

# POLITENESS IN FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

by  
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In this paper, I will briefly describe Brown and Levinson's politeness theory and identify some of their politeness strategies, particularly those of the intrinsic face-threatening acts. I will then go on to analyze a small segment of verbal exchange between some participants and a facilitator of a workshop for teacher education development. Adaptation of this theory to this particular verbal episode /exchange reveals some of the types of politeness phenomena described by Brown and Levinson. This paper concludes that these politeness phenomena can be identified and that they help explain breakdowns in face-to-face interaction if we utilize Brown and Levinson's theory.

## *1. Introduction*

Face is the self-image that individuals desire to present to others as well as the acknowledgment that others have face needs of their own (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987, 1999; henceforth B&L). Positive face includes a person's need to be liked, appreciated, and admired, while negative face assumes a person's desire to act freely, without constraints or imposition from others. Because one's own face needs may conflict with a partner's face needs, the partner may initiate the use of a face threatening act (FTA).

Individuals resort to communication strategies to thwart or minimize FTAs. These strategies include *avoidance*, *going off record*, *negative politeness*, *positive politeness*, and *bald on record*. A speaker who uses avoidance simply chooses not to communicate in a way that would create embarrassment or a loss of face for another, whereas when a speaker goes off record, he or she subtly hints at, or indirectly mentions, the face-threatening topic. A speaker who uses negative politeness recognizes the negative face needs of the hearer, that is, the latter's need not to be imposed upon or be restrained. Apologies and

self-effacement are some of the strategies employed to make a person appear vulnerable to the other, while also acknowledging that the FTA is impolite and inhibits the other's independence. An even more direct, yet less polite strategy is that of positive politeness, which emphasizes the receiver's need for positive face, that is, the need to be liked. Praising or flattering is sometimes used to soften the FTA. Finally, the most direct and least polite strategy is bald on record. Using this strategy, the speaker makes no attempt to protect the other's face and simply commits the FTA.

People choose to engage in FTAs rather tactically. When considering how polite to be, speakers determine whether the hearer has more or less prestige (social distance, D) than they do, whether the receiver has control (power, P) over them at the time, and whether what is going to be said runs the risk (relative to ranking, R) of hurting the other person (Brown and Levinson 1987). These factors include intrinsic payoffs or advantages and relevant circumstances in which one of these payoffs will be more advantageous than the others. B&L predict that because humans typically commit FTAs to achieve a desired goal, individuals will not use strategies that are more polite than necessary because the cost of ambiguity is too great.

Politeness theory emphasizes that individuals try to balance their own positive and negative face while also attending to the others' face needs. When they deliberately commit a face threatening act, individuals can try to save face by using a variety of strategies.

## *2. The data*

The segment discussed in this paper is the 45-minute verbal exchange that occurred in a teacher-training workshop attended by 130 participants from all over the Philippines. The segment in question consists of face-to-face interaction among three of the workshop participants (A, B, and C) and the facilitator (F). All four interactants are teacher-trainers who hold key positions in their respective universities. They are in their late thirties to early fifties. This verbal

exchange is part of the activity of the workshop, where participants are asked to share their reflections/insights/questions/clarifications with regard to the previous day's topic/input/activity.<sup>1</sup>

### *3. Background information on the teacher-training workshop*

The segment begins on a high note, because from the very first day of the workshop, when participants realize that they will only be given copies of the handouts of the workshops they have signed up for, they have been clamoring for copies of all the talks and presentations by all of the speakers. However, the organizers, having foreseen this, remain adamant in their decision that no copies of the other workshop materials, including the PowerPoint presentations, be made available to the participants, for fear that they will simply rely on these when they go back to their respective schools and are asked to share their experiences with others. One of the objectives of the workshop is to engage the participants to experience for themselves the processes of writing/creating their own syllabus which they can bring home. The organizers believe that only when they get to experience the processes of making a syllabus can they teach these to their student-teachers. Research has shown that transmissive learning and teaching does not improve training and development of future teachers.

