

HONORIFIC SYSTEM OF THE YORUBA PEOPLE

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DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS STUDIES

FACULTY OF ARTS

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**A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS STUDIES,
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APPROVAL PAGE

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DEDICATION

"To the Almighty God, I dedicate this project, acknowledging His divine guidance and inspiration that has seen me through its completion.

I also to my wonderful parents, Mr. and Mrs. Obayogba.

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This work bears the imprint of many persons who tried as much as they could to see that it was a success.

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to examine honorific system of the Yoruba people by analyzing the use of honorifics in conveying respect and social hierarchy, investigating the maintenance or alteration of honorific practices in urban and rural settings, and lastly, by examining the challenges faced by the honorific system in the context of modernization. Primary and secondary methods of data collection was employed for this study. primary include participant observation while secondary include books, online materials and journals . The theoretical framework used for the analysis was the "Politeness Theory" by Brown and Levinson (1978). Findings are: Maintaining social relationship through respect and deferences. It also highlight the importance of gender specific honorifics, ensuring that both men and women in position of authority receive proper recognition. Furthermore, it shows deference and acknowledge social hierarchy, aligning with the positive politeness strategy, where respect to show through inclusion and acknowledgement of higher status. It emphasize hierarchical structures speakers within themselves with the social norms and values of the community, showing their understanding the need to respect positions of power. The study concluded that the Yoruba honorific system remains a crucial aspect of social interaction, promoting respect and maintaining social order. However, its use is adapting in response to modernization, particularly in urban settings, presenting both opportunities and challenges for the future preservation of these cultural practices. The researcher recommends further studies in this particular area and any aspect not touched in this study should be treated by linguist, scholars or any other researchers who have interest in honorific system of the Yoruba people or any dialect of the language.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Yoruba people, one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa, predominantly reside in southwestern Nigeria, with significant populations in neighboring countries like Benin and Togo (Fayemi & Macaulay-Adeyelu, 2009). Their rich cultural heritage includes a complex honorific system that reflects social hierarchy, respect, and identity.

Honorifics in Yoruba society serve as linguistic markers that convey respect, age, status, and relational dynamics (Adetomokun, 2012). This system is deeply embedded in social interactions, influencing communication styles in both formal and informal contexts. Titles and forms of address are not merely linguistic; they embody cultural values, traditions, and the community's moral fabric.

Historically, the honorific system has been shaped by various factors, including colonial influence, religious practices, and modernization. Despite these changes, traditional practices remain crucial in maintaining social cohesion and respect for elders and leaders (Ajayi & Olayinka, 2014). Understanding this system provides insight into the Yoruba worldview, emphasizing communalism, respect for lineage, and the importance of social roles.

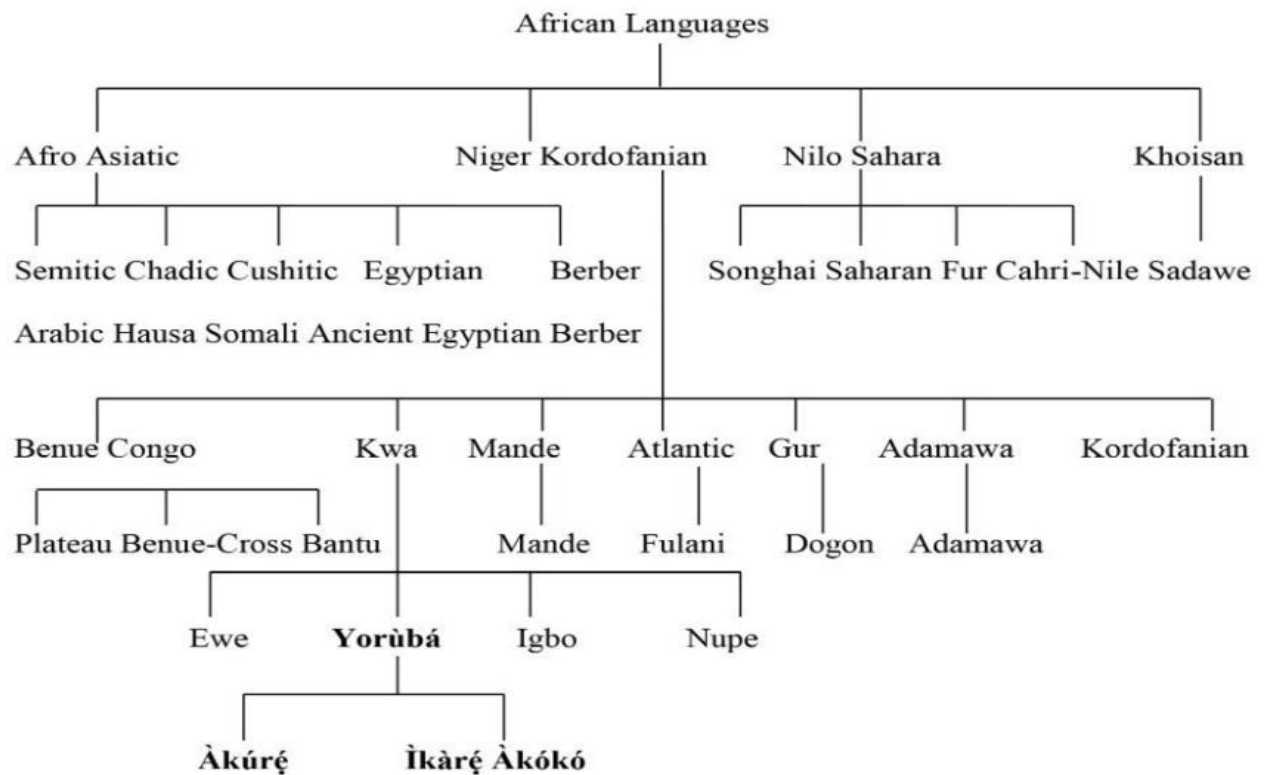
This research aims to explore the nuances of the Yoruba honorific system, examining its implications for identity, social interaction, and cultural preservation in a rapidly changing world. Through this study, we seek to highlight the relevance of honorifics in contemporary Yoruba society and their role in maintaining cultural continuity amidst globalization.

1.1 YORUBA LANGUAGE AND ITS PEOPLE

Yoruba is primarily spoken in West Africa, especially in Southwestern and Central Nigeria. It serves as the language of the Yoruba ethnic group, which has approximately 47 million speakers, including around 2 million second-language speakers (Ethnologue, 27th ed. 2024). The language is prevalent in six southwestern Nigerian states: Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo, where both the language and its speakers are known as Yoruba. As a pluricentric language, Yoruba is also spoken in Benin and Togo, with smaller communities in Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia. Furthermore, Yoruba vocabulary is present in Afro-Brazilian religions like Candomblé and in Santería in the Caribbean through the liturgical Lucumí language, as well as in various Afro-American religions in North America (Britannica, 2014). However, many modern followers of these religions in the Americas do not speak or understand Yoruba, using it mainly in ritual songs, often without comprehension. While the use of Yoruba vocabulary in rituals is widespread, it has transformed since the language is no longer their first language, and fluency is not required (Valdés, 2015). Yoruba, as the main Yoruboid language, is closely related to Itsekiri in the Niger Delta and Igala in central Nigeria.

The Yoruba people, an ethnic group from West Africa, predominantly inhabit regions in Nigeria, Benin, and Togo, collectively referred to as Yorubaland. Most Yoruba people reside in Nigeria, where they represent 20.7% of the population, making them one of the continent's largest ethnic groups (Ethnologue, 2023). The Yoruba language, part of the Niger-Congo family, has the highest number of native speakers among its language group (Bendor-Samuel, 2024).

1.1.1 Genetic Classification of African Languages



Source: (Yusuf 2007: 124)

The table above shows how Yoruba which is a KWA language can be traced to the Niger Kordofanian proto language family.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

The methodology for researching the honorific system of the Yoruba people involved a qualitative techniques. The population sample consisted of Yoruba community members, selected based on their educational qualification, which ranged from secondary school to university education, and their ages, which spanned from 25 to 80 years old. This age range was chosen to capture the perspectives of different generations and their experiences with the honorific system. The sample was purposively selected to ensure a diverse range of participants, including community leaders, elders, and younger individuals. The qualitative data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions, which provided rich insights into the social dynamics and cultural nuances of the honorific system. The instrument used for data collection included audio recorders for interviews and observations, and note-taking materials. However, the study had some limitations, including the potential for social desirability bias in self-reported data and the challenge of accessing and interpreting various cultural practices. The theoretical framework guiding this study is the "Politeness Theory" by Brown and Levinson (1978).

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The honorific system of the Yoruba people is a complex linguistic and cultural framework that plays a critical role in social interactions and the preservation of cultural identity. Despite its significance, there is limited understanding and documentation of how this system functions in contemporary society, particularly in the context of globalization and modern communication. This research seeks to investigate the nuances of the Yoruba honorific system, including its linguistic forms, social implications, and the impact of changing cultural dynamics. Key

questions include how honorifics are used to convey respect and social hierarchy, how these practices are maintained or altered in urban versus rural settings, and what challenges the system faces in the face of modernization. By addressing these issues, this research aims to contribute to the broader understanding of Yoruba culture and the role of language in social structure.

1.4 AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The study aims to examine honorific system of the Yoruba people. Its objectives include:

1. to analyze the use of honorifics in conveying respect and social hierarchy.
2. to investigate the maintenance or alteration of honorific practices in urban and rural settings.
3. to examine the challenges faced by the honorific system in the context of modernization.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following are the research questions:

1. How are honorifics used to convey respect and social hierarchy?
2. How are these practices maintained or altered in urban versus rural settings?
3. What challenges does the system face in the face of modernization?

1.6 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The scope of the study on the honorific system of the Yoruba people encompasses a detailed examination of the cultural, social, and linguistic dimensions of honorifics within Yoruba society. This research aims to explore how honorifics function as markers of respect and status, reflecting the intricate social hierarchies that characterize Yoruba culture. It will investigate the various forms of address used in different contexts, including familial, communal, and formal settings, highlighting how these forms contribute to social cohesion and identity.

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study of the honorific system of the Yoruba people offers significant benefits to various groups. Firstly, scholars and researchers in anthropology, linguistics, and cultural studies gain valuable insights into the complexities of social hierarchy and communication within Yoruba society. Understanding the nuances of honorifics can enhance their academic work and contribute to broader discussions on language and culture.

For the Yoruba community itself, the study serves as a means of cultural preservation. By documenting and analyzing their honorific system, it helps reinforce a sense of identity and pride among members of the community. This awareness can foster greater appreciation for their linguistic heritage, especially among younger generations who may be at risk of losing touch with traditional practices.

Educators and students also stand to benefit from this research. Incorporating findings into curricula can enrich educational materials, making them more relevant and reflective of cultural

diversity. This can promote respect for different social structures and encourage cross-cultural understanding among students from varied backgrounds.

Additionally, policymakers and cultural organizations can utilize the insights gained from the study to promote cultural heritage initiatives. By understanding the importance of the honorific system, these entities can design programs that celebrate and support Yoruba cultural practices, fostering greater community engagement and intercultural dialogue.

In a broader context, the study contributes to the global understanding of social systems and communication styles, highlighting the diversity of human expression. This understanding can inform fields such as international relations, social justice, and community development, ultimately promoting more inclusive and respectful interactions across cultures. Through these various avenues, the study of the honorific system of the Yoruba people serves to enrich knowledge, promote cultural preservation, and enhance social cohesion both within the community and beyond.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a review of previous scholarly works and articles which are related to this study. This chapter is divided into four sections, namely: conceptual review or theoretical review as may be called, previous studies which gave rise to the motivation for the current study, and the concern of the present study.

2.1 CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

This section carefully outlines and explains the concepts or key terms related to this study. The purpose of the review is to provide a better understanding of the content of the work, and this review will help remove any form of ambiguity that may arise in the mind of the reader. The concepts to be reviewed are:

- Honorifics
- Gender Roles and Honorifics
- Social Hierarchy and Stratification

2.1.1 Honorifics

Honorifics are linguistic forms used to convey respect or social status, playing a crucial role in various languages and cultures. They often reflect social hierarchies and relationships, serving to establish and reinforce societal norms (Brown, 2020).

According to Brown (2020), honorifics can be defined as titles or terms of respect used in speech or writing to indicate the social status of the individual being addressed or referred to. Their primary function is to convey deference and politeness, often influencing the way individuals interact within their cultural context.

2.1.1.1 Types of Honorifics

Honorifics vary significantly across languages and cultures. They can be categorized into several types:

1. Titles: These include formal titles such as "Mr.," "Mrs.," "Dr.," or "Professor," which signal professional or social status.

2. Forms of Address: These are expressions used directly in conversation, such as "Sir," "Ma'am," or culturally specific terms like "Sensei" in Japanese (Mangga, 2015).

3. Suffixes and Prefixes: In some languages, honorifics are added to names or words to indicate respect. For example, the Korean language uses suffixes like "-ssi" or "-nim" (Brown & Whitman, 2015).

4. Kinship Terms: Many cultures utilize kinship terms to show respect to elders or superiors, such as "Auntie" or "Uncle" in English-speaking cultures (Jones, 2010).

2.1.1.2 Cultural Variations

The use and importance of honorifics can vary widely. In East Asian cultures, such as Japanese and Korean, honorifics are deeply embedded in the language and reflect Confucian values of

respect for hierarchy and age (Pizziconi, 2011). For example, Japanese uses a complex system of honorifics that adjusts speech depending on the status of the interlocutor (Yamada, 2019).

In contrast, Western cultures may exhibit a more simplified system of honorifics. While titles are commonly used in formal situations, the use of first names is often encouraged in informal contexts, reflecting a more egalitarian approach to social interaction (Laham et al., 2012)

2.1.1.3 Psychological and Social Implications

The use of honorifics has significant implications for social dynamics. According to Macaulay (2024), honorifics serve as a strategy for "face-saving," helping individuals navigate social interactions without causing offense. In settings where hierarchy is crucial, such as business or academic environments, the appropriate use of honorifics can foster respect and cooperation (Okamoto & Shibamoto-Smith, 2016).

Moreover, honorifics can influence perceptions of authority and expertise. Studies have shown that individuals who use appropriate honorifics are often perceived as more competent and trustworthy (Adu-Oppong & Agyin-Birikorang, 2014). Conversely, failure to use them can lead to misunderstandings and social friction (Stubbe et al., 2003).

Honorifics are an essential aspect of language that reflect cultural values and social structures. Their diverse forms and functions underscore the importance of context in communication. As societies evolve, so too may the use of honorifics, but their fundamental role in facilitating respectful interactions remains significant.

2.1.2 Gender Roles and Honorifics

Honorifics, as linguistic markers of respect and social status, play a significant role in shaping and reflecting societal norms, particularly concerning gender roles (Cookson et al., 2023). The use of honorifics varies across cultures, but their implications often reinforce traditional gender dynamics, highlighting both the complexities and the evolution of these roles in the 21st century.

In many languages, honorifics are gendered, which can perpetuate stereotypes. For example, in Japanese, "san" is a neutral honorific, while "bansan" (for men) and "josan" (for women) carry different connotations (Kadar et al., 2023). This gender differentiation in honorifics reflects broader societal views on gender, where men are often afforded more authoritative or formal titles. Such distinctions can influence perceptions of competence and authority, reinforcing the idea that men occupy higher social positions (Pizziconi, 2011).

The impact of honorifics is not limited to verbal communication; it extends into written forms and professional settings. In many Western contexts, titles such as "Mr." or "Mrs." not only denote marital status but also serve to categorize individuals in relation to societal expectations. This binary classification can marginalize those who do not conform to traditional gender identities, as highlighted by studies examining the experiences of non-binary individuals in professional environments (Griffin, 2020). The use of gender-neutral titles, such as "Mx.," is emerging as a means to challenge these conventions and foster inclusivity (Cordoba, 2022).

Moreover, honorifics can serve as a reflection of evolving gender roles. In some cultures, the increasing acceptance of women in leadership positions has led to a shift in the use of honorifics. Women may be addressed by their professional titles rather than traditional honorifics, indicating

a move toward equality in professional spheres (Smith & Sinkford, 2022). This shift not only signifies changing attitudes but also actively contributes to the redefinition of gender roles in society.

Despite these positive changes, resistance remains. The persistence of traditional honorifics can evoke tensions, especially in discussions about gender equality. For instance, the debate surrounding the use of "Ms." versus "Mrs." encapsulates broader societal conflicts regarding female identity and autonomy (Cameron, 2005). Such debates highlight how honorifics can both reflect and shape societal attitudes toward gender.

In multilingual contexts, the interplay of different honorific systems can complicate the understanding of gender roles. The use of honorifics in multilingual settings often requires navigating the expectations of various cultural norms, which can either challenge or reinforce gendered perceptions (Teibowei, 2024). This dynamic is particularly evident in globalized workplaces, where cross-cultural communication necessitates an awareness of how honorifics function differently in various linguistic environments.

Scholarly exploration of honorifics and gender roles is increasingly prominent, as researchers aim to unpack the implications of language in shaping societal norms. For instance, Abdalgane (2021) examines the role of language in reinforcing gender inequalities. These studies suggest that while honorifics can perpetuate traditional roles, they also hold potential for subversion and redefinition.

In conclusion, honorifics are more than mere linguistic forms; they are deeply intertwined with societal constructs of gender. As society progresses toward greater inclusivity and equality, the

discourse surrounding honorifics continues to evolve. Understanding the relationship between gender roles and honorifics is crucial for fostering more equitable communication practices in the 21st century.

2.1.3 Social Hierarchy and Stratification

Social hierarchy and stratification are fundamental concepts in sociology that examine how societies are organized and how power, resources, and status are distributed among individuals and groups (Naydenov et al., 2023). These concepts help in understanding social inequalities and the structures that maintain them.

2.1.3.1 Definitions and Theoretical Frameworks

Social hierarchy refers to the arrangement of individuals or groups within a society based on various factors such as wealth, power, and social status. Stratification, on the other hand, pertains to the systematic categorization of people into different layers or strata within a social hierarchy. (Giddens, 2013). This layering often leads to social inequality, as those in higher strata have greater access to resources and opportunities compared to those in lower strata (Oyekola & Oyeyipo, 2020).

Oyekola & Oyeyipo (2020) identified three dimensions of stratification: class, status, and party. Class refers to economic position, status pertains to social prestige, and party relates to political power (Oyekola & Oyeyipo, 2020). These dimensions interact to create complex social dynamics. For instance, individuals from lower economic classes may struggle to gain social prestige, while those with political power might exploit their position to reinforce their status (Conger et al., 2010).

2.1.3.2 Types of Stratification Systems

Stratification systems can be categorized into several types: caste systems, class systems, and meritocratic systems. Caste systems, often found in societies like India, are rigid and determined by birth, leaving little room for social mobility (Naydenov et al., 2023).

Meritocracy, a more contemporary concept, suggests that individuals succeed based on their abilities and efforts. However, critics argue that meritocratic systems often perpetuate existing inequalities because not everyone has equal access to opportunities (Sandel, 2020). This raises questions about the validity of meritocracy as a means of justifying social inequalities.

2.1.3.3 Impacts of Stratification

The effects of social stratification extend beyond individual experiences; they influence societal structures and institutions. For instance, stratification affects educational attainment, health outcomes, and political participation (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Individuals in higher strata often have better access to quality education and healthcare, leading to a cycle of advantage that is difficult to break.

Moreover, social stratification can lead to social unrest. Historical and contemporary movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, highlight the consequences of systemic inequality and the demand for social justice (Tilly, 2004). When individuals perceive that their opportunities are limited due to their social standing, it can result in tensions that challenge the status quo.

2.2 PREVIOUS STUDIES

This section highlights and discusses previous research which are related to this current study.

Oyetade (1995) article provided a descriptive analysis of the entire system of address forms in Yoruba, a Defoid language of the Niger-Congo phylum, spoken principally in the western part of Nigeria and to a lesser extent in the Republics of Benin and Togo. With data from short radio and TV plays, unobtrusive observation of actual usage, and introspection, it was discovered that the choices made by interlocutors are guided by the perceived social relationship that exists between them. The principal indices of this among the Yoruba are age, social status, and kinship. Nevertheless, certain peculiarities are noticeable. For instance, the dichotomy of power vs. solidarity becomes blurred with respect to Yoruba kinship terms of address; thus solidarity does not necessarily imply equality among the Yoruba.

Ajayi and Olayinka (2014) asserted that the concept of politeness is a universal concept which operation or manifestation varies according to the varying cultures and beliefs of people all over the world. As cited in his work, many languages that do not belong to the same language family nor situated in the same continent are found to have something in common in the way they express politeness in their culture. Such is the case with the Yoruba and French languages, which, in spite of their differences, manifest similarity in their culture of politeness. His work gave an insight into the similarities and differences that exist in the politeness cultures of the Yoruba and French languages, with particular focus on the use of honorific pronouns. He further went on to say that both languages make use of honorific pronouns to express politeness. However, while the French language has just one honorific pronoun "*Vous*", the Yoruba language has four honorific pronouns, *Eh* , *Yính*, *Wónh*, and *Wònh*.

Iwemi (2022) paper examined honorific names in the Ile-Oluji dialect of Yoruba. The purpose of the study was to point out and account for the selected honorific names in the language under consideration. The data used for the study were both primary and secondary. The primary data was collected from the selected native speakers of the community while the secondary data was collected from journals, archival materials, magazines, newspapers (Ile-Oluji Times), and documentations. The theoretical framework employed the descriptive method of data analysis of Basic linguistic theory. In the findings, there were gender specific terms that are used in referring to and conveying honour for each gender and they vary in their usage. Another finding and observation is that the use of address forms or honorifics in Ile-Oluji helps the people of the Ile-Oluji community to know and accord due respect to their superiors. Lastly, there was adequate proof to show that the address forms of Ile-Oluji are effective.

2.3 CONCERN OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study aims to offer a broader and more integrated examination of the Yoruba honorific system as a whole. It seeks to synthesize findings from these previous works while addressing gaps in understanding how honorifics function across different contexts and communities within Yoruba culture. This study not only builds on the descriptive analyses of earlier research but also aims to deepen insights into the complexities and variations in the use of honorifics, potentially incorporating a wider range and social settings than prior studies.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the theoretical framework for the research on Honorific system of the Yoruba people. The theoretical framework to be employed for this research is the "Politeness Theory" by Brown and Levinson (1978).

3.1 POLITENESS THEORY

Politeness theory, developed by sociolinguists Brown and Levinson in the 1970s, is a framework that helps explain how people manage social relationships through language. The theory is rooted in the concept of face, which refers to the positive social value a person claims for themselves in a given interaction. This value is shaped by both the individual's own desires and the expectations of the community. In every conversation, people are concerned with maintaining face, and politeness is one of the key strategies for doing so.

Face consists of two main components: positive face and negative face. Positive face refers to a person's desire to be liked, accepted, and admired by others. It reflects the need for connection, affirmation, and approval. Negative face, on the other hand, refers to the desire for autonomy, freedom from imposition, and non-interference from others. It reflects a person's need to maintain independence and avoid being forced into actions or obligations. Politeness strategies are designed to manage these two types of face, balancing the desires for social connection with the need for personal freedom.

According to the theory, communication often involves face-threatening acts (FTAs), which can potentially damage someone's face. An FTA occurs when an action or statement violates the listener's positive or negative face. For example, directly telling someone they have made a mistake threatens their positive face, while demanding something from them or imposing on their time threatens their negative face. In such situations, speakers may use politeness strategies to soften the impact of these threats.

Brown and Levinson identified several strategies speakers use to maintain politeness, depending on the social context and the relationship between the speaker and the listener. One of the key strategies is mitigation, where the speaker reduces the force of their utterance to avoid imposing on the listener. This can be done through indirectness, hedging, or using formal language. For instance, instead of saying "Give me that," a speaker might say, "Could you please pass me that?" to soften the request.

Another strategy is the use of positive politeness, which focuses on the listener's need for approval and affiliation. This could involve expressing warmth, compliments, or solidarity, and is typically used when the speaker and listener share a friendly or close relationship. Positive politeness strategies are aimed at making the listener feel valued and appreciated, thus maintaining their positive face. For example, a speaker might say, "I really like your ideas," before making a request to ensure the listener feels respected and their face is protected.

Negative politeness, in contrast, is used to respect the listener's desire for autonomy and independence. It involves strategies such as being apologetic, offering deference, or using indirect language to avoid imposing too much on the listener. For example, a speaker might say,

"I'm sorry to bother you, but could you help me with something?" to acknowledge the listener's right to decline the request and minimize the imposition.

The extent to which a speaker chooses to use these strategies depends on several factors, including the social distance between the speaker and listener, the power dynamics in the interaction, and the relative status of both parties. For example, a speaker is more likely to use negative politeness with someone in a higher social position or with whom they have a formal relationship. Conversely, with a close friend, positive politeness strategies may be more appropriate, as the social distance is smaller, and the need for autonomy is less emphasized.

Politeness theory has been highly influential in sociolinguistics, helping to explain the ways in which people navigate complex social interactions. It underscores the importance of context in communication, showing how different strategies are employed depending on the relationship between speakers, the social situation, and the potential consequences of face-threatening acts. Through this framework, it becomes clear that politeness is not simply about using "nice" language, but about managing social relations and maintaining the balance between connection and autonomy in communication.

3.2 APPLICATION OF THE THEORY

For the study of "Honorific system of the Yoruba people", politeness theory helps to understand how honorifics work to maintain harmony in communication. The theory suggests that speakers, when interacting, will use certain linguistic forms to either minimize or emphasize the social distance between themselves and others. In the Yoruba context, this may involve the use of formal language or titles when speaking to someone of higher status or age, thus safeguarding

the negative face by preventing the possibility of seeming too familiar or disrespectful. For example, younger individuals are expected to use elaborate greetings and honorifics when addressing elders, which reflects their understanding of the social norms that regulate these interactions.

Furthermore, the application of politeness theory to the Yoruba honorific system highlights how speakers manage the delicate balance between showing respect and maintaining their own face. When someone addresses an elder or a figure of authority using an honorific, they are performing a social act that acknowledges the power dynamics and reinforces social order. These interactions are not just about politeness in a superficial sense but are deeply embedded in the cultural fabric that governs social conduct. By using honorifics, the speaker demonstrates awareness of the intricate systems of respect, hierarchy, and reciprocity that define the Yoruba community.

Thus, politeness theory is applicable because it provides a framework for understanding how linguistic features, such as honorifics, function to navigate social relationships and maintain face in a society where respect and hierarchy are crucial. The Yoruba honorific system, through the lens of politeness theory, can be seen as a structured way of ensuring that social norms are respected and that individuals' social identities are upheld through language.

3.3 RELEVANCE/JUSTIFICATION OF THE THEORY

Politeness theory is highly relevant in examining the honorific system of the Yoruba people. This theoretical framework revolves around the concept of "face," which refers to an individual's social identity or self-image. According to the theory, politeness in communication is essentially

a way of maintaining or protecting this face, and it is achieved through strategies that address the positive and negative face needs of individuals.

In the context of the Yoruba language and culture, the use of honorifics serves as a clear marker of politeness and respect, particularly in interactions involving elders, social superiors, or individuals with higher social status. The Yoruba honorific system is rich with linguistic devices that acknowledge these social hierarchies. For instance, the use of specific titles like "*Bábà*" (father) or "*Íyà*" (mother) shows deference and acknowledges the importance of age and position. These forms of address fulfill the positive face needs by showing respect, care, and recognition of an individual's status in the social structure.

Politeness Theory is preferred for researching the Yoruba honorific system because it offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how language reflects social relationships and hierarchies. The theory's concept of face is crucial in analyzing how Yoruba speakers use honorifics to show respect, manage power, and maintain social harmony. Since Yoruba honorifics are closely tied to age, status, and social roles, Politeness Theory helps explain the strategic use of language in these contexts. Furthermore, the theory's focus on interactional dynamics and politeness strategies aligns well with the cultural importance of respect in Yoruba communication, making it ideal for this type of study.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

4.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents and analyzes the data for this research. The data is organized into three headings; data presentation, data analysis, and the discussion of findings. The politeness theory framework by Brown and Levinson (1978) will guide the analysis of the research, and the analysis will reflect the objectives of the research.

4.1 DATA PRESENTATION

The honorific system of the Yoruba people is deeply embedded in their culture and societal structure. Yoruba society places a strong emphasis on respect, especially towards elders, leaders, and individuals of higher social standing. These honorifics can be categorized based on the individual's age, status, and role in the community. Below is an organized breakdown of the various honorifics used by the Yoruba people:

4.1.1 Honorifics for Elders

Yoruba culture places a high premium on respect for the elderly. Elders are typically addressed with titles that show their high status, wisdom, and experience.

- 1. Bábá (Father):** Used to address elderly men or fathers, especially in the community. It signifies respect and can be used for older male figures even if they are not one's direct father.
- 2. Íyà (Mother):** Used for elderly women or mothers, similar to "Bábá" for men. It denotes respect and affection towards older women.

3. Íyè (old woman): This is a form of address used for elderly women, signifying respect.

4. Àgbá (Elder): Used as a general honorific for elders, whether male or female.

4.1.2 Honorifics for Royalty and Chiefs

The Yoruba people have a highly structured monarchy, with various titles used to address royal figures and chiefs.

5. Ọbà (King): The king or ruler of a town or city, who holds the highest authority in the traditional hierarchy.

6. Bààlẹ: A chief who oversees a village or community, often responsible for local governance and administration.

7. Ólórógún: A title given to a chief or noble, often recognized for their wealth and influence within the community.

8. Àsìwàjù: A leader or chief who is responsible for guiding and organizing people, often in a specific area of community life.

9. Íyàlódé: A title for a prominent female chief, often recognized for her leadership and influence among women in the community.

10. Ólójé: A title given to a chief who has significant influence and is often involved in matters of governance and community leadership.

11. Íyàlájẹ: A female chief in charge of commerce and trade, playing a vital role in economic activities within the community.

- 12. Ààrẹ:** A title for a chief who holds a position of authority over a larger region, often recognized for their leadership and governance skills.
- 13. Áwò:** A chief responsible for divination and spiritual guidance, often consulted for wisdom and advice in decision-making.
- 14. Ónífàngì:** A chief who oversees the affairs of a specific clan or lineage, ensuring the preservation of traditions and customs.
- 15. Àláfẹ:** A chief who has authority over a particular area or domain, often responsible for law enforcement and maintaining peace.
- 16. Óbínrín Ààrẹ:** A female counterpart to the Ààrẹ, holding a significant leadership role and often involved in community development.
- 17. Ákógún:** A chief recognized for their military prowess and leadership in defense matters, often advising on security issues.
- 18. Ólùwó:** This is a title for a ruler of a town or a traditional kingdom, particularly in the Yoruba region of Osun State.
- 19. Àlàáfín:** This refers to the king of Oyo, one of the most prominent Yoruba kingdoms.
- 20. Óónì of Ife:** This is the title for the king of Ife, one of the oldest Yoruba kingdoms and a key cultural center.
- 21. Éwí:** Used for the king or ruler of a smaller kingdom, often seen in the Ekiti region.

22. Òlòrì/Àyábà: The female counterpart of the king, often referred to as the queen, but still with great respect.

4.1.3 Honorifics for Religious Leaders

Religion, especially traditional African religions and Christianity, plays an important role in Yoruba society. There are specific titles for spiritual and religious leaders.

23. Bàbàlàwò: A title for a high priest in the Yoruba religion, specifically in Ifa worship. Babalawos are custodians of divination and spiritual knowledge.

24. Ólúwó: Not to be confused with the political title, this title also refers to a high priest or priestess in some religious contexts.

25. Álúfá: An honorific for a Muslim clergy or priest in Yoruba-speaking regions.

26. Ímàm: For Islamic religious leaders. While Yoruba culture is primarily associated with traditional religion and Christianity, there is a significant Muslim population, and the term "Imam" is used to address Muslim leaders.

27. Alhàjí/Alhàjá: Titles given to Muslim chiefs who have completed the pilgrimage to Mecca, reflecting their religious status.

28. Óriṣẹ́ Ágúntàn: An honorific for a Christian clergy or priest in Yoruba-speaking regions.

4.1.4 Honorifics for Age Grades

The Yoruba people have a system of age grades, and certain honorifics are used for individuals based on their age group and stage in life.

29. Ọmọdè: This means "child" or "teenager" and it is used for younger individuals.

30. Ọdọ: This means "youth" and it is used for individuals between childhood and adulthood.

31. Àgbà: This refers to an elderly person or an elder of high status.

32. Ọmọ Àgbà: A term that means "child of an elder," often referring to someone who is of a significant age but is still regarded as a younger person.

4.1.5 Honorifics for Common Courtesy

In general conversation, the Yoruba people use specific honorifics that convey respect to others, even in more casual interactions.

33. Sir/Madam: The Yoruba use the English terms "Sir" and "Madam" as additional markers of respect, especially when addressing strangers or people in positions of authority.

34. Óní: Meaning "owner," used to address someone with possession or control over something, such as "Oni ile" (owner of the house).

35. Ẹyín: A polite form of address used when referring to older people.

4.1.6 Honorifics for Titles and Professional Roles

There are certain titles used to address people based on their professional or academic achievements in the Yoruba community.

36. Ojogbon: Just as in Western societies, the title of "Professor" is used for individuals who have attained this academic rank.

37. "Dokita": This title is used for medical doctors as well as those who hold a Ph.D. The Yoruba form of this title is "Dokita" or "Dókítà".

38. Elero.: This is a professional honorific for engineers in the Yoruba-speaking regions. The title is used similarly to how "Engineer" is used in English.

4.1.7 Expressions of Respect

The Yoruba people also have specific expressions and forms of speech used to show respect in both formal and informal contexts.

39. E kààbọ: A respectful greeting used when meeting someone older or of higher status.

40. Èkúṣẹ: A form of greeting that acknowledges someone's hard work or achievement.

41. Èṣé: An expression of gratitude and respect that means "thank you."

4.1.8 Honorifics for Gender

Gender also plays a role in the Yoruba honorific system, with different terms used for men and women depending on their status.

42. Ọmọ-Óbínrín: This refers to a female child or daughter.

43. Ọmọ-Ọkúnrín: A term used for a male child or son.

4.2 DATA ANALYSIS

This section analyzes all the presented data in (4.1). The politeness theory framework will be used for the analysis of the data.

4.2.1 Analyzing the Selected Honorifics for Elders in Yoruba

In Yoruba, the use of honorifics plays a very important role in upholding social norms, particularly those related to positive face (the desire to be respected, valued, and appreciated) and negative face (the desire to be free from imposition or intrusion). "Bàbá" is an honorific that signals respect and acknowledges the elder's status and experience. Addressing an older man with this term supports the positive face of the elder by showing admiration for his wisdom, authority, and familial role. It also enhances the speaker's negative face by using a term that maintains social distance while also showing deference. This is an example of positive politeness, where the speaker emphasizes the elder's valued status within the community, making them feel respected and honored. "Íyà" functions similarly to "Bàbá" but for elderly women. It reflects respect and affection for the elderly woman. This term acknowledges her role as a mother figure, both in the familial and communal sense, and aligns with maintaining her positive face by highlighting her wisdom and societal standing. This can be considered a form of positive politeness as it highlights the elder woman's esteemed role in the community and conveys an affectionate respect that reinforces her social value. "Íyè" is a respectful term for elderly women, but it may also be seen as less affectionate than "Íyà" because it emphasizes age. In Politeness Theory terms, it functions to respect the elder's positive face by recognizing her experience. This is another example of positive politeness, yet it may be more neutral in conveying respect compared to the familial warmth implied by "Íyà." "Àgbá" is a broad honorific used for any elder, whether male or female, and emphasizes the individual's status as an elder rather than their familial role. It acknowledges the elder's wisdom and authority, which maintains their positive face. This term is a generalized recognition of the individual's position within the community. It

follows positive politeness because it emphasizes the elder's high status and wisdom, contributing to the maintenance of their face.

In all these examples, Yoruba honorifics for elders are used primarily to manage positive face. The speaker uses these honorifics to acknowledge the social status and experience of the elder, thus showing respect and avoiding any possible imposition. The choice of terms may vary in warmth and intimacy, but they all serve to reaffirm the social hierarchy and maintain face, demonstrating that Yoruba culture, through its linguistic practices, upholds the values of respect and reverence for elders.

4.2.2 Analyzing the Selected Honorifics for Royalty and Chiefs

Honorific titles and their uses within Yoruba society serve both to maintain and enhance these aspects of face.

Titles like *Ọ̀bà* (King), *Bààḽe* (Chief of a village/community), *Ólórógún* (Wealthy or influential chief), and *Áàrẹ* (Chief of a larger region) are used to express deep respect and acknowledgment of the person's authority and status. By using these honorifics, speakers are effectively addressing the positive face of the addressee, emphasizing their high status and communal respect. These titles indicate the high degree of deference due to those in positions of power. Titles such as *Áwò* (Chief responsible for divination) or *Ólùwó* (Ruler of a town or kingdom) demonstrate the use of language to create social distance between the speaker and the addressee. These titles acknowledge authority without overfamiliarity, ensuring that the speaker does not impose upon the addressee's high status. This reflects the negative face need to avoid intrusion and to maintain the dignified position of the person being addressed. Titles like *Íyàlódé* (female

chief), *Íyàlájẹ* (female chief in charge of commerce), and *Óníyángì* (chief overseeing a clan) demonstrate the specific gender roles within the Yoruba community. These titles maintain the same level of respect as those for male counterparts, showing how language reflects gendered power dynamics. The politeness markers here help to recognize women's authority and their significant roles in governance and commerce. The titles for female figures such as *Óníyángì* and *Ólóri/Àyábà* (Queen) uphold their importance and status within the traditional structure. Using these terms reflects an effort to ensure these women's positive face is maintained by offering appropriate respect for their leadership and authority. The Yoruba honorifics are not only used in addressing individuals; they also serve to communicate the speaker's social role and recognition of the role of others. In cases where a speaker might risk threatening the face of a high-status individual (for example, in making a request or providing feedback), the use of these titles acts as mitigation, softening the impact of the interaction. For instance, addressing a king as *Ọbà* before making a request would mitigate the imposition and show respect for their position, thus avoiding an outright face-threatening act.

While Yoruba honorifics emphasize hierarchical structures, they also serve to create solidarity within the community. By using the appropriate title, speakers align themselves with the social norms and values of the community, showing their understanding of the need to respect positions of power. This is a form of positive politeness, showing that the speaker is a member of the same group and recognizes the social order. Some titles, like *Ólórógún* or *Bààlẹ*, are used within specific communities or regions, signifying a shared understanding of authority and respect. When used within the group, they show membership and solidarity. However, the same titles might serve to differentiate between in-group and out-group members, as non-Yoruba individuals may not be familiar with the meanings of these titles. Titles like *Ákógún* (Chief

recognized for military prowess) and *Áláṣẹ* (Chief responsible for law enforcement) carry formal connotations of respect and authority. They serve to elevate the speaker's status by association with the addressee's honorific title, thus signaling the formality of the relationship and the respect due.

4.2.3 Analyzing the Selected Honorifics for Religious Leaders

The title *Bàbàlàwò* can be seen as an example of positive politeness, where respect and deference are expressed toward a religious leader through the use of an honorific. In this context, it acknowledges the high priest's spiritual authority and social status, reinforcing the positive face of the leader. The use of the prefix *Bàbà* conveys a sense of seniority and wisdom, which aligns with Yoruba cultural norms of showing respect for those with significant spiritual knowledge. Similarly, the title *Ólúwó* is another example of positive politeness, as it also serves to honor a religious leader by highlighting their role in spiritual and social guidance. The distinction from the political title *Ólú* (meaning "king" or "ruler") underlines the importance of religious authority, and using this title reinforces the social distance and respect for the leader's religious role. By addressing a religious leader with this title, the speaker acknowledges their high status in the religious hierarchy. The title *Álúfá* is used in a similar manner, employing positive politeness to show respect for Muslim clergy in the Yoruba community. This title signifies the speaker's acknowledgment of the priest's role as a spiritual guide and authority. It is a form of addressing someone with high moral and spiritual standing, where the title highlights the face-threatening act (addressing someone with authority) in a mitigated form. Similarly, the title *Óriṣẹ́ Ágúntàn* is used in a similar manner, employing positive politeness to show respect for Christian clergy in the Yoruba community. This mitigates the potential imposition of the

speaker's request or statement by showing deference. The title *Ímàm* follows the same pattern, with positive politeness being used to address a leader in the Muslim community. The use of the term reinforces the positive face of the *Ímàm* by recognizing their spiritual role and leadership. This also signals an understanding of the social importance of the Muslim community, acknowledging the *Ímàm's* religious authority in a similar way as other religious leaders in Yoruba society. The honorific *Alhàjí* (for men) and *Alhàjá* (for women) demonstrate positive politeness as well. These titles mark individuals who have undertaken a significant religious duty—the pilgrimage to Mecca. By addressing someone with these titles, the speaker is acknowledging not only their spiritual achievement but also their elevated status within the Muslim community. The use of these titles shows respect for their commitment to religious practices, emphasizing their social and spiritual standing.

4.2.4 Analyzing the Selected Honorifics for Age Grades

The Yoruba age-grade honorifics exhibit redressive politeness as they signal respect for an individual's age, status, and position within the community.

Ọmọdè (child/teenager) and *Ọdọ* (youth) are terms that show a hierarchy of respect, where younger individuals (typically those in the age group of children and youths) are addressed in a manner that reflects their lower status in the social structure. These terms convey an acknowledgment of their social position, signaling respect for their stage in life but without elevating them to a position of authority or maturity. *Àgbà* (elder) is used to show deference to older individuals, reflecting a higher social status. This term is a clear example of an honorific used to protect the "positive face" of the individual, acknowledging their maturity and wisdom, which are highly valued in Yoruba society. The use of *Àgbà* provides a form of respect and

recognition of the individual's life experience, ensuring their face (self-esteem) is maintained in social interactions. This strategy involves the speaker showing interest, approval, or warmth toward the listener's desires and needs. The use of honorifics like Àgbà or Ọmọ Àgbà (child of an elder) reflects positive politeness, as they indicate respect for an individual's age and wisdom. These terms affirm the person's social identity and role in the community, conveying warmth and recognition. Ọmọ Àgbà refers to a person who is of significant age but still considered younger than an elder. Using this term may indicate a respectful recognition of the person's familial connection or position, while also acknowledging that they are not yet at the same social status as the elder. In this context, the term is a form of positive politeness that shows the speaker recognizes the importance of age and wisdom but does not confuse it with the status of an elder. The use of Ọdọ for youths, for instance, serves to maintain social distance from elders and helps avoid the threat of disrespect when a younger person interacts with an elder. Similarly, using Àgbà ensures that an elder's face (social status and respect) is preserved in conversation.

4.2.5 Analysis on Selected Honorifics for Common Courtesy

The use of these English terms "Sir/Madam" reflect a positive politeness strategy, specifically addressing the need to show respect to strangers or authority figures. The use of these honorifics reduces social distance and acknowledges the power and status of the addressee, demonstrating deference. "Óní" which means "owner," aligns with the concept of possession or control as a form of social status. It can be viewed as a strategy to show respect and acknowledgment of someone's authority or ownership, which is a form of negative politeness. It avoids imposing by referring to someone by their title or role rather than their personal name, preserving their social standing. "Èyín" which is used to address older individuals, conveys respect and reflects a

strategy of positive politeness. By using this form, the speaker acknowledges the social value of age, which is an important marker of respect in Yoruba culture. It aligns with the desire to reinforce social bonds and show regard for the addressee's seniority.

4.2.6 Analysis on Selected Honorifics for Titles and Professional Roles

The title "Professor" is used to honor individuals with a high academic rank. This aligns with the concept of positive politeness, as it recognizes the individual's achievement and social status in academia. It acknowledges their expertise and is a sign of respect. Doctor ("Dokita" or "Dókítà") is used both for medical professionals and those with Ph.D.s. It serves a dual function, indicating professional expertise and societal value. The use of this title reflects face-threatening acts minimized by showing respect for the individual's contributions to health or academia. It strengthens the bond by recognizing their societal contribution. Engr. Is a title used for engineers and mirrors the function of "Engineer" in English. It shows respect for one's professional qualifications. The use of "Engr." supports positive politeness by acknowledging the individual's technical expertise and social role in improving infrastructure and industry. These honorifics, based on professional and academic achievements, help maintain social harmony by recognizing individuals' roles in society, enhancing their positive face.

4.2.7 Analysis on Some Expressions of Respect

The greeting "Ẹ kààbọ" shows deference and acknowledges social hierarchy, aligning with the "positive politeness" strategy, where respect is shown through inclusion and acknowledgment of higher status. The greeting "Ẹ kúṣẹ" expresses respect and admiration for someone's effort or achievement, utilizing "positive politeness" by focusing on the other person's accomplishments,

fostering goodwill and recognition. Eṣé which is the expression of gratitude is a negative politeness strategy, as it is used to show humility and avoid imposing on the person being thanked.

4.2.8 Analysis on Some Honorifics for Gender

In the context of Politeness Theory, the use of gendered honorifics in Yoruba reflects the concept of "positive face" and "negative face." These honorifics, such as Ọmọ-Óbínrín for a female child and Ọmọ-Ọkúnrín for a male child, show respect for the individual's social identity. By distinguishing between genders, these terms maintain the speaker's politeness and recognition of the listener's status and role. The system helps maintain social harmony by adhering to culturally accepted norms, reinforcing respect and appropriate social distance based on gender.

4.3 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The research reveals that Yoruba honorifics play a vital role in managing social relationships through respect and deference. These terms, such as "Bàbá" for men and "Íyà" for women, primarily serve to uphold the positive face of elders by showing respect for their age, wisdom, and social status. The use of honorifics like "Àgbá" for any elder reinforces the community's hierarchical structure, where age and experience are highly valued. In relation to royalty, titles such as "Ọbà" (King) and "Bààlẹ" (Chief) serve to acknowledge the authority and social distance of these figures, emphasizing their power while maintaining respect. Similar patterns emerge for religious leaders, where titles like "Bàbàlàwò" (high priest) or "Ólúwó" (spiritual leader) are used to affirm their spiritual authority and social standing.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights the importance of gender-specific honorifics, such as "Íyálódé" for female chiefs, ensuring that both men and women in positions of authority receive proper recognition. Age-grade honorifics also reflect respect for individuals based on their life stage, reinforcing social order. Yoruba honorifics function as a tool for both positive and negative politeness, ensuring respect and maintaining social harmony by acknowledging one's status, age, gender, or role in the community. This system of respect strengthens societal bonds and cultural norms.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

5.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter summarizes the previous chapters of the study on honorific system of the Yoruba people, as well present the findings, draw some conclusions and recommendations.

5.1 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

This research study was designed to look into the honorific system of the Yoruba people. The first chapter of the study focused on the background of the study. It introduced the topic, language of discuss, as well as stating the aim and objectives of the study, research questions, the statement of the research problem, scope of the study, methodology, and the significance of the study. The second chapter reviewed some relevant literature. The chapter was divided into three main sections, they were: conceptual review, previous studies, and lastly, the concern of the present study. The third chapter looked into the theoretical framework employed for the research which was the politeness theory framework. The chapter discussed what the theory framework was all about including its working principles, application of the theory, relevance/justification of the theory to the research, and lastly, how the theory can be applied to the analysis of the present study looking at the strengths of the theory. The fourth chapter has as its main concern the data presentation and analysis. The chapter concerned itself with the presentation of the data, analysis of the data, and lastly, the discussion of findings.

5.2 FINDINGS

1. The study reveals that honorifics in the Yoruba culture play a critical role in conveying respect and reinforcing social hierarchy. Terms like "Bàbá" for elderly men, "Íyà" for elderly women, and "Àgbá" for all elders highlight respect for age, wisdom, and experience, thereby reinforcing the community's reverence for elders. Similarly, titles for royalty, such as "Ọbà" for a king and "Bààlẹ" for a chief, reflect an acknowledgment of authority, ensuring that high social statuses are respected. Honorifics used for religious figures, like "Bàbàlàwò" (high priest) and "Ólúwó" (spiritual leader), further emphasize respect for spiritual authority. In all cases, Yoruba honorifics reinforce both positive face (respect for individuals' roles and statuses) and negative face (maintaining social distance). The research suggests that while the fundamental use of honorifics remains largely consistent across both urban and rural areas, there are subtle variations in the formality and frequency of their use. In urban settings, where modern influences may prevail, some traditional terms may be simplified or replaced by more neutral forms like "Sir/Madam" in professional contexts.
2. Conversely, rural areas tend to preserve more traditional forms of address, such as "Bàbá" and "Íyà," which are used more frequently. This shift indicates that urbanization and modernization may influence the specific language practices, but the core principles of respect and hierarchy remain intact. Lastly, modernization presents several challenges to the traditional Yoruba honorific system. One major issue is the erosion of cultural practices, where younger generations, influenced by globalized communication and technology, may adopt more casual forms of address or abandon honorifics altogether.

Additionally, in urban areas, the use of professional titles like "Doctor" and "Professor" might overshadow traditional honorifics, leading to a blending of respect for professional status and social hierarchy. These shifts may challenge the full preservation of the honorific system, potentially leading to a weakening of the clear social distinctions that honorifics once helped maintain. However, the study also notes that some individuals strive to balance both traditional and modern forms of address, indicating a degree of adaptation in response to changing societal norms.

5.3 CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Yoruba honorific system remains a crucial aspect of social interaction, promoting respect and maintaining social order. However, its use is adapting in response to modernization, particularly in urban settings, presenting both opportunities and challenges for the future preservation of these cultural practices.

5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher recommends further studies in this particular area and any aspect not touched in this study should be treated by linguist, scholars or any other researchers who have interest in honorific system of the Yoruba people or any dialect of the language.

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