mechanism for maintaining interpersonal harmony and minimising social friction, influenced by power relations, social distance, and cultural context. The data, however, reveal that while interpersonal harmony between MPs is often disrupted through confrontational exchanges, institutional equilibrium is nonetheless maintained. Politeness, in this context, functions less to preserve interpersonal goodwill and more to sustain the orderly functioning of parliamentary proceedings and the legitimacy of the institution itself.

6.   Conclusion

The strategic use of polite address forms in Ghanaian parliamentary discourse, that is, the way in which MPs employ address forms and expressions to manage tension, assert dominance, and subtly challenge opponents while adhering to parliamentary standing orders, was explored in this study. Drawing on concepts gleaned from Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, Culpeper et al.'s (2017) mixed messaging and the deictic functions of address forms and expressions, the researchers employed descriptive qualitative analysis of video transcripts from seven ministerial vetting sessions to identify four key strategies: deference markers, familiarity and solidarity, strategic courtesy, and indirect address. The findings revealed that MPs often use polite address forms and expressions not merely to convey respect but as rhetorical tools to mask hostility, maintain institutional order, and

navigate adversarial exchanges within the constraints of parliamentary norms. These findings corroborate with studies such as Ilie (2003, 2010, 2021), Furkó (2020), Kondratenko et al. (2020), and Dianitami (2024), which looked at discursive strategies in parliamentary discourse. The analyses also revealed the various deictic functions often associated with the address forms used by the MPs to position themselves to their interlocutors. The findings revealed that the utilisation of these polite address forms situates MPs and their interlocutors in three different deictic positions: authority, collegiality, and superiority. The current study contributes to the understanding of discourse communities by illustrating how shared linguistic practices, such as polite address forms, regulate interactions in highly polarised environments. This offers insights into the performative and strategic dimensions of politeness in political discourse.

The study's findings have significant implications for both politeness theory and political communication. The study contributes to the broader understanding of how politeness operates in highly polarised environments and challenges the traditional view of politeness as a purely cooperative strategy by showing instead how it can be weaponised to achieve adversarial goals. Moreover, the study underscores the importance of cultural context in shaping linguistic practices. The research highlights how Ghanaian MPs draw on broader socio-cultural norms of respect and indirectness that are deeply ingrained in Ghanaian society. For instance, the study notes how Ghanaian children are taught from a young age to avoid insulting elders or people in power – a cultural norm that influences the way MPs communicate in parliament. This cultural dimension adds a layer of understanding to the analysis in the demonstration of how politeness strategies are not only shaped by institutional norms but also by broader societal values.

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