Face-Threatening Speech Acts and Face-Invading Speech Acts: An Interpretation of Politeness Phenomena

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Abstract

P. Brown and S. Levinson state, in their foundational works on politeness, that only *some* communicative acts intrinsically threaten the speaker's and the hearer's face. Therefore, when performing these 'face-threatening acts', speakers use strategies aiming at minimizing face threat.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that *all* speech acts, i.e., all utterances, inevitably affect both the speaker's and the hearer's face. This thesis leads us to the distinction between non-impolite and rude speech acts. Non-impolite speech acts (which are polite when involving at least one politeness strategy) always *threaten* the speaker's and the hearer's face. On the other hand, rude speech acts always *invade* the hearer's face and, consequently, the speaker's face. This analysis enables us to suggest that there are three general principles that take part in verbal communication.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Politeness, Speech acts, Strategies, Face threat, Invasion

1. Face-Threatening Acts, Face-Invading Acts, Unintentional Meanings

In their foundational works on politeness, P. Brown and S. Levinson (1978, 1987) assume that all competent adults belonging to a society are rational agents who have a positive and a negative face. They conceive this double-featured face as the public self image that every individual, every member of a society, wants to claim for himself/herself. It consists of two related aspects. The negative face is the basic want of freedom from imposition, whereas the positive face is the basic desire of appreciation and approbation of his or her wants. This notion of 'face' is originally derived from that of Goffman (1967), and it deals with some folk terms such as 'losing face' in English, or its Spanish equivalent 'perder imagen' (Gil 2001: 223). For example, when the speaker (S) asks politely the hearer (H)

1) Could I just borrow a tiny bit of paper? (Grundy 1995: 128), S threatens H's negative face, because S imposes H a future action (giving S a sheet of paper). We may consider many other types of face-threatening acts (FTA). For example,

2) I arrived a little bit late yesterday because I had an interview with the dean.

When admitting responsibility of having been late, S directly threatens his/her own positive face. Roughly speaking, every single utterance is *co-extensive* with the realization of a speech atc, and every realization of a speech act is co-extensive with a single utterance. As a whole, an utterance is a piece of evidence about the speaker's meaning, and comprehension is achieved by inferring this meaning from evidence provided not only by the utterance but also by the context (Sperber and Wilson 2005: 355). Of course, utterences involve a complex variety of meanings, but of all of them can be individually interpreted as the concrete realization of a single speech act, with its peculiar illocutionary force.

In this sense, all speech acts (and all utterances) are face-threatening. Even an apparently innocent assertion talking about the weather may generate disagreement. (There is a fictional but very funny example about serious disagreements promoted by the weather as topic of conversation in the 1983 film *Zelig*, directed by Woody Allen.) The single act of speaking threatens H's face, because when S speaks H *has to* listen. It is crucial to emphasize again that every utterance implies the realization of single speech act. In fact, an utterance is every single linguistic realization, which has a variety of properties, such as an illocutionary force and a linguistic structure (the sentence). Sentences are described by abstracting out the purely linguistic properties of utterances (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 9; Sperber and Wilson 2005: 354). However, the correspondence between a single utterance and a single speech act does not imply that the recovery of the speech act be essential to verbal comprehension (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 245).

The point is that every utterance seems to affect both H's and S's face. Nevertheless, there is a matter of degree which has a great importance here. For instance, a merciless remark like (3) is different from a suggestion like (4).

1) Reading your statement of purpose has been a wasteful loss of my valuable seconds.

2) Your statement needs some corrections.

Utterance (3) directly invades H's positive face, because S despises, overtly and impolitely, something that is valuable for H: H's own statement. On the other hand, utterance (4) threatens, but does not invade, H's positive face. By performing the FTA (4), S affects H's positive face seriously. However, S is not rude or impolite, because, in spite of the criticism to H's writings, H's intelligence or capacity are not being damaged. S has only done the FTA without redressive action, baldly. Compare the previous examples with the following one:

1) Your statement is interesting, but it should be revisited.

Here, H's positive face is being threatened again, but S performs the FTA with redressive action. Threat is being minimized by claiming some common ground: S conveys that H's ideas are interesting, i.e., S manifests approval or sympathy with H. In this case, S says that something valuable for H has to be modified and, therefore, H's positive face is being threatened. But, since the FTA is performed with some redressive action, S has been polite.

Examples (1)-(5) make manifest, first, that face threat and face invasion are social facts with linguistic realizations. Secondly, both of them are included in a complex continuum that ranges between weak threat and strong invasion. A single offer such as

2) Would you like to drink a beer?

threatens S's positive face, because the person who makes the invitation is expressing that he/she appraises H, and, because of that, there is some risk of rejection, and that rejection could mean that H does not appraise S's companion. Since S's offer is sincere, he/she wants H to accept it, i.e., S wants H to drink a beer with him/her.

Generally, the meanings evoked by threatening or invading speech acts have not been individually intended by S. That is to say, S may be polite or may be rude, without the conscious intention of being polite or rude. However, any hearer and even any observer can be able to recognize that S's speech act has been threatening or invading.

