Looking into Face: A Pragmatic Appraisal of Public Self-image

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Abstract

Face is our public self-image through which we incessantly project ourselves as a better and considerate human being. In the design of face deference, demeanor, and camaraderie have a crucial importance. We try to create and maintain our face in terms of facework. This facework is undertaken by means of avoidance and a corrective process. We tend to avoid those encounters which may threaten our face. The corrective process is adopted after the face loss through the phases including challenge, offering, acceptance and thanks. Our poise too is a way to lessen the impact of face threat. Some people avoid public contacts by the fear of possible threat to their face. While doing face-work, cooperation among interlocutors plays a vital role. The face saving and face threatening acts help us understand various nuances of face.

Keywords: Face, face-work, face saving acts, face threatening acts, negative/positive face, deference, demeanor, camaraderie, politeness, savior-faire, mianzi, lian.

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Face – Public Self-image

`   In pragmatics, "face" is the public self-image of individuals. Every individual tries to be projected as a better human being with the help of various individual qualities and abstract entities such as self-esteem, respect, honor, reputation, recognition, approbation, etc. It's a ceaseless human enterprise to build public-opinion and the image of self. So, human beings have been trying to create and maintain face since his[1] existence. However, face of others is equally preserved expecting them to preserve ours.

The idea of face is originally a Chinese notion. But the investigations could trace its Chinese origin only after a detailed discussion of face by the anthropologist Goffman (1967) and a much contentious book by Brown and Levinson (1987). Since these two publications, tremendous research has been conducted into the issue of face, and its analogous idea, politeness,, globally as well as cross-culturally.

Chinese Perception of Face: *Mianzi* and *Lian*

Mao (1994, p. 454) affirms that the word face is a literal translation of two Chinese characters *mianzi* and *lian*. It is said to appear in the phrase "to save one's face" in the English community in China. It conveys a meaning of "one's credit", "good name and reputation". According to Goffman (1967, p. 9), the idioms of "to give face" and "to lose face" are Chinese in origin.

Classification of Face

Cultures across the world define the aspect of face as per principles embedded in social life. Some cultures, especially western, give importance to the "self" of an individual. On the other hand, many oriental cultures consider face to be a judgment of the community. So this perception of identifying the values of face gives rise to the classification of face into two categories given below.

Individual Face

Nwoye (1992, p. 313) claims that individual face refers to the individual's desire to attend his personal needs, and to place his public self-image above those of others. Culpeper (2011, p. 323) uses the term "quality face" to the personal type of face. It means that we want society to positively accord our personal qualities like ability, appearance, confidence, skill, etc.

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Group Face

Nwoye (1992, p. 313) refers to group face as the individual's desire to behave in conformity with culturally expected norms of behavior that are institutionalized and sanctioned by society.

There are some cultures that prioritize individual face, and some group face, according to their own socio-cultural constructs.

Face and the Design of Deference, Demeanor and Camaraderie

Face is closely associated with the idea of deference, demeanor and camaraderie. The nature of these concepts is briefly illustrated as follows:

Deference

Yule (1996, p. 60) postulates that when the other person seems to be socially distant, then there is a need of showing awareness for that person's face in terms of respect or deference. Mastsumoto (1988, pp, 423-434, footnote) considers deference to be a strategy which follows the injunction: don't impose, give options.

According to Goffman (1967, p. 77) deference is the appreciation an individual shows of another through either presentational rituals or avoidance rituals.

A proper treatment to the concept of deference is found in Goffman (1967, pp. 48-77). By deference, Goffman refers to that component of activity which functions as a symbolic means by which appreciation is regularly conveyed to a recipient. It is a way to confirm our relationship with others.

Types of Deference

Goffman (1967, p. 73) divides deference into two main categories: presentational rituals and avoidance rituals.

The term "ritual", although informal and secular, "represents a way in which the individual must guard and design the symbolic implications of his acts while the immediate presence of an object that has special value for him" (Goffman, 1967, p. 56).

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Presentational Rituals

This deference concretely depicts a person's appreciation for the recipient. There are four very common forms of presentational deference: salutations, invitations, compliments and minor services.

Avoidance Rituals

Such rituals take the form of proscriptions, indirections and taboos. It implies that we must refrain from performing certain acts lest; we violate the right of the recipient and keep him at a distance.

Demeanor

By demeanor, Goffman (1967, p. 77) refers to that element of the individual's ceremonial behavior typically conveyed through deportment, dress, and bearing, which serves to express to those in his immediate presence that he is a person of certain desirable or undesirable qualities. In our society, a person with good or proper demeanor, displays his attributes like discretion, sincerity; modesty in claims regarding self, sportsmanship; command of speech and physical movements, self-control over his emotions, his appetites, his desires; poise under pressure and so on.

