Maintaining "Face" in Discourse
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Abstract

Brown and Levinson define face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (1987, p. 61). Speakers of any language in any culture constantly try to defend and enhance this self-image during discourse, both their own and that of others (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Although the specifics of face may differ according to the participants, Brown and Levinson (1987) consider attention to face to be universal in human discourse. Maintaining face and reducing threats to face are an important part of discourse in all cultures – in general it is beneficial to all participants to cooperate in maintaining each other's face, and members of every society have at least unconscious knowledge of their own and other members' face needs. Face is, however, a far from simple issue. This paper will provide an outline on how to reduce threats and maintain face and show how this can provide an opportunity for better discourse in any culture. The author will conclude that it is beneficial to all participants to cooperate in maintaining each other's face and how extensive understanding of the cultural norms and values is essential for students to act in an appropriate way.

Introduction

Brown and Levinson (1987) divide face into two types that they call positive face and negative face. Every person has a certain "positive consistent self-image or 'personality', and it is the desire for approval of this self-image where the term "positive face" came from, Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 61). For example, if a speaker (S) expresses interest or concurrence with a hearer's (H) ideas, he/she is building the positive face of H. Conversely, refutation of those ideas may cause loss of positive face. Positive face, therefore, involves expressing "involvement, friendliness, and solidarity" (Hatch, 1992, p. 69). In addition to the desire for approval, people have a desire to speak and act as they please without intrusion from others: "To maintain autonomy, we recognize distances between people, being deferential and considerate" (Hatch, 1992, p. 69). This constitutes a person's negative face. Acts such as orders or threats, which can impose on H's freedom, can thus challenge H's negative face, while speakers may use hedges or apologies to reduce the impact and maintain H's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

With all of this in mind, the classroom is a potential minefield for maintaining and losing face. The teachers' language is of essential importance, not only for the process of acquisition, but for the organization of the classroom (Numan, 1991). Politeness, as an everyday social phenomenon, is viewed as a moral code in social activities and human communication. As we are aware, a positive learning atmosphere is productive both to students and teachers. Therefore, it is of crucial relevance to be aware of the extent teachers can apply politeness strategies to their language use in EFL classrooms. Teachers typically do not think of themselves as role models, however, inadvertently they are. Students spend a great deal of time with their teacher and therefore, the teacher becomes a role model to them. This also lays the foundation for an indirect method of learning, through imitation. This can be a positive or negative concern depending on the teacher. As very few curriculums will have time to teach students the intricacies of face, teacher imitation can play a significant part in student behavior. Therefore, by creating positive interaction in the classroom, teachers and students should both reap the rewards.

Face Threatening Acts (FTA)

In general, people in any culture will try to maintain their own face as well as others' face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). There are frequent occasions when it is necessary to risk loss of face for one or more of the participants, and a face threatening action (FTA) may occur. Not all FTAs are "equal" – they differ according to the amount they may threaten a person's face. Thus, asking someone to pass the salt at a dinner party is likely to be less threatening than asking someone for a substantial loan (unless, of course, that person is a bank manager, although even in this situation S may stand to lose a great deal of face if the loan is refused). The difference in level of threat is what Brown and Levinson (1987) call the "weightiness" of an FTA. Weightiness is governed by three factors: the social distance (D) between S and H (essentially how well they know each other); the relative social power (P) of H over S (i.e. the higher the P value, the higher H's status is in relation to S in a given situation); and "the absolute ranking (R) of impositions in the particular culture" (how imposing a given FTA is considered in a given culture) (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 74). If any one of these three variables, or any combination of them increases, the weightiness of the FTA will also increase. For example, even though P and R may be low when asking a stranger for directions, the fact that D is high increases the weightiness of the FTA: on many occasions I have walked around an unfamiliar town half lost rather than risking an FTA (of low P and R value) with a complete stranger (high D value), and even when I have attempted the FTA I have generally used much more polite and more apologetic language than I normally would for such a trivial matter.

The weightiness helps to determine the strategy a speaker uses in order to deal with an FTA. Brown and Levinson (1987) give five such strategies: 1) without redressive action, baldly; 2) with positive politeness; 3) with negative politeness; 4) off-record; and 5) avoid the FTA. The higher the weightiness of the FTA, the higher the number of the strategy, perhaps number 4 or 5, a speaker is likely to choose (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Thus, a person who wishes to use an FTA that imposes greatly on a social superior may simply choose not to do the FTA at all. Alternatively, an "off-record" strategy may be used to minimize the threat to H's and/or S's face. In off-record strategies, the FTA is not explicit, thus giving S a chance to deny the FTA if necessary, or for H to "get credit for being generous and cooperative" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 71). For instance, if S says, "Oh, I'm starving," he/she may want H to offer to buy some food.

If H indeed buys some food, he/she has not lost face by being ordered around, instead appearing generous. If, however, H is angry at S for trying to scrounge a free meal, S can deny the FTA by saying, for example, "Oh no, that's not what I meant. I was just thinking of going home to eat," thus reducing the risk of loss of face.

Politeness Strategies

An FTA with a lower weightiness is likely to result in an *on*-record strategy, i.e. one where the FTA is made explicit. Numbers 1) to 3) above are all on-record strategies. A negative politeness strategy involves trying to maintain H's negative face, such as by showing "self-effacement, formality and restraint […] centering on his right to be unimpeded"; it naturally follows, then, that a positive politeness strategy aims to enhance H's positive face by showing a certain amount of approval of H's wants (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 70). Examples of negative politeness strategies include apologizing ("I'm sorry to inconvenience you with such a trivial matter, but...") and giving H the option of refusal ("Would it be possible for you to…?"). Positive politeness strategies, on the other hand, may involve showing agreement ("Yes, I see what you mean."), approval ("Wow, that's a really nice shirt.") or any utterance that identifies S and H as belonging to the same social group (which may involve choosing certain topics of discussion or using the same slang words).

Negative politeness strategies often involve phrases that are traditionally taught as "polite" forms, such as "Sorry," "Excuse me," "Could you…?" "Would you mind…?" "May I please…?" and such like. Many positive politeness strategies, however, may not immediately seem "polite" in the traditional sense, since showing solidarity with others can involve somewhat pushier and less deferential language. For example, Jewish Americans may "argue for the sake of sociability," Greeks have tendencies to disagree with the objective to agree and Turkish adolescent's dueling rhymes are not designed to offend but are more with the intent of having fun (Bayraktaroglu, 2001). Positive politeness strategies may indeed involve language that is considered somewhat rude or offensive. Daly, Holmes, Newton, and Stubbe argue that certain uses of "curse words" can express solidarity, thus building positive face – "It is as if they are saying 'I know you so well I can be this rude to you'" (Daly et al., 2004, p. 960).

While positive and negative strategies use redressive action, doing an FTA "badly" means no attempt is made to soften the impact, making it "the most direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way possible" to perform an FTA (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 69). Since this strategy is the most likely to cause loss of face, the weightiness of the FTA is normally very low, i.e. the social distance is not great, H is of inferior status to S and/or the FTA is not considered to be particularly imposing. Examples include a manager telling a worker, "Don't ever come late to work again!" or a close friend insulting H's cooking skills by saying, "This is absolutely disgusting!"

Further Benefits

The weightiness of the FTA is not the only factor in determining the choice of strategy. There are additional benefits to each strategy: off-record strategies both allow S to avoid accountability and since off-record strategies are less direct by reducing the amount of imposition, they allow S to avoid accountability, and "can satisfy negative face to a degree greater than that afforded by the negative-politeness strategy" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 73). Conversely, on-record strategies can improve clarity and also "demonstrate non-manipulativeness"; however, in some situations, off-record strategies may well create the perception that S is trying to gain advantage in a devious manner (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 72). In the above example ("Oh, I'm starving"), even if S denies the FTA, H may still believe that S is trying to be manipulative. Bald-on-record FTAs have the additional advantage of being efficient (Brown & Levinson, 1987). If it is necessary to deal with a problem quickly, it may be beneficial to both parties to cut to the chase, ignoring ordinary risks to face. For example, while an employee may not normally give direct orders to a boss, the words "Get down!" may be appropriate to a superior if there is a danger from some kind of attack.

Types of FTAs

Brown and Levinson (1987) divide FTAs into four types according to the type of face threatened: those that primarily threaten H's positive face; H's negative face; S's positive face; and S's negative face (although they stress that there is a certain amount of overlap between the

categories – both negative and positive face may be threatened at the same time, as might S's and H's face). The four types are further divided into categories and subcategories (Brown & Levinson, 1987). These are further detailed below, with examples of various threats to face and ways to avoid such threats.

H's negative face can be threatened when there is pressure on H to perform or not to perform an act, such as orders, requests, suggestions, threats and dares (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Thus, when the head of my department in my previous position asked me to do extra classes (without extra pay), despite my "inferior" position it would have caused too much loss of negative face for him to say, "You're doing these extra classes tomorrow." Instead he said, "Would you mind doing these extra classes?" and even gave me an additional chance to opt out by saying, "If you don't do them, I'll have to do them," which was, of course, a strong hint that I should accept, though one which maintained my negative face. The following example from Rowland (2002) shows how a mathematics teacher (Hazel) uses a question in place of a direct order, then presents the second order as if she is allowing H to perform the act of her own volition, thus reducing the threat to her two pupils' negative face:

> Hazel: Right would you like to try out with ten, twelve and fourteen one of
> you and the other one can try another jump. (Rowland, 2002, p. 6)

A suggestion from an inferior may also cause loss of H's negative face. When I thought the head of a department's new textbook contained far too much material to be taught in the time allotted, I avoided a direct suggestion such as, "This book is too long. You should cut some of it out." Instead, after complementing his work, I hedged the suggestion by saying, "This might be a little too much to fit into one course. Do you think a couple of units might be able to be moved to the second textbook?" An off-record strategy, allowing H to make the suggestion, would also be an effective way to maintain H's negative face.

Offers and promises from S can also threaten H's negative face, since they "put some pressure on H to accept or reject them, and possibly to incur a debt" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 66). For example, if S offers to let H stay in S's house during a trip to S's hometown, H may feel forced to accept even though he/she would prefer to stay in a hotel. This imposes on H's autonomy and thus his/her negative face. Any subsequent refusal on H's part would in turn risk loss of positive face to the one who made the offer, thereby creating additional pressure to

accept. Acceptance, however, may make H indebted to S in some way, creating an additional imposition on H's negative face. S may try to reduce the threat to H's negative face (and subsequently S's own face) by giving H a chance to opt out. For example, S may say, "I guess you may already have accommodation lined up, but if you'd like, it would be no trouble at all to stay at my place." This example has the advantage of both allowing a refusal and making clear that acceptance is not an imposition on S.

A third type of threat to H's negative face involves a threat towards H or H's goods, such as expressions of envy, admiration, anger or hate (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Envy or admiration towards H may appear non-threatening on the surface, but either may signal S's desire to take something from H (either something physical or non-physical, such as H's position as the best sports player in the class). Expressions of anger and hate are more obviously a threat to H's negative face, since there may be a risk of harm to H or H's goods (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Positive face is also threatened, since it is clear that S does not approve of H or H's actions. Although anger and hate may be conveyed openly (risking both H's and S's face), even such strong emotions can be more subtly expressed. Someone who is angry that the photocopier was left on may apply conventional negative politeness ("Could you turn the photocopier off next time?"), an off-record strategy ("Oh look – the photocopier's been left on again.") or even avoid the FTA completely despite feelings of anger.

H's positive face can be threatened when S expresses "a negative evaluation of some aspect of H's positive face" including disapproval, ridicule, complaints, insults and disagreements (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 66). Bald on-record strategies may well be applied for any such threat. For example, children often give unhedged insults on the sports field: "You're absolutely hopeless!" could be a response to someone missing an easy catch. Sarcasm, such as "Nice catch!" in the same situation, does not necessarily weaken the insult despite seemingly involving positive politeness. However, changing "Everyone hates you" to a hedged "You're not exactly the most popular person here" may soften the insult slightly, and may be used when S does not want H's loss of face to be too great. When Hazel, the mathematics teacher, disagrees with her student, she chooses a tact that avoids face loss even more:

> Hazel: So that ... so do you ... will it always work d'you think?
> Faye: Yeah ... I think.
> Hazel: How can you be sure? (Rowland, 2002, p. 7)

Instead of telling Faye she is wrong, Hazel avoids threatening Faye's positive face by using an off-record strategy that allows Faye to work out the answer for herself.

