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# Impoliteness in language use: a study of barrow pushers and the public in onitsha main market

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**Abstract:** This study examines the language use of barrow pushers and the public in Onitsha Main Market, focusing on impoliteness strategies. Using a discourse analysis approach, the researcher analysed audio recordings of interactions between barrow pushers and customers, revealing the prevalent use of impolite language, including insults, blame and criticism. The study shows that impoliteness serves as a means of negotiating power, managing conflicts and maintaining social relationships. However, it also leads to communication breakdown and conflict escalation. The findings highlight the importance of language sensitivity training for barrow pushers and the public-potential customer to enhance effective communication and conflict resolution in market settings. The study contributes to the understanding of impoliteness in language use in African markets, emphasizing the need for context-specific approaches to communication and conflict management.

**Key words:** Impoliteness, language use, barrow pushers, public, Onitsha Main Market, discourse analysis, power negotiation, conflict management

## INTRODUCTION

Impoliteness, a pragmatic phenomenon that violates social norms and causes offense, has been a subject of interest in various fields, including linguistics and communication studies. In the bustling Onitsha Main Market, where barrow pushers and the public interact daily, the use of impolite language has become a prevalent issue. This article aims to explore the nature and extent of impoliteness in language use among barrow pushers and the public in this vibrant market. Impoliteness in language use has been a subject of interest in linguistics and communication studies, as it can have significant consequences on social relationships and communication effectiveness. Market places, like Onitsha Main Market, provide a unique context to investigate impoliteness in language use,


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given the diverse interactions between vendors, cutomers and service providers like barrow pushers.

Language is a vital tool for communication and as such can be either to build or destroy relationships. In market settings, effective communication is crucial for successful transaction and positive customer experiences. However, impoliteness in language use can lead to conflict, mistrust and negative outcomes. Onitsha Main Market, a bustling commercial centre in Nigeria, presents an interesting context to explore impoliteness in language use. Barrow pushers, who play a crucial role in the market's operations, often interact with customers in a fast-paced and dynamic environment. This study therefore, investigates impoliteness in language use among barrow pushers and the public in Onitsha Main Market, examining the manifestations, functions and perceptions of impoliteness in this context.

**Statement of the Problem**

Notwithstanding the importance of effective communication in market environments, impolite use of language among barrow pushers and the public in Onitsha main market has been observed to be prevalent, leading to misunderstandings, conflicts as well as negative impacts on business transactions and relationships. However, there is a lack of empirical research on the nature, extent and social dynamics of impolite language use inthis context.

**Research Questions**:

This study anchors on the following research questions;

- Is there any manifestation of impoliteness in language use among barrow pushers and the public in Onitsha Main Market?
- What is the function of impoliteness in this context?
- How do barrow pushers and the public perceive impoliteness in this context?

**Review of Literature**

**Conceptual Framework**

**Language Use and Conflict**

The power of language in conflict is so influencing that it even controls the action of the user. Language has the power to entertain, insult, teach, satirize, reconstruct and even destroy. A listener or reader is held to complete attentiveness when appropriate language is in the application. A reader smiles when he/she has read something that interests his /her person. The same reader may begin to cry when an account reveals genocides and the members that perished are much.

Language has a strong role in conflict management from the perspective that it has the history of man as being a tool to igniting and escalating a conflict on the one hand and pacifying or checking the destructiveness of conflict on the other hand. In fact, language



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could be bad or good depending on the usage. It is a powerful indicator of any conflict language, when a dominant language displaces other tongues, then the subordinate groups change. Aniga, (2011 p.3) further explains that language entails: language and conflict are synonymous for the very reason that language is an integral part of culture and a vehicle of interaction, inter-communication and a practical tool for state administration both in modern and ancient times. Therefore, adopting a particular language by a particular speech community declares what identity it wants to show of itself and to the world. In the light of the above assertion, there is no gain saying that language being a vehicle of symbolic value becomes a source of conflict because two persons/groups during interaction usually disagree or clash. Depending on the usage, language is good or bad, its application can promote conflict or otherwise. When it is applied properly, conflict is averted but when it is otherwise applied conflict is ignited. Also, culture plays or determines whether or not language is appropriate. Language one uses in resolving conflicts matters a lot- mild/polite language facilitate speedy resolution while impolite language escalate conflicts.