The independency of some kind of pragmatic meaning from intention has not to be problematic at all. On the contrary, the study of unintentional meanings contributes, in Jeff Verschueren's words (1999: 48), to "a pragmatic return to meaning in its full complexity, allowing for interacting forces of language production and interpretation".

For example, the concept of "intention" has been regarded as a "culture-specific within sociocultural-interactional pragmatics (Danziger 2006, Duranti, 2006, Richland 2006). There have been also contributions that posit that Gricean intentions are not constitutive to verbal interaction (Arundale 2008) and that verbal information can be transmitted without communicative intention (Németh T. 2008). Within the cognitive-philosophical perspective on pragmatics, the role of S's intention in the communicative process has been ardently debated (Davis 1998, 2007, 2008; Gibbs 1999, 2001; Gil 2011; Green 2007, 2008; Jaszczolt 2005, 2006; Keysar 2007; Saul 2001; Thompson 2008).

In this sense, Haugh (2008: 102) suggests that, while there is substantial (if not overwhelming) evidence against the placement of Gricean intentions at the center of theorizing in pragmatics, "there remains a need to account for the cognition that underlies interaction". This article

aims at accounting for some cognitive aspects underlying interaction: The core hypothesis that is being maintained here is that every single piece of linguistic behavior affects both S' and H's faces. In other words, all utterances inevitably affect both S's and H's face. If this is true, everything we say is at least threatening, if not invading.

2. An Analysis of Face Threat and Face Invasion

2.1 A Rough Classification

Since all speech acts seem to affect both H's and S's faces, there should be two basic kinds of speech acts regarding politeness phenomena:

i. **Non-impolite speech acts are face-threatening acts** (FTA). Two different sub-groups can be distinguished here:

- Non-impolite speech acts which make use of at least one politeness strategy are **polite** speech acts.

- Non-impolite speech acts which do not include any politeness strategy are properly **non-polite** speech acts.

ii. **Rude speech acts are face-invading acts** (FIA)

Figure 1 aims at illustrating this rough classification.

Polite speech acts
(with some politeness strategy)

Face-threatening speech acts (FTAs)
(Non-impolite speech acts)

Speech acts

Properly non-polite speech acts
(on record, without redress)

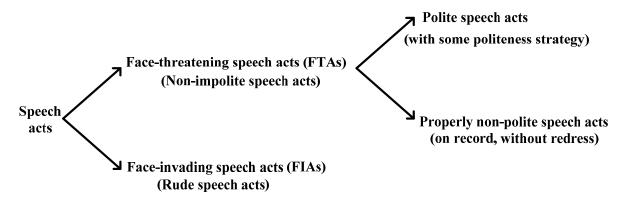Face-invading speech acts (FIAs)
(Rude speech acts)

Figure 1. Types of speech acts regarding politeness

2.2 Face Threat

We should analyze *how* every kind of non-impolite speech act, i.e., every non-impolite utterance, threatens both S's and H's face. This means that every single thing we dare to say will affect not only our herarer's face but also our own face. In order to account for the different varieties of speech acts, I will consider the "classical" taxonomy elaborated by Searle (1975) as based on the well-known essential condition (Searle 1969). According to this condition, a certain utterance *x* counts as *y* in the context *c*; e.g., the utterance 'I promise to come next year at the same time' counts as S's commitment to some future action (in this case, coming next year at the same time). Categories of speech acts, then, are defined as follows:

1) Assertive speech acts commit S to the truth of the expressed proposition. Traditionally, it has been believed that "such illocutions tend to be neutral as regards politeness" (Leech 1983: 105).

2) Directive speech acts express that S wants H to perform a future action.

3) Commissive speech acts commit S to a future action.

4) Expressive speech acts count as the manifestation of S's psychological attitude to a state of affairs.

5) Declarations count as the institution of a correspondence between the propositional content and reality.

In the following paragraphs, I will try to demonstrate that all these categories of speech acts affect both S's and H's face.

2.2.1 Assertive Speech Acts

If S says

1) It's raining

he/she commits to the truth of the proposition 'It's raining'. The following consequences, then, can be expected:

i.   The assertion threatens S's positive face. S' commitment to the truth of a proposition is exposed to H's valuation.

ii. The assertion threatens S's negative face. When committing to the truth of a proposition, S imposes himself an obligation: As Austin (1962) has suggested, S has to be consequent with his/her own words.

iii. The assertion threatens H's positive face. S has chosen a subject and has presented it in some particular way. Subject and mood may not be valuable for H.

iv. The assertion threatens H's negative face. S imposes H a subject.

2.2.2 Directive Speech Acts

This is a wide and complex category: Commands, questions, pieces of advice, etc. can be included here. As regards politeness and face threat, the approach we can adopt is the same as before. For example, S says:

1) Close the door, please

Politely, S makes manifest that he/she wants H to do something: to close the door. The following consequences can be mentioned in this case:

i.   The directive act threatens S's positive face. S admits that he/she wants, prefers, or even needs, