

Is it Politeness or Respect? Forms of Addressing men in Matengo

Society

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Abstract

This paper explores the forms of address used to refer to men in Matengo society, seeking to establish whether these address terms express politeness or respect. Guided by Dominance Theory and Social Identity Theory, this qualitative study uses interviews with four native speakers of Matengo from Mbinga District, Ruvuma Region, together with documentary review. The findings indicate that Matengo society is using plural forms, surnames, kinship terms, first names, nicknames, and terms of intimacy as forms of address. Plurality, the use of surnames, and kinship terms are primarily used to show respect, mainly towards male elders and socially recognized individuals, indicative of age-based and status-based hierarchies, respectively. First names, nicknames, and intimate terms are mainly used to express familiarity and social closeness among peers and close relations. This study indicates that the address terms in Matengo serve as significant sociolinguistic markers through which power relations, social identity, and cultural values are maintained. Such findings contribute to African languages' sociolinguistics studies by identifying respect at the core of the male address practices within the Matengo society and by offering insight into culturally grounded systems of social interaction.

Keywords: Address terms, Matengo language, Power relations, Politeness, Respect

Introduction

Address forms are vital in sociolinguistic encounters, as they are reflective and expressive of social structures and social relationships in society. In most societies, including the Matengo society, address forms used for men are significant in revealing social aspects, power relationship, and cultural expressions. The Matengo society is rich in cultural heritage. It has diverse address forms, which are deeply entrenched in their society. The address forms are significant because they involve deeper social implications of respect, power, and status. Wardhaugh (2006) explains that address forms are affected by social status, gender, age, and intimacy. For example, university students address their lecturers using their formal names even though they may live near them. This means that context is central in deciding how people address each other.

Address forms are of great concern to social scientists such as sociologists and social psychologists because these forms reflect the way in which social relations are structured in a particular forum. Finally, the use of address forms is not fixed but varies depending on the context in which the communication is embedded (Brown & Yule, 1983).

The significance of using appropriate address terms is underscored by the present study cited from Afful and Mwinlaaru (2012), drawing from Lumoindong et al. (2025), through their study on address terms at a state university in Ghana. The study showed that instead, there was evidence of address terms being used by the students on their lecturers in the form of titles, kinship terms, and nicknames. In addition, address terms were both used and functioned in relation to both authority and resistance.

Wardhaugh (2006) classifies address terms into seven categories: first name, last name, title combined with last name, pet name, kinship term, title alone, and special nickname. Both Wardhaugh and Esmae'li (2011) note that these forms of address perform five primary

functions: capturing attention, expressing politeness, signaling identity, indicating social or power hierarchies, and conveying closeness or intimacy.

In Tanzania, forms of address and naming practices have been researched. For example, Resani (2012) discussed Kurya naming practices from both sociolinguistic and semantic perspectives. Recently, Mapunda and Shigini (2024) conducted a study on name-giving among the Sukuma community of Shinyanga, Tanzania, and found that a person's name is carefully selected to represent cultural, social, and spiritual truths. The choice of a personal name may be influenced by factors such as sex, order of birth, mode and circumstances of birth, parents' experiences, and events. These reasons are context-dependent and vary from family to family. Pallangyo and Sane (2024) conducted a study within the Meru community located in Tanzania to explore traditional name giving conventions to determine the influence names have on social cohesion, identity, cultural heritage, religion, among other aspects but contribute to gender inequality. Similarly, Lusekelo and Muro (2018) investigated naming practices in Machame-Chagga culture today, with a special focus on how foreign religions-Christianity and Islam-have influenced formal names of school-going children from Machame-Chagga families. The findings indicated that the inclusion of the two religions has almost devastated the traditional naming practice system since most children acquire either Christian or Islamic names. As well as Sebonde (2020) examines Chasu personal names and their correspondence to address practices among Vaasu in Same District, Kilimanjaro Region, and discovers that Chasu names are both linguistic and sociocultural markers which take shape through lexical formation and affixation processes.

However, the Matengo forms of addressing men are questioned whether it is politeness or respect; this is the interesting aspect that this study seeks to understand how men are addressed. And this distinguishes it from the other studies conducted, as shown above. In this

research, politeness refers to a tactic for expressing deference or for preserving social harmony, and respect entails recognition of age, social status, or authority in society.

A discussion on these themes within the framework of the Matengo sociocultural setup would necessitate an examination of the overall usage of language from a sociolinguistic perspective informed by theories like Social Dominance Theory or Social Identity Theory. Social Dominance Theory, conceptualized first by Peter Trudgill way back in 1974, can serve as the theoretical framework through which the language usage can be understood.

On the other hand, Social Identity Theory, conceptualized by Tajfel and Turner in the 1970s, centers on self-categorization in social groups. Interestingly, this could be applicable to the issue of naming and titling, where some names connote respect and dominance, while other names convey familiarity and equality. Interestingly, the issue of naming could very well be tied to self-categorization.

Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by two theories: Dominance Theory and Social Identity Theory.