**Impoliteness in Interaction**

Impoliteness belongs to the other end of politeness and it includes rudeness, aggression and non-verbal behaviours that threaten the face needs of individuals. In different opinion of many scholars,' it is a communicative act which tends to attack face and cause social conflict and disharmony among people' as opined by Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichman (2003); Kienpointer (1997) and Beeds (1995). A better description according to Cupper is that proffered by Tracy and Tracy according to them, 'impoliteness as communicative acts perceived by members of a social community which is often intended by speaker to be purposefully offensive' (20). Culpeper unpacks this definition and points that impoliteness results when:

1. A speaker communicates face attack intentionally or
2. The hearer perceives and or constructs behaviour as intentionally face attacking or a combination of 1 and 2.

According to Bucholtz (1999), ' It is linguistic indexes that individuals employ to distance themselves from a rejected identity' (211). It is an attempt to exercise power over one's interlocutors whilst simultaneously ensuring that one's interlocutors are overtly offended in the process, Bousfield (141).

Impoliteness is linguistic expressions encoded through language and accorded behaviour, that can be heard or seen. Impoliteness therefore according to Spencer Oatey is people's judgement about the social appropriateness of verbal and non- verbal behaviour (95). It is not behavior perse that is impolite but impoliteness is an estimated identity of people's behaviour as it concerns their unobjective inference about social appropriateness. Primarily, inferences from people are based on their credence about behaviour in terms of


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imposed what is given and accepted. Lay down attitude is a behaviour that is considered as legally or socially mandatory. People are mandated to produce and others are expected to accept it. People are compelled to avoid it while others do not have right to experience it at all. Any behaviour that appears in this form is considered impolite according to Kasper (193-218). It is noteworthy from the preceding that troubles can emanate as a result of many variables like the choice of language that incorporates power, imposition with particular reference to mood, status, gender, occupation age etc.

Impoliteness according to Terkourafi (2008) occurs when the expression used is not conventionlised relative to the context of occurrence. Terkouafi's view suggests that some completely polite behaviours in one context, can be assumed as impolite in another context. This supports Jamet and Jobert (2013) aver that "in German context, directness is politeness".

**Impoliteness Strategies**

Culpeper (2011) distinguishes five super strategies by which impoliteness can be created and received, they are:

1. Bald on Record Impoliteness: This strategy is employed when there is much face at risk and when a speaker intends to damage the hearer's face and thus the impolite utterance will be performed directly and clearly, Bousfield, (2008, p.92). Culpeper (2011) uses here the concept of face-attack-act (FAA), in opposition to FTA, in order to identify face attack where there is a deliberate intention on the part of the speaker Mullany and Stockwell, (2010, p.71). Wieczorek (2013, p.46) elucidates the difference between Brown and Levinson's bald on record politeness and Culpeper's bald on record impoliteness. While the former is applied in particular situations where the risk to face is minimal without any attention to attack the hearer's face, the latter is used when there is much risk to the and the speaker intends to damage the other's face.
2. Positive Impoliteness: This strategy is used to damage the hearer's positive face want (his desire to be acceptable) Bousfield and Locher, (2008, p.34). In the incarnation of his model (2005), Culpeper adds a range of sub-strategies of impoliteness including;
   -Ignoring or snubbing the other
   -denying common ground with the hearer
   -selecting a sensitive or understandable topic to talk about
   -using inappropriate identity markers
   -being disinterested and unsympathetic with the hearer
   -looking for disagreements
   -using obscure language and inserting secretive words into the discourse


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-using taboo words, cited in Mullany and Stockwell, (2010, p.72).

3. Negative Impoliteness: This strategy is designed to attack the hearer's negative face want (his/her desire to be free from imposition) Thieleman and Kosta (2013, p.239). Negative impoliteness, in accordance with Culpeper's (2015) involves the following sub-strategies as cited in Mullany and Stockwell (2010, p.72)

-scorn

-frighten

-ridicule

And invade the hearer's space literally or metaphorically.