Camaraderie

Camaraderie is a politeness strategy which underlines friendship between participants. The idea of camaraderie is equivalent to solidarity which shows the "equivalent awareness when the other is socially close, and is often described in terms of friendliness" (Yule, 1996, p. 60). Yule further cites two examples to show relationship among people based on deference and camaraderie.

I. A: Excuse me, Mr. Buckingham, but can I talk to you for a minute?

II. A: Hey, Bucky, got a minute?

There may appear to be some strain in the relationship between people when deference and camaraderie are altered. We need to know when to show deference and when camaraderie.

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There are so many ways in which people espouse to maintain and sustain their face. These attempts are sometimes undertaken in the form of deference, demeanor and camaraderie. Every individual tries to show off his better side through these means.

Facework

Goffman (1967, pp. 5-45) has meticulously elaborated how we can engage ourselves in face-work. By face-work, he means - to designate the actions of a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face. Face-work serves to counteract those events which jeopardize his face. Every member of our society is expected to have some knowledge of face-work and even experience to use it properly. This kind of capacity or expertise is termed tact, "savior-faire", diplomacy, or social skill.

Types of Face-work

Goffman (1967) has mentioned some basic kinds of face-work which are addressed as follows:

The Avoidance Process

Face is very vulnerable whenever we come across social encounters. But the surest way for a person to prevent threats to his face is to avoid contacts in which these threats are likely to occur. Each society usually observes this avoidance relationship. Goffman (1967, p. 16, footnote) cites an example of the avoidance process when the middle and upper class blacks in the U. S. A. avoid certain face-to-face contact with whites in order to protect the self-evaluation projected by their cloth and manner. When we consider upper class blacks, the above statement by Goffman is found to be incorrect; it may be true of poor blacks and some middle class blacks in the USA.,

There are many people who adopt the strategy of go-between when they sense approaching danger to their face. There are some people who know the value of voluntarily making a gracious withdrawal before an anticipated threat to face. Goffman, (1967, p. 16, footnote) suggests that when a person finds that he has lost face in a conversational encounter, he may feel a desire to disappear or "drop through the floor." This may involve a wish not only to

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conceal loss of face, but to return magically to a point in time when it would have been possible to save face by avoiding the encounter.

In our normal course of activities, we generally try to avoid those incidents and people who may cause potential threat to our face. This avoidance process is the indicator of our socialization.

When one fails to prevent or avoid a face-threatening encounter, he may act in this way as if no threat to face has occurred. Many a time some stubborn children claim that "they are not hurt" even after being beaten by their parents. The similar claim children make to the witness when they fall while running. Surprisingly, some people act in such a manner that as if an event that contains a threat to face has not occurred at all.

Goffman (1967, p. 17) observes how we employ circumlocution and deception while phrasing our replies with careful ambiguity, so that others' face is preserved even if their welfare is not.

The Corrective Process

The corrective process is deployed when face has already been threatened. There are so many corrective processes which are adopted according to the gravity of face threat.

Goffman (1967, p. 19, footnote) provides a very interesting example in regard to corrective process. If a husband beats his wife, custom demands that she leave him and go to her parents. She may remain there a length of time, commensurate with the degree of her offended dignity. Such a lady often expects her husband or his parents to come to her and confess his (husband's) guilt. After this, the offended lady may be "happily" ready to go to her husband's place.

Goffman (1967) offers four phases of corrective process: challenge, offering, acceptance and thanks.

Challenge

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In this phase participants take on the responsibility of calling attention to the misconduct. By implication, they suggest that the threatened claims are to stand firm and that the threatening event itself will have to be brought back into line.

Offering

In the offering stage, the participant is given a chance to correct the offence and reestablish the expressive order. There are some classic ways of undertaking this step.

Non seriousness of the act. The offender can be made to show that the so called face threatening act is really a meaningless event, or an unintentional act, or a joke not meant to be taken seriously; or it may be considered an unavoidable, understandable product of extenuating circumstances.

Other's responsibility. Some information may be provided to show that the offender was under the influence of something, and was not himself; or that he was under the command of somebody else and not acting for himself.

Compensation. Sometimes the offender may offer compensation to the offended person. There are many people who offer gifts to their wife after having committed the act of beating. Even parents offer their children chocolates and sweets to compensate their earlier wrath. But compensation does not always come in the form of articles and gifts.

