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Face-threatening Acts: A Dynamic Perspective

In every talk-in-interaction, participants not only negotiate meanings but also establish, reinforce, or redefine interpersonal relationships. This is where politeness comes in and sways the way people talk. Politeness, according to Johnstone (2002), “refers to all the ways in which speakers adapt (or decide not to adapt) to the fact that their interlocutors, actual or imagined, have human needs like their own” (p. 124-5). In Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory (1987), a participant is considered a Model Person (MP), who is “a wilful fluent speaker of a natural language, further endowed with two special properties—*rationality* and *face*” (p. 58). A MP has a positive face (the want to be liked by people) and a negative face (the want to maintain personal territory). In terms of rationality, each speaker is capable of reasoning and knowing what options or strategies best suit the face needs (both faces) of interlocutors. Important to note is that Brown and Levinson treat politeness as a “redressive action” (p. 25) because some communicative acts (e.g. request, compliment, invitation, etc.) are considered to be intrinsically face-threatening acts (FTA); interaction is thus “the expression of social relationships and is crucially built out of strategic language use” (p. 56). The three social factors which influence participants’ ‘calculation’ make up the following ‘formula’: $W_x = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + R_x$. (The Distance, Power between the Speaker and the Hearer and Ranking of imposition contribute to the Weightiness of an FTA).

It is also important to note that Brown and Levinson’s framework has been criticized as not as universal as they claimed (e.g., Ide, 1989) as well as being too pessimistic in treating numerous communicative acts as intrinsic FTAs. In this paper, two short excerpts from naturally occurring talk-in-interactions demonstrate how FTAs that Brown and Levinson have

categorized are calculated, performed, and interpreted and that what appeared to be FTAs at first sight turn out to be non-FTAs after context and participants' intentions as well as lexical, grammatical, pragmatic and paralinguistic features are taken into consideration.

Speaker X is a native speaker of Mandarin and second language speaker of English; speaker Y is a native speaker of English; speakers X and Y use English to communicate. The transcription of the conversation in Excerpt 1 and 2 represents the English used by both of the speakers and preserves the original utterances, even though some expressions may not reflect perfectly the colloquial English.

Excerpt 1: An offer being “rejected” by the listener.

X asks if Y wants to go to a restaurant that does not serve only hot pot (a style of cooking in which small pieces of meat and vegetables are placed by diners in a pot of boiling, spicy broth and eaten).

- (1) X: Do you want to ¹ [change restaurant?²] We can change that.
 (2) Y: [No No] It's okay, it's okay. It's just like something I
 got ever, ever, ever, “Is it done yet? Is it done yet?” “Is it okay?”]
 (3) X: [((laugh out loud))]

In Excerpt 1, X *offers* Y a chance to choose a different restaurant if Y doesn't like the hot pot restaurant. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), an offer qualifies as an FTA. First, an offer threatens both participants' face. X offering threatens Y's negative face because “Y is incurring a possible debt” (p. 66). Second, Y's acceptance of an offer threatens her negative face because she is constrained to accept a debt, and to intrude in X's negative face (p. 67). Based on this assumption, it is reasonable to see Y reject an offer by saying “No, No.” Third, Y's rejection of X's offer threatens X's positive face, for her kindness has been turned down. However, the reason for Y going *on record* (baldly), without redressive action, to reject

¹ The big brackets indicate the overlapping parts of the two interlocutors' speech.

² *Change restaurant* is a literal translation from Mandarin Chinese to English in the speech of Speaker X, who here means “go to a different restaurant.”

an offer is that “the danger to [hearer]’s face is *very* small” and the act is “clearly in [hearer]’s interest and does not require great sacrifices of S[peaker]” (p. 69). Brown and Levinson also state that even a ‘typical’ FTA such as a criticism could “lose much of its sting” with the assertion of mutual friendship (p.72). Therefore, from the fact that Y performs in a bald-on-record manner, we could tell that X and Y are close to each other, so the FTA is minimal. Furthermore, Y uses a positive politeness strategy by saying “*it’s okay, it’s okay.*” By so doing, Y avoids disagreement with X. Avoidance of a disagreement, in order to minimize a possible FTA, is termed the number 6 positive politeness strategy in Brown and Levinson’s FTA strategies (p.102). The function of positive politeness not only allows a MP to minimize the “execution” of an FTA but also signify another MP that both of them are “of the same kind” and that MP 2 likes MP 1 and wants MP 1’s wants (p. 72).

Nevertheless, it may be confusing why Y would hold back after she has performed a bald-on-record FTA. We could argue that first, instead of using a positive politeness strategy to minimize the sting of an FTA (since it is shown earlier that there is no FTA in this case), the redressive action must be used for Y to show that she wants X’s wants (one of the function of a positive politeness, which is either sticking to the plan of going to the hot pot restaurant or choosing another one.) Sticking to the plan of going to the hot pot restaurant is less troublesome for X, since she does not need to inform other friends that the location of dinner has changed. However, even if Y accepts X’s offer and chooses a different restaurant, X’s want is still satisfied, since it is X’s wants to make Y feel comfortable, even though it is still somehow troublesome for X to inform other friends. In other words, X’s face is not threatened by either of Y’s responses. Second, Brown and Levinson also indicate that the three social factors influencing participants’ calculations for doing an FTA in the formula are “context-dependent.” Therefore, if we take the context of this talk-in-interaction into consideration, we see that Y’s being made an offer is not an FTA to her. In this case, X is

being considerate to Y since Y had bad experience with hot pot — the last time she ate hot pot, she suffered from terrible diarrhea.