4. Mock Impoliteness: In this strategy, the speaker performs the FTA using politeness strategies which are clearly insincere, Thielemann and Kosta, (2013, p.239).

5. Withhold Politeness: This strategy occurs when the speaker does not perform politeness where it is expected as in keeping silent when the speaker is supposed to thank the hearer, Thielemann and Kosta,(2013, p.239).

**Conflict Resolution**

The concept, of conflict has received several definitions from different scholars. This study will pay particular attention to that of Oboegbulem and Alfa (2013) who define conflict as "a struggle over values or claims to status, power and scarce resources in which the aim of the conflicting parties are not only to gain the desired value but also to neutralize, injure or eliminate the rival" (p.91). Furthermore, Shahmohammadi (2014 p.630) define it "as a form of friction, disagreement or discord arising within individuals and or a group when the belief ar actions of one or more members of the group are either resisted by or unacceptable to one or more members of another group". Again, Tschamon-Moran (2011 p.3) added that " conflict pertains to the opposing ideas and action of different entities resulting in an antagonistic state".

Causes of conflict was identified by Shahmommadi as specialization, common resource, goal differences, interdependence, authority relationships, status differences, jurisdictional ambiguities, roles and expectations. Rahim (2001) gave diversity as a source of conflict. Again, he explained that increasing heterogeneous factors such as differences in age, cultural background, ethnicity and values greatly generate conflicts among employees in workplaces. Moreso, Oboegbulem and Alfa (2019) are of the opinion that effective administration of tertiary/school system depends largely on a cordial and cooperate working relationship between HoD and staff, staff and staff or students. This is a different task, however, Kilonzo and Ivita (2019 p.1) posit that " conflict is an integral part of human organisations". Therefore, efforts must be made to manage or resolve it and to promote



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development and progress. Accordingly, Shahmohammadi observes conflict-handling strategies such as avoiding, collaborating, compromising, accommodating and mediating which, can all be applied through the proper application of language.

**Onitsha Main Market**

Onitsha main market is a prominent commercial centre located in Onitsha Anambra State, Southeast of Nigeria. It is also known as Onitsha Market. It is one of the largest and most popular markets in West Africa, attracting traders and customers from various parts of the region. The market is situated at the centre of Onitsha and covers a vast area along the bank of the River Niger. Onitsha main market has thousands of traders including wholesalers and retailers, many of whom are organized into various trade unions or associations. This market serves a large customer base both locals, visitors from neighbouring towns and cities as well as international buyers. The market plays a vital role in the economy of Onitsha and Anambra State and it is generating a significant revenue together with providing employment opportunities for many people.Onitsha main market is also a cultural hub, reflecting the rich heritage and traditions of the Igbo people, with traders and customers engaging in lively negotiations and banter.

**Barrow Pusher**

Barrow pushers also called market porters are individuals who provide transportation services for goods and products within the market. They play a crucial role in facilitating trade and commerce in Onitsha Main Market. They also offer transportation for goods, products and luggage within the market, using wooden or metal barrows to move items from one location to another. However, their interactions with the public are often characterized by impolite language, which can lead to conflicts and misunderstandings.

Barrow pushers are essential to the market's operations as they help traders and customers transport goods effectively and conveniently. They possess physical strength, endurance and navigation skills that allow them to navigate and manoeuvre through crowded market paths and alleys. Barrow pushers interact with traders customers and other market stakeholders, often engaging them in negotiation, banter and witty remarks. They are known for their unique language style, blending formal and informal language, slang and humour to communicate effectively in the fast-paced market environment. Often they develop close relationships with traders and customers, building trust and loyalty through their reliable services.

**Power Negotiation**

This refers to the process of bargaining and influencing others to achieve a desired outcome, often involving the strategic use of language, persuasion and leverage. In the context of barrow pushers and the public in Onitsha Main Market, power negotiation plays out in price negotiation where the barrow pushers engage the customer in price


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bargaining with each side trying to achieve a favourable price for their goods or services. In power negotiation, language plays an important role with participants using various strategies like persuasion, manipulation and humor to achieve their target.