Dominance Theory

The concept of Dominance Theory was first described in 1974 by a sociolinguist named Peter Trudgill. This theory provides a theoretical background to study the extent to which language use reveals power contexts and social dominance. This particular theory is very helpful to analyze to what extent forms of address remain expressive of attention and social dominance. Trudgill defines language as not a neutral tool and social prestige in a society is mirrored through such linguistic choices as names to address people.

In applying Dominance Theory to the analysis of addressing names, it becomes apparent how these names function to both reflect and maintain power in society. For example, the more formal style of address involving title and surname is most likely to convey respect

as well as social difference based on power dynamics. Furthermore, when referring to names in their informal or nickname form, there is most likely social equality being expressed.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory was a concept introduced in the 1970s by Henri Tajfel and John Turner. This refers to how people categorize themselves and other people as members of a social group and affects self-perception and subsequent behavior. However, it is also clear that a person derives self-esteem as part of an in-group and has a less favorable perception of an out-group, hence exhibiting in-group favoritism and an out-group bias. This approach will be useful for understanding how reference to names and titles reflects a mirror image of social hierarchies and affiliations.

In reality, address choice is often based on social status and group affiliation. Formal names are often associated with respect and authority, while non-formal names imply closeness and equality. Consequently, address variation is significant in terms of social identity and affiliation with society.

Methods

The study employed a qualitative research methodology, making use of interviews and document analysis as key sources of information. The study conducted interviews on four native speakers of the Matengo language from Mbinga District in the Ruvuma Region. The technique of purposive sampling was used in seeking the interviewees to ensure that the participants were familiar with information on the subject matter. The study also consulted written documents and existing literature on the Matengo language and culture. This is because the study needed to acquire information on addressing in the Matengo society.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings based on the sociolinguistic analysis of terms used to address men in Matengo society.

Terms used to Address men in Matengo Society

The study revealed various strategies used by the Matengo society to address men. These terms used differ from those used to address women. The following are the ways in which the Matengo society addresses the male gender. The key findings are detailed below:

The use of Plurality

In Matengo society, the use of plurality when addressing men, particularly grandfathers, fathers, uncles and brothers signifies respect and reverence. This form of address is prevalent among children who use plural terms even when referring to a single individual. As one interviewee noted,

“...Always when talking to men, children are required to demonstrate respect by addressing his/her father by plurality such as 'Our fathers, you become very angry when your children misbehave'” [Phone Interview, 15th June 2025].

The use of *mwakatati* ‘our fathers’ reflects an ingrained cultural practice that emphasizes respect and acknowledges the paternal role within the family unit.

Table 1: Plurality in Matengo Community

Form of address	Gloss
<i>Akatati</i>	‘fathers’
<i>Akakaka</i>	‘bothers’
<i>Akamjomba</i>	‘uncles’
<i>Akahoko</i>	‘grandfathers’
<i>Akabinamu</i>	‘cousins’

Source: Field data (2025)

These findings are consistent with the work of Marten and Kula (2021), who note that Bantu languages exhibit a diverse range of strategies for marking politeness. Some of these strategies are widespread across the language family, while others are more restricted. One notable

morphosyntactic strategy involves using second-person plural forms when addressing a singular individual to convey respect. Similarly, Mkochi (2019) highlights that the use of the second-person plural in Malawian CiTonga as a politeness marker is exemplified in the widely used “plural addressee marker” -ini/-eni, which serves to express respect and courtesy toward the addressee as.

The use of Surname or Lastname

In Matengo society, surnames or last names serve to identify lineage and the social bonds that exist. As E'mar (2021) explains, a surname reflects whole family groups and is an important way to differentiate people from one another. Wardhaugh (2006) claims that the use of the last name can connote power relationships, as when a person of lower status uses the surname of a person with higher status formally, which indicates that one is subordinate to the other. In the Matengo case, though, surnames have been used with regard to indicating the degree of maturity of the person, where married people are usually addressed by surname or last name.

Table 1: Surname or Last name in Matengo

S/N	Matengo	Gloss
1.	Kapenga	Kapinga
2.	Ndongoro	Ndunguru
3.	Nkomba	Komba
4.	Mapunda	Mapunda
5.	Nsembi	Nchimbi
6.	Kabonga	Kawonga
7.	Nsuha	Msuha
8.	Kinunda	Kinunda
9.	Turuka	Turuka
10.	Sangana	Sangana

11.	Mbungu	Mbungu
12.	Ndimbo	Ndimbo
13.	Mbonda	Mbunda

Source: Field Data (2025)

Lusekelo (2018) observes that surnames, otherwise regarded as family names, are crucial in identifying individuals and establishing ties with their clans. In relation to this, the use of a specific form of address is crucial in securing ties between families and clans. Lusekelo adds that such cultural expressions are not unique to Nyakyusa but are replicated in other African societies. In light of this, Sebonde (2020) elaborates that the use of family names is a common cultural phenomenon, even though its application may differ from one society to another and is predisposed by ethnic or cultural heritage. Among the Chasu, a family name may be a surname usually taken from the grandfather's name; a clan name, or a combination of both. The naming convention is traditionally patriarchal and indigenous rather than being subject to religious practice, such as baptism.

The use of Nicknames

In Matengo society, nicknames are used to express friendship and personal relationship. According to E'mar (2021), nicknames take over the use of formal names when people stay in the informal setting. This assumes that nicknames show intimacy and closeness to each other. Wardhaugh (2006) adds that usually, nicknames assume a much closer meaning than formal names. Salihu (2014) elaborates that nicknames chosen by oneself tend to have positive meanings identifying features or some achievements one has acquired, while nicknames obtained from other people cannot be frankly welcomed and are often opposed. Based on this, it is said that nicknames reinforce and negotiate social relations. It was also revealed that among married women in Yoruba, nicknames were amongst address forms that they used to

address their husbands. This study also revealed that age difference, education, originality, and the context of the speech determine the adoption of address forms.

Table 2: Nickname in Matengo society

S/N	Name	Gloss
1.	Kasufulia	‘Small bowl’
2.	Kabakuli	‘Small plate’
3.	Kakombe	‘Small cup’
4.	Kandeku	‘Small drum’
5.	Kahuhi	‘Small nest’
6.	Kaundi	‘Small cloud’
7.	Kalwaju	‘Small foot’
8.	Kabagu	Small axe

Source: Field Data (2025)

Many nicknames come from the individuals' behavior, from events happening in society, from associations with things, plants, and animals. Table 2: Distribution of hypersensitive nicknames following gender as stated by Watzlawick et al. (2016), a nickname is sometimes used only by a restricted group of people. It can be pejorative or tender, but the person who received it may accept or reject, which does not prevent others from insisting on continuing to use it:

The use of the First Name

A first name is assigned to a person at the time of birth. Rifai and Prasetyaningrum (2016) say referring to a person using their first name is a very common form of referring to a person. People commonly refer to others using first names while talking to strangers or people they know and people they know within their families. In Matengo social groups, people refer to each other using first names when referring to their friends and people within their age

group. Magashi (2023) says referring to a man or a woman whose age is unknown to the speaker using a first name is common in Sukuma social groups. In this social group, people refer to people they are well aware of using first names. People refer to people within their families using first names.

Some other cultural taboos also affect the use of given names. It is a taboo for a woman to refer to her father-in-law by a given name. In a scenario where a daughter is given the same first name as her mother-in-law, the father is not supposed to use his daughter's name. In the Matengo culture, inheritance of first name comes from either the fathers

Kinship Terms

As Wardhaugh (2006) points out, in certain languages, kinship terms may serve as vocatives. For instance, using examples from a film, Wardhaugh illustrates how certain vocatives are normally used by speakers when referring to kin and/or young individuals, such as children.

In the Matengo social organization, kinship terminology is based on similar forms of hierarchical relationships. These are applied to refer to relatives as well as other people within the social organization based on social relationships and age. For instance, the title “uncle,” “aunt,” or “elder brother” is not only applied to refer to social relationships; it is applied to show respect based on the social roles that people hold within the social organization.

Table 3: Kinship names

Kinship name	Gloss in English
Ahoko	Grandfather
Atati	Father
Mmbele	Elder brother
Nhasa or kaka	kaka
Nsomba	Uncle

Nhibini	Cousin
Ndombo	his sister

Source: Field Data (2025)

Such names are utilized in establishing the relationship between the speaker and the addressee. Additionally, they are used as ways of establishing respect and a relationship. As per Kufakunesu et al. (2012), names considered part of kinship, like “baba” meaning “father”, are used as respectful ways of enhancing social interaction between both related and unrelated people. Based on Shona culture, they state that in cases involving interaction between individuals who are of similar ages to one’s father, the name “baba” is preferred.

Terms of Intimacy

In speech situations between the speaker and the addressee holding a close and amicable relationship, there are terms of endearment which the speaker uses. Terms of endearment show that the speaker views the addressee as belonging to a closely knit social circle or as a person whom they regard as a friend or with whom they have a personal relationship. In Matengo society, there are terms of endearment whose use signifies a close relationship between the speaker and the addressee. An example of a term of endearment in Matengo language is ndome ‘her husband’.

In the Iranian culture, the use of various forms of address like first names, pet names, and honorifics among spouses has been analyzed by Esmae’li (2011). Variables considered were whether the spouses were alone or along with their children or along with the parents of the spouse. Finally, the age and educational background of the spouses were taken into consideration. Concluding the findings, Iranian men were observed to often use pet names when they are alone with their wives.

Conclusion

In this study, the forms of addressing men in Matengo society were investigated to find out if these forms of addressing men are more a matter of politeness or respect. Results show that forms of addressing in Matengo society depend on age, marital status, social status, familiarity, and context. Plurals, surnames, and kinship terms mostly signal respect, especially towards male elders and important or recognized men within society. In contrast, first names, nicknames, and terms of affection signal more towards familiarity than towards politeness. Results obtained indicate that the core motive behind terms of addressing men in Matengo society lies with respect and not with politeness. Future research may focus on forms of addressing women in Matengo society for a more contemporary work comparing terms of addressing within Matengo societies in both rural and urban settings with a focus on how modernization, education, and language contact shape forms of addressing within these societies.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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