### *4. Summary of the segment of conversation*

At the beginning of this segment, several participants have shared their reflections on the previous day's inputs/topics/activities. It is at this juncture that F acknowledges A, and invites her to approach the microphone and to share her reflections. A expresses her gratitude and offers her congratulations to the organizers of the workshop and vows to attend next year's activity in case there is one in the offing. She goes on to talk about the conversations she had with her colleagues the night

before and states that she needs to vent her frustration or else she will not have peace of mind over the fact that the workshop organizers would not give her copies of the PowerPoint presentations and some lecture notes of the speakers. She verbalizes her worries of not having any handouts to bring home and to share with her colleagues back in her school. F clarifies that all materials, including references used by the speakers/facilitators, except the PowerPoint presentations, are made available on the compact disk which is included in their workshop kits. A asks why is it not possible for them to have copies of the lecture notes when in fact they paid dearly for the workshop. F clarifies that there should be a paradigm shift in their thinking, because providing them with handouts that they can bring home to their respective schools defeats the very objectives of the workshop. F goes on to explain that, rather than worrying about acquiring the handouts (which are actually provided them), they should reflect on the processes they underwent with their facilitators and how well they have participated in the various activities planned, and how they can share these insights when they themselves conduct teacher-training in their respective schools or regions.

Participant C then argues that she particularly wants to have copies of their speakers' notes because they have summaries on them about the various topics covered in their lectures. F asks why they need these summaries when the references/materials used by the speakers are already included in their kits and are actually found in the compact disks provided them. He directly asks C if she can summarize on her own the various readings/materials provided in her kit. C at this point refuses to be engaged in the conversation and declares that she has already been cut off and will not be engaged anymore. She then turns her back on F who repeatedly asks her to continue dialoguing with him. When she refuses to do so, F comments that it is very unfortunate that such things occur in a context where the participants are teachers who are expected to be open and willing to engage their students in a dialogue or negotiation of ideas. He then engages the rest of the participants by saying that each of them, whether they like it or not, is pulled into the process of reflecting on what has just occurred. He

continues by saying that thinking about these events and the ideas /insights accompanying these developments will challenge them to (re)think their own objectives in attending the workshop.

With regard to politeness phenomena, both negative and positive politeness can be seen to emerge at the beginning, when the interactants negotiate their own roles in this part of the interaction. The more intrinsically face-threatening acts become dominant, the more the exchange livens up and all three participants become actively engaged.

The whole sequence is a bit like watching a bullfight, with the facilitator smiling and gracefully waving his red cape, while waiting for the entrance of the raging bulls. One after one, they come in and pounce on him to tear him to pieces, only to lose momentum and energy in the process; when in the end, they walk out of the verbal exchange, they have accomplished nothing.

In accordance with the differences in the manner of speaking and listening of all interactants, this segment of the conversations can be divided into three parts: first, from line 1 to 27; second, from line 28 to 41; and third, the rest of the segment. Each part will be analyzed in turn in the following section.

## 5. *Analysis of the individual segments*

### 5.1. 'Invitation to rage'

- 1 F Yes, ma'am. (Smiling.) Please approach the microphone.  
 2 A Good morning. I would like to express my thanks to uh the organizers of  
 3 this uh seminar. It is very helpful :: and I would like to go back next year  
 4 if you will have uh one again. I learned so many things. ... However, I  
 5 need to vent my worries because if I don't, .. I will not have peace of  
 6 mind.  
 7 [laughter]  
 8 F That's good, ma'am. We welcome both positive and negative reflections.  
 9 A Yes, sir. You see, I was talking with my colleagues last night and we were  
 10 worried because we realize that when we go back to our schools we have  
 11 no materials to bring home with us. What will we show our teachers?  
 12 What will we share to them?

- 13 [Agreement from the other participants.]  
 14 F We provide you with the handouts and a CD containing all the readings  
 15 we prepared for you. All the references are included there, too.  
 16 A Yes, sir. But we need the copies of the lecture notes and the presentations  
 17 you used. WHY CAN'T [WE HAVE THEM?]  
 18 F [Have] you listened to our lectures/inputs? Did you  
 19 understand them? Did you participate in our discussion? How well have  
 20 you participated? Did you do all the activities we planned for you?  
 21 THESE ARE OUR NOTES,  
 22 A Yes, sir.  
 23 WE GAVE THEM TO YOU.  
 24 A Yes, sir. But we NEED TO SEE THEM AGAIN SO WE CAN REVIEW  
 25 THEM AND MEMORIZE THEM.  
 26 F Why do you need to memorize them? Have we not said that  
 27 MEMORIZATION does not lead to learning? You know that yourselves.