**Discourse Analysis**

This is used in various fields such as linguistics, sociology, psychology and communication studies. In the context of this study, discourse analysis examines how language use reflects and shapes power relationships between barrow pushers and the public who are their potential customers. It is an aspect of linguistics that examines language use in social contexts, focusing on the meaning and functions of language in communication. Discourse analysis involves a systematic and detailed analysis of language data to uncover the underlying social, cultural and power dynamics that shape language use.

**Impoliteness Strategies Employed**

Barrow pushers and the public in the Onitsha Main Market employ various impoliteness strategies in their language use. These strategies may include:

- Insults and name-calling: The use of derogatory terms, insults, and name-calling is a common form of impoliteness observed in the market.
- Interruptions and disruptive behavior: Interrupting others during conversations, shouting and engaging in disruptive behavior can be perceived as impolite and disrespectful.
- Ssrcasm and mockery: The use of sarcasm and mockery can be employed to belittle or ridicule others, contributing to an impolite atmosphere.
- Aggressive language and threats: The use of aggressive language, including threats and intimidation can create a hostile environment and escalate conflicts.

**Types of Impoliteness**

Culpeper (2011) proposes three types of impoliteness in his up-to-date books on impoliteness. They share the function of contradicting interpersonal relationships, identities and social norm, thus;

1. Affective Impoliteness: This type of impoliteness is where the speaker expresses his anger towards the hearer and this consequently generates a negative emotional atmosphere between the speaker and the hearer, Huang, (2014, p.150)
2. Coercive Impoliteness: This variant of impoliteness raises realignment between the speaker and the hearer so that the speaker can gain profits at the expense of the hearer. Culpeper believes that this impoliteness type takes place to a greater extent in situations where the speaker belongs to a higher and or more powerful social level than the hearer's level. In a nutshell,


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coercive impoliteness is a means of getting power via language, (2011, p.252).

3. Entertaining Impoliteness: This type of impoliteness is generated when the speaker pokes fun at the hearer and utilizes the target feelings to obtain amusement.

**Factors Contributing to Impoliteness**

Several factors may contribute to the prevalence of impoliteness in language use among barrow pushers and the public in Onitsha Main Market thus:

- Socioeconomic status: The socioeconomic status of barrow pushers and their perceived lower social standing may influence their language use and interactions with the public.
- Cultural norms and expectations: Cultural norms and expectations regarding appropriate language use and behaviour in public spaces can shape the way individuals communicate.
- Environmental factors: The chaotic and crowded nature of the market, as well as the high levels of noise and activity, may contribute to impolite language use of aggressive behaviour.
- Power dynamics: The power dynamics between barrow pushers and the public, including traders and customers, can influence the way they communicate and interact with each other.

**Conceptual Framework**

- In the study of impoliteness 'face' is an all-important issue. Face is a linguistic concept originally introduced by Erving Goffman. Face according to Goffman (1967) is self-image reflected in terms of approved social attributes; it is a person which we present in a discourse; the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself. In conversations, sometimes, people's face is threatened. Impoliteness maximises face threats for Culpeper (2011). He perceives impoliteness as a phenomenon which comes about when the speaker communicates face–attack intentionally or the hearer perceives and or constructs behaviour as intentional face-attacking or a combination of both. In this research impoliteness is the major term and as such, this study will focus on theorizing the concept of impoliteness

**Methodology**

The researcheremployed a mixed-methods approach in this study to have a comprehensive understanding of impoliteness in language use among barrow pushers and the public-potential customers in Onitsha main market. Personal observation and recorded



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interactions were employed for systematic data collection. The data collected were analysed using content analysis of interactions to identify types of impolite language during interaction.

**Data Presentation and Analysis**

The findings and investigation into the language use of barrow pushers and the public in Onitha Main Market, with a concentration on impoliteness. Using a mixed-methods approach that combined personal observation and recordings, the researcher gathered data on linguistic features, pragmatic functions as well as social perceptions of impolite language in this context. The analysis reveals patterns and trends in the use of impolite language among barrow pushers and the public, showing the ways through which social dynamics, cultural norms and power relationships shape communication in this urban market setting.