Punishment, penance and expiation. In certain cases the offender may show that he is prepared to pay a price for his mistake. Although the offender may not prove his innocence, he may suggest through some means that he is now a renewed person, a person who has paid an adequate price for his misadventure. He may further show that he does not treat the feelings of other people lightly anymore.

Acceptance

After the challenge and offering have been made, the third move can occur. The person to whom the offering has been made can accept it as an acceptable means of reestablishing the expressive order, and the faces supported by his order.

Thanks

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Finally the forgiven person may convey a sign of gratitude to those people who have given him the indulgence of forgiveness.

Poise

There are so many encounters which we fail to avoid due to interactional necessities. Although we are unable to avoid threat to our face, we can undoubtedly avoid further consequences of the threat. So our poise is a post-threat primary aid to lessen the impact of face loss. Through poise, we control our embarrassment and a consequent embarrassment to others. Sometimes we are under profound stress when we think of the damage caused to our image. The situation may further worsen if we become a prey to our emotions. So, it is sometimes advisable to say nothing, do nothing and maintain our composure. We may certainly gain a lot by venturing nothing.

Who is to Undertake Face-work: Cooperation in Face-work

Goffman (1967) elaborates how cooperation among participants takes place while undertaking face-work. It is important to observe who initiates face-work after a face threatening act. In the vast majority of cases, the face-work is primarily undertaken by the person whose face is threatened. Sometimes a mere witness may contribute to face-work. Lack of effort on the part of one participant induces compensative efforts from others. Others are relieved of the task when somebody initiates the corrective measure. In certain cases, it is likely that the offender and the offended person may simultaneously attempt to initiate an apology. The resolution of the situation is more important than the confession of guilt.

There are some instances during which a powerless person fails to save his face. At this point others feel obliged to protect the face of such a helpless person. So, cooperation plays a vital role while managing face-work.

Face-work and Face Hiding

Goffman (1967) rightly observes that our emotional attachment to our own face gives others something to aim at. Sometimes people not only make efforts to wound us unofficially, but make even official attempts to utterly destroy our face. They are more encouraged to initiate

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face attack when they realize that the victim is unable and incapable to protect his face, and ask for face-work. As a result, fear over the possible loss of face often compels the person to shun from initiating public contact. So, such a person always wants to "hide" his face due to the fright of its loss. After all, it is advisable "to seek the safety of solitude rather than the dangers of social encounters" (Goffman, 1967, p. 39).

Face Saving Acts (FSAs)

According to Yule (1996a, p, 134), that type of behavior is called as a face saving act (FSA) through which a person says something that lessens the possible threat to another's face.

Goffman (1967) presumes that FSAs are habitual and standardized practices of human beings which are like traditional plays in a game or steps in a dance. Each individual, culture and society appears to have its own characteristic repertoire of face saving practices.

Our interaction plays a central role in supporting our face. But "maintenance of face is a condition of interaction, not its objective" (Goffman, 1967, p. 12). We consistently endeavor to see our interaction gaining some usual objectives. Some routine objectives of interaction include gaining face for oneself, giving free exposure to one's genuine beliefs, introducing unsavory information about other people, unraveling problems, performing certain meaningful tasks and so forth. All these acts are designed in such a way to be inconsistent with the maintenance of face. In a sense, "to study face-saving is to study the traffic rules of social interaction" (Goffman, 1967, p. 12).

Face Threatening Acts (FTAs)

According to Brown and Levinson (1987, pp. 65-67) there are so many acts that intrinsically threaten our face. These acts are termed as the face threatening acts (FTAs) which may be introduced by verbal and nonverbal means. Such acts include orders, requests, warnings, dares, complaints, criticism, ridicule, reprimands, insults, accusations, etc. These acts may threaten either the negative or the positive face of the speaker or the hearer.

Conclusion

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Our real sensibility as a human being is reflected in our behavior with others. We always desire self-respect, and in the same token we need to respect other human beings. We are always expected to sustain a standard of considerateness during our social encounters. We need to respect feelings and face of others willingly and spontaneously because others' feelings and face are quite identical with ours. As a result, we should not witness others' defacement and denigration cold bloodedly. Because,

> The person who can witness another's humiliation and unfeelingly retains a cool countenance himself is said in our society to be "heartless", just as he is who can unfeelingly participate in his own defacement is thought to be "shameless" (Goffman, 1967, pp. 10-11).

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Note
1. Only masculine gender is used to avoid redundancy and achieve precision. This use does not aim at any sex discrimination.

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