The general feature of the first part is that F gains the status of principal speaker and acknowledges A's presence by asking her to approach the microphone. A obliges and becomes the principal speaker with F adopting the role of a hearer. Both positive and negative politeness phenomena can be seen in this initial part of the exchange.

Starting from the aspect of positive politeness, both interactants satisfy each other's positive face by showing their engagement in this exchange. F's smile and request for A to approach the microphone recognize A's presence and invite her into the interaction. A, in turn, indicates her engagement in the interaction by taking advantage of the opportunity created by F for her to share her reflections. As a result of the creation of this opportunity, there are no overlaps in this first part (in contrast to the later parts of the interaction).

In addition to this aspect of positive politeness, the interactants also satisfy each other's negative face by not imposing on each other. That is, F grants A's desire to share her reflections by recognizing her presence and asking her to come to the microphone. F creates no disturbances and actually encourages A to continue talking despite her threatening F's positive face by venting her frustration over his inability to provide them with copies of the lecturers' notes and presentations.

Another significant feature of this part of the interaction is A's use of linguistic features to soften the impact of her FTA ('You see...') and

her elaborate introduction ('I was talking with my colleagues...'). F's 'We welcome both positive and negative feedback' satisfies the other's negative face by accepting A's expression of thanks and criticism.

Despite A's threat to F's positive face, the interactants initially are approaching mutual understanding. However, towards the latter part of this exchange, A's question, 'Why can't we have them?' clearly demonstrates her doing an FTA baldly, without redress. B&L posit that

normally, an FTA is done in this way only if the speaker does not fear retribution from the addressee; when both speaker and hearer tacitly agree that the relevance of face demands may be suspended in the interests of urgency and efficiency. (Brown and Levinson 1999:328)

It could well be that A's direct question demonstrates her power (P) over F and/or her wish to enlist audience support in order to attack F's face without losing her own; her expression of agreement in (11) confirms this. A's calculated assumption of power over F could have sprung from the assumption among participants that they have the right to demand or ask for the copies of the notes and presentations of the lecturers/speakers. The inability of the organizers (represented by F) to address this demand heightens the conflict brewing between the two groups. F's series of rhetorical questions and statements, 'Have you listened to our lectures/inputs? Did you understand them? Did you participate in our discussion? How well have you participated? Did you do all the activities we planned for you? These are our notes, we gave them to you', represent an attempt to go off record: whatever F wants or means to communicate, he does without doing so directly. His use of positive politeness strategies demonstrates this, too. A's 'But we need to see them again so we can review them and memorize them' clearly threatens F's negative face all over again. Similarly, F's 'Why do you need to memorize them?' and 'Have we not said that memorization does not lead to learning?' represent a direct threat to A's negative face.

At this juncture, it could be pointed out that F's going bald on record puts more importance on his desire to communicate than A's imposition to his negative face is unfounded, simply because the need to secure copies of the speakers' notes runs contrary to the basic objectives of the training-workshop. His calculation of the pain, relative to ranking (R), to be imposed on A is determined by his desire to be direct rather than to be liked (Brown and Levinson 1999:334). As an obvious sign of defeat, A turns her back on F, signaling the end of the exchange.

## 5.2. 'Let's engage'

- 28 B Good morning, Sir. In our group we have a hard time convincing each  
 29 other with regard to the contents of our syllabus. We argued that since  
 30 this content is already found in Educational Assessment 1, there's no need  
 31 to include it in Educational Assessment 2  
 32 F What's wrong with having it in both?  
 33 B There will be an overlapping of contents and  
 34 F What's wrong with that?  
 35 B Sir, it's going to be a waste of time and effort  
 36 F Why? You see, do you hear yourself? Are you listening to yourself? Are  
 37 we saying here that we are concerned more about the topics we can cover  
 38 rather than the mastery that our students can get from our course?  
 39 B Sir, may I speak? Will you let me finish?  
 40 F I'm engaging you to a dialogue with me. I am not interrupting you. I'm  
 41 simply engaging you.