**Research question 1:**

Is there any manifestation of impoliteness in language use among barrow pushers and the public in Onitsha Main Market?

**Excerpt 1:**

A woman came to buy goods and after her purchases, she called a barrow pusher to convey her goods to the motor park and here is the observed interaction:

Customer: Good morning oo.

Barrow pusher: Madam, good morning!

Customer: Please, how much will you take to convey these (pointing at good ) to park?

Barrow pusher: Madam, (#1000) one thousand.

Customer: Only these?

Barrow pusher: Madam, you are wasting my time, time is money.

Customer: Is it not (#500)?

Barrow pusher: Idiot! Do I look like a bager?

In the above excerpt, the customer (woman) in the cause of negotiating and bargaining with the barrow pusher received insults through verbal aggression and other unvoiced expressions from the barrow pusher, 'Idiot! Do I look like a beggger?' without minding that the woman only wanted to patronize him and she is equally capable of paying him handsomely after delivery. Also, forgetting the general slogan- "customer is always right". The transaction still took place because both of them saw it as a normal lifestyle in Onitsha main market.

**Excerpt 2:**

A man called a younger man pushing a barrow, he came and below is their recorded interaction:



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Customer: Hey! Barrow! Barrow!
Barrow pusher: Oga! Good morning.
Customer: Good day. Please carry these goods to this (pointing at a park) park for me.
Barrow pusher: Loaded the items without negotiating the price.
Customer: (On getting to the park) gave him what he likes (as a small boy).
Barrow pusher: Do I look like a small pikin?
Customer: You are a small pikin nahh.
Barrow pusher: Na your papa be small pikin. Give me my money!

In excerpt two above, the interaction began with the customer calling the barrow pusher in usual way, 'barrow, barrow' and the barrow pusher came and they exchanged greetings. The customer requested him to convey his goods to the park which the barrow pusher loaded the goods without negotiating the price seeing the customer as a responsible man. On getting to the park, the customer dashed the barrow pusher money like a small boy. The barrow pusher asked him ' do I look like a small pikin?'. The customer replied in the affirmation that 'you are a small boy nahh', the barrow pusher in anger, told him 'na your papa be small pikin, give me my money! Forcefully the customer paid him the surposed amount.

**Excerpt 3:**

A woman after purchasing her goods needed a barrow to carry her goods and here is their interaction:

Customer: Barrow come!
Barrow pusher: The barrow pusher came and positioned his barrow and asked the customer why are you addressing me like that?
Customer: Is it offensive to address you with your job?
Barrow pusher: You know something so?
Customer: Are you insulting me?
Barrow pusher: You are a big fool!

In the above excerpt, the customer invited the barrow pusher in the usual way, 'barrow man', he came and started accusing the customer of not addressing him well. The customer tried to explain to him that there was nothing wrong in addressing him with his job but the barrow pusher got more angry and asked the customer, 'You know something so?'. The customer asked him are you insulting me? The barrow pusher gave her a more direct insult by telling her 'You are a big fool'

**Research Question 2**:

What is the function of impoliteness in this context?


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**Excerpt 4:**

A man was walking along the street within the market area and a barrow was coming behind him and this is the observed interaction:

Barrow pusher: Road! road!

Other road user: Easy nahh!

Barrow pusher: comot for road, (eri-er!) stingy man.

Other road user: Mtshew! Sighed.

In the above excerpt, the barrow is acting as the only user of the road who can walk as he likes. The barrow pusher in an ungarded way of talking to other road users shouted behind, 'road! road!' the other road user asked him to take it easy nahh, the barrow pusher as the acclaimed owner of the road shouted at him and even called him names 'comot for road,eri-eri'. The road knowing how barrow pushers behave sighed and let go.

**Excerpt 5:**

A man after purchasing his goods called barrow pusher for service and their interaction was recorded as follows:

Customer: Barrow! Barrow!

Barrow pusher: Barrow pusher came and positioned his barrow for work.

Customer: So you don't know how to greet?

Barrow pusher: No! no! don't ask me, if you go home you ask your children. Tell me why you called me!

Customer: Stared at him but without a word.