To sum up, a rejection is not an FTA to X because either decision Y has made satisfies X's face wants. Y's being provided an offer is not an FTA, either after we put context of being considerate into consideration. Also, we could argue that X's offer and Y's rejection of an offer are not treated as FTAs for them, since both X and Y are being considerate in the context of this talk-in-interaction.

Excerpt 2: agreement and disagreement

X tells Y what she thinks about an American girl eating sashimi.

- (1) X: and I, I was thinking, I was talking to myself, “Wow, she’s brave. She’s the first American who can, who is willing to eat raw fish.” ((laughter)) and then, I saw her put the raw fish into the hot pot ((laugh out loud)) to COOK it.
- (2) Y: [((laugh out loud))]
- (3) X: [((laughter))] Wow, she’s so clever!
- (4) Y: That’s pretty clever.
- (5) X: But the Japanese may think, “Wow! What a waste!” ((laughter))
- (6) Y: [((laughter))]
- (7) Y: That’s true. That’s kind of funny.

If Excerpt 2 only included the transcription from lines 1 to 3, line 3 would appear to be a compliment and Y is showing her agreement in line 4 to the compliment. However, the lexical and grammatical aspect line 5 indicate that line 3 may not be a compliment. That is, X's use of the conjunction *But* signifies a change of fact or a contradiction to her previous statement in line 3; the noun *waste* also connotes negative meaning. If we take this view, we could tell that what X says in line 3 “Wow, she’s so clever!” qualifies as irony. However, from Y's reaction in line 4 and X's comment in line 5 using *But* and *waste*, we can see that Y treats X's comment in line 3 as a compliment, and although it could be the fact that X's intonation in line 3 does not sound like she intends to perform a communicative act of irony

but a compliment, the pragmatic perspective indicates that Y receives X's informative intent (sentence meaning) but not X's communicative intent (speaker meaning). Regardless of what X does in line 3, one thing is certain: Y is showing her agreement in line 4 by repeating the adjective *clever* X has used in line 3, noting that "repetition" is one way to show agreement, based on Brown and Levinson's lists of positive politeness strategies. Thus Y is anointing X's positive face by showing her agreement. To make this short talk-in-interaction more complicated, if we look at line 5 closely, rather than using *But* to show X's disagreement with her own previous comment in line 3, we see another possibility, that X is using *But* to show her disagreement with Y in line 4. X may wish Y to disagree with her in line 4 as a sign that Y detects her irony in line 3. If this is X's intention, then X is giving Y a hard time: If Y takes the literal meaning in line 3 (a compliment), then she is taking a risk of doing an FTA by disagreeing with X's intention of performing an irony; if Y figures out what X says in line 3 is an irony, by agreeing with the irony, Y is doing an FTA by disagreeing with the literal meaning.

It is also possible that Y is simply echoing with X because Y is not familiar with the culture of eating sashimi and hence the consequence of cooking the raw fish. Nevertheless, we can say that no matter which meaning Y chooses to respond to, her negative face is threatened by having to respond to X's comment. X's positive face can be threatened if she does not get a satisfying response from Y. However, in the transcription, we see a lot of laughter. Either X bursts into laughter in the middle of her own talk in lines 1 and 3 or Y uses laughter in return in lines 2 and 6. Though Brown and Levinson do recognize that paralinguistic and kinesic elements involve a broader communicative spectrum, they maintain that their theory is better organized and developed on the "linguistic categorizations" (p. 92). However, the paralinguistic element, the laughter, is an important factor in deciding the relationship between participants. Without laughter, we could argue that X may have higher

power than Y and they are distant with each other, since Y seems to anoint X's positive face by agreeing with her all the time. However, if we put the laughter into consideration, we could argue that these two participants are close to each other and that this is a pleasant interaction; whether Y gets the complicated language game X is playing (if indeed X is playing), the face threat is minimized and can be treated as X teasing Y for not getting her point.

These excerpts show that language is not merely a rational or logical use of strategies, nor do FTAs remain face-threatening or as intrinsic as Brown and Levinson claim. Excerpt 1 has demonstrated the importance of how contexts (e.g., interlocutors' relationship and background knowledge) affect the interpretation of FTAs. Excerpt 2 displays how pragmatics, linguistic features (lexicon, grammar) and paralinguistic elements change the analysis of participants' relationships, and thus the assessment of a communicative act previously labeled as a FTA to a non-FTA. The abovementioned features should be studied more to promote the understanding of (non) FTAs.

References

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