The second part of this segment begins with B as the principal speaker and F as primary hearer. B's elaboration of what transpired in her group indicates an active involvement in the exchange. F's silence while she goes on with her story shows that she is encouraged to speak; thus, F demonstrates positive politeness. However, when F interrupts B's talk about the issue on contents or topics to be covered in the course, B takes this as an affront to her negative face. F's interfering or transgressing while B is speaking is conventionally considered in Philippine society as a direct threat to a speaker's negative face. Even so, F tries to justify this by explaining that he merely engages B in a



dialogue and in no way aims to shoot her down. Unfortunately, B does not oblige him at this point, as she believes that she has 'lost face' enough already. As the facilitator and convenor of the group, F considers it important that discussions like these are characterized by openness and dialogue – values that B may share, while disagreeing as to how to realize them.

F's imposition on B's negative face may not be regarded as an FTA by F simply because he considers it his right and/or obligation to teach the participants the value of engaging their students to dialogue with them, without appearing to be (or being labeled as) impolite or impudent. B sees it differently and considers F's transgressions as impolite; thus, not worthy of her time.

### 5.3. 'The surrender'

- 42 C Sir, I'm from the same university as the two other speakers. In my group,  
 43 we demanded, I'm sorry for the word, but we did demand that we be given  
 44 input before we work on the activities because we have zero knowledge  
 45 about our topic. It is very fortunate that we have facilitator X who  
 46 gave us inputs on the said topic. We are likewise grateful to facilitators Y  
 47 and Z. Now, my question is why don't you allow us to have copies  
 48 of the workshop materials? Don't we have the right to have them?  
 49 F [You] see, what we are saying here? Are we still on the level of equating  
 50 success of our participation on the workshop by the number of handouts  
 51 we can bring home?  
 52 [That's] not what I mean, sir.  
 53 C Okay, what do you mean?  
 54 F [I] mean, sir, that we need those lectures and  
 55 summaries given by the speakers to share with our colleagues in our  
 56 school...  
 57 [Precisely], my point. If we give you our materials and list of  
 58 references, too, are you not going to read them and...  
 59 [We] will, sir, but we  
 60 want the summaries of these materials and notes, sir...  
 61 [Listen] to me...  
 62 F [I] have the floor, sir. May I speak?  
 63 C [I'm] engaging you. Listen  
 64 F

- 65 to what you're saying...
- 66 C [I] know what I'm saying, sir...
- 67 F [Good]. Now, can you
- 68 summarize the reading materials that we give you? Because if you can,
- 69 you don't need our summaries. Now, I'm asking you, can you summarize
- 70 our lecture notes?
- 71 C [Sir], in psychology, when one is already cut off, there's no point
- 72 F [Lady], I'm engaging you. Talk to
- 73 C ...in continuing anymore. (Turns, gets her purse, and leaves the room.)
- 74 F me. (Gets no positive response.) It's very unfortunate that these things
- 75 happen. How can we expect our students to engage in a dialogue when we
- 76 ourselves are not willing to?

In this last part of the segment, the speech of the two interactants overlaps significantly, which makes it sound very noisy and high-strung. C's offer of information with regard to her status and place of origin is an indication that her positive face is the main characteristic of the early part of this exchange. Her offer of apologies for using a strong word ('demand') is both a positive and a negative act, because through it she indicates that she regrets doing a prior FTA, thereby damaging her own face to some degree – as well as the faces of her hearers, especially those learning about her transgression. Likewise, C's profuse expression of gratitude is a threat to her positive face, in that she accepts a debt from these speakers, thereby humbling herself.

C goes on record when she unambiguously expresses her intent to get the copies of the workshop's materials and thereby threatens F's negative face. F's overlapping response to her question signifies an act done baldly, without redress, because both C and F tacitly agree that face is of minimal importance at this juncture and that the need to address the question is more pressing. Notice that this is the nth time this issue has been brought up in the exchange (cf. the first part of this segment). At this stage of the interaction, all attempts to demonstrate politeness seem to have been set aside, if indeed politeness observance has not already broken down completely. Both the interactants' faces have been threatened and neither of them seem to mind. The apparently polite use of the title 'Sir' by C is a concrete indicator that it is principally used to underline the ever growing sarcasm in the

exchange; likewise, F's directly 'polite' use of 'Lady' and his bald on record utterance 'Listen to me' seem to spell out the absence of any further attempts at being polite. C's utter loss of face finds redressive action in her retort, 'Sir, in psychology, when one is already cut off...' in (67) and her turning away from F, getting her purse, and leaving the room represent her last-ditch efforts at saving her face. Meanwhile, F's own redressive face-saving action finds meaning and outlet in his statement, 'It's very unfortunate that these things happen...'