The second kind of threat to H's positive face occurs when S shows no concern about H's face, including expressing violent emotions, discussing inappropriate, divisive or taboo topics, giving distressing news, non-cooperation and inappropriate use of address terms (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Excessive interruption and refusal to listen to H's turns are examples of non-cooperation. If S wishes to minimize the risk to H's positive face, he/she may choose to adopt a positive politeness strategy such as complimenting H on his/her views as a prelude to S taking over the conversation. Saying "I can see what you're saying, but…" provides acknowledgement of H's right to think that way, while "That's a great idea. I was thinking more along the lines of…" is less abrupt and shows that S is at least in partial agreement with H.

Further Threats to Face

Although the above threats may result in loss of face for S as well as H, for example, in any instance where H loses face, he/she may deliberately cause loss of face to S in reprisal. Brown and Levinson (1987) give further examples that specifically threaten S's face. Threats to S's negative face include thanking and accepting offers (both of which involve accepting a debt), forced acceptance of H's thanks or apology, and unwilling promises and offers (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In expressing thanks, S "humbles his own face" while maintaining H's. Failure to express thanks may cause unacceptable loss of face to H, which in turn may reflect badly on S's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 67). Therefore, in many situations, accepting a loss of face in order to show appreciation is necessary. It follows that the greater the favor from H, the more humble S must be in his/her apology: "Thanks" may suffice for a small favor, while a large favor (which may incur a correspondingly large debt) may require an expression such as, "Oh, thank you so much. I don't know how I'll ever repay you," which clearly humbles S in front of H to a much higher degree.

Finally, threats to S's positive face include apologies and confessions (which admit fault in S's behavior), acceptance of a compliment, and self-humiliation (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Although a compliment in itself can serve to boost the receiver's positive face, the act of

acceptance may involve some kind of self-deprecation in order to avoid seeming boastful or arrogant. For example, someone who has been complimented on his/her language skills is likely to respond with, "No, no, I'm really not that good," or a similar expression. The amount of modesty necessary varies from culture to culture: in Japanese language classes I was often reminded to respond humbly to compliments, including those about language skills. Expressions equivalent to "I can only speak a little" are therefore often learnt early on in language courses.

Conclusion

The idea of face as the public self-image plays a significant role in every culture. It molds the character of speakers as well as how they can be perceived by others. As we have seen, maintaining face and reducing threats to face are clearly an important part of discourse in all cultures. It is, therefore, the self-assumption of a speaker's own appearance in public, which is determined by defined cultural and social features. In any given conversation, the hearer will directly react to the speaker's face, consequently hallmarking it. However, the individual perception of face will change throughout a speaker's lifetime, which could either lead to an enhancement or a deterioration of the face, depending on whether the speaker's expectations are fulfilled. Comprehensive understanding of social features and cultural norms are critical for speakers to behave appropriately. By understanding and applying positive politeness strategies, the threats to the hearer's face can be significantly minimized and will lead to more constructive and unambiguous discourse, as the hearer will have a greater feeling of satisfaction and contentment. Furthermore, with the knowledge and application of negative politeness strategies, the hearer's negative face will be maintained with the hearer remaining autonomous as the speaker uses distancing styles such as indirect speech or apologies. It is important for speakers to understand and remember that a person continually has positive and negative face wants, depending on the goals which want to be accomplished. These wants must be fulfilled if a person's self-image is to be maintained. Face Threatening Acts are sometimes unavoidable in social interactions depending on the rules and type of conversation. These acts harm the face of the speaker or hearer by acting inversely to the face wants of the other. Depending on the hearer's and speaker's reaction, a FTA can impact discourse in two different ways: Either a mitigating statement or a compensation is spoken, or the communication may disintegrate. Recognizing

these acts and understanding how best to cope with them are another crucial aspect of successful discourse.

In general it is beneficial to all participants to cooperate in maintaining each other's face, and members of every society have (at least unconscious) knowledge of their own and other members' face needs (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Face is, however, a far from simple issue. "Extensive understanding of the cultural norms and values" is essential for acting in an appropriate way, especially regarding expressions of solidarity and positive politeness strategies (Daly et al, 2004, p. 961). It would be too much to expect such "extensive understanding" to be achievable through regular second language classes alone. Negative politeness strategies, which respect H's negative face, can be taught somewhat successfully, and can be found in most language learning textbooks, such as New Headway Elementary (2000). Although positive politeness strategies and bald on-record strategies may be difficult to teach and even potentially offensive, some effort should be made at least to give students an awareness of the issues, since they make up an important part of human interaction.

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