Barrow pusher: Here is not school, I'm not your boy!

In excerpt five above, the man invited the barrow man to carry his goods, on arrival he expected the barrow pusher to at least greet him but no way. He then asked the barrow pusher, 'don't you know how to greet'. The barrow pusher cut in 'no! no! don't ask me, if you go home you ask your children, tell me why you called me'. The customer stared at him with surprise and the barrow continued by telling him that 'here is not school I'm not your boy'.

**Excerpt 6:**

This exchange between a barrow pusher and another road user around Onitsha main market;

Barrow pusher: Comot for road , comot for road!

Another road user: Don't jam me oo!

Barrow pusher: Anya okporo gi! (Are you blind) stand there!

In excerpt six above, the barrow pusher trying to deliver the loaded goods on record time refused to acknowledge other road users and kept shouting 'comot for road, comot for road'. Another road user tried to alert him so as not to harm him, but the barrow pusher



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impolitely asked him ‘anya okporo gi (are you blind) stand there!’. Noticing the barrow pusher's unguarded utterance, insult and unrepentant behaviour, the other road user gave him a way to pass.

**Research question 3:**

How do barrow pushers and the public perceive impoliteness in this context?

**Excerpt 7:**

The barrow man is fully loaded with goods and and struggling to deliver without damage, here is the observed interaction with another road user:

Barrow pusher: Road! Road! Road!

Another road user: This Abakaliki boy, don’t wond me oo.

Barrow pusher: Azu ebu, na you surpose to carry you loads?

Another road user: You don’t have respect.

Barrow pusher: Do you know the meaning? (mockingly).

Another road user: I’m not surprised, nwa Aba!.

Barrow pusher: na your papa be nwa aba!.

In the above excerpt, the barrow pusher in his bid to deliver on recorded time without any damage and in their disrespectful manner shouted behind another road user ‘Road! Road! Road!’, the other road user with shock turned and said to him ‘this Abakaliki boy don’t wond me’. The barrow pusher returned insult to him aptly by calling him ‘azu ebu’ buy and carry. The road user replied him, ‘you don’t have respect’, and the barrow pusher responded with a question’ do you know the meaning’. The other road user, said ‘I’m not surprised, nwa Aba!. The barrow pusher gave him indirect insult ‘na your papa be nwa aba!’. Making impolite language obvious.

**Excerpt 8:**

Barrow pusher and another road user had this observed interaction while barrow pusher was trying to force himself first before others on the road within the area under study.

Another road user: Hey! Don’t jam me ooo.

Barrow pusher: Onye mgbu nochie ebe ahu nahh. (foolish man just be there).

Another road user: Are you talking to me that way?

Barrow pusher: Oga, respect yourself ooo!

Another road user: Looked at him with awe and left through another way.

In the above interaction observed, the barrow pusher was just forcing himself to first pass in a very slim space but another road user cautioned him not to hit him in other words to be careful not to wound others. The barrow pusher at once replied’ Foolish man stay there nahh’ implying that he is not ready to do anyother thing apart from crossing first and if anyone blocks his way he will hit the person. The other road user enquired if he was



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talking to him like that, and the barrow pusher cautioned him 'oga! Respect yourself oo' disrespectfully. The other user of the looked at him and found out that he is even ready to say more then he choose to pass through another path.

**Conclusion**

This paper, Impoliteness in Language Use: A Study of Barrow Pushers in Onitsha Main Market revealed that impolite use of language is a pervasive feature of communication in the area under study. It contributes to the understanding of impoliteness in language use within African market context, x-raying the need for communication strategies which prioritize respect, empathy and mutual understanding. The findings have suggestions for market management, customer service training together with language education. Constant use of polite language and efficient communication and market experience can be enhanced, by promoting positive/ healthy relationships as well as support economic growth in the market under study.

**Recommendations**

The researcher hereby recommends the following:

- Language education for traders and barrow pushers with more emphasis on polite use of language during interaction.
- There is need to train barrow pushers as well as market stakeholders on the effective communication and polite use of language.
- To organize training for both barrow pushers and market vendors on cutomer relations with more emphasis on respect, empathy and conflict management.

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