### 6. *General Analysis*

Above, I have discussed some of the politeness phenomena listed under B&L's politeness strategies. These phenomena are related to the interactants' manner of speaking and listening and to the sequence of exchanges in the extended interaction. For example, F invites A, B, and C to be involved in the interaction by recognizing their positive faces and acknowledging their desire to share. Gradually, they assume the role of the principal speakers, with F showing his involvement by asking questions and engaging them in a dialogue – a move which, unfortunately, they find intrinsically face-threatening. And because this is so threatening to them, they feel that F's inability to demonstrate both positive and negative politeness leads to the breakdown of the exchange, resulting in all three women terminating the interaction by turning their backs on F and going back to their seats, sulking, or leaving the room.

However, certain questions persist: Can F's use of bald on record utterances be considered to be the cause of the communication breakdown? Or is it the women's refusal to heed F's request, born out of their stubborn rejection of a paradigm shift in the teacher-training curriculum? Is F's desire (common in his American subculture) to directly engage the participants too threatening to them, thus leading to their decision to abandon their involvement in the exchange? Or are the women too proud to accept the futility of their request? Is the

participants' gender contributory to the breakdown of the interaction? Would the response have been different had F been of the same gender as his interactants? Providing answers to these questions may enrich B&L's Politeness Theory.

As to what may have caused the breakdown, I can only speculate. All four participants, as mentioned at the beginning, hold key positions in their respective universities, where they are highly regarded. B&L argue that 'the assessment of the seriousness of an FTA involves the social distance (D), the relative power (P), and the absolute ranking (R) of speaker and hearer' (1999:331). The speakers' assumptions of these factors determine the actual weight of their FTAs. Believing that they have power over F by virtue of being participants (and potential future clients) in the activity organized by F, A and C threaten F's positive and negative face by asking him directly why they and the rest of the group will not be provided copies of the speaker's notes and presentations. Implicit in their question is the assumption that anybody who attends a workshop must be given handouts including the lecturers' notes. This leads them to go bald on record, and makes them see their demands as not representing an FTA at all. F, on the other hand, goes bald on record because he, too, assumes that he has power over the participants inasmuch as he designed the objectives, activities, limitations, etc. (which were made clear to all participants at the beginning of the workshop). He believes that it is his duty and right as an organizer to set the parameters of the workshop and to ensure that these are observed or practiced. This leads him also to neglect the participants' faces. This (mis)calculation of power on the part of all interactants could have caused the communication to break down.

## *7. Conclusion*

The segments of verbal interaction analyzed in this paper involve one of the interactants (F), who gains the status of principal speaker and continues to lead the interaction, while allowing other interactants (A, B, and C) to shift from being principal hearers to principal speakers.

This constant shifting of roles increases the involvement of the participants in the exchange.

Face-to-face interactions like the ones analyzed here seem to demonstrate that one central goal of interaction is the preservation and protection of face. And that more than anything else, its maintenance /creation is of paramount importance if we want open communication to prosper, or at least, continue. In the context of Filipino settings, face is alive and thriving. The promotion, protection, and saving of one's face, especially when embarrassing or shameful situations unexpectedly arise, are well illustrated and best accounted for by using the tenets of Politeness Theory.

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## Notes

1. The conversations were reproduced from notes taken by me as co-convenor and co-facilitator of the activity in question.

## References

- Brown, Penelope & Stephen C. Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, Penelope & Stephen C. Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. In: N. Coupland & A. Jaworski (1999) (eds.), *The discourse reader*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 321-35.

## Transcription conventions

[	the point at which the current speaker's talk is overlapped by the other's talk
(.)	micro pause
(..)	pause slightly longer than micro pause
CAPS	relatively high volume
underline	stressed part of syllable
::	noticeable lengthening
=	latched utterances, with no interval between them
?	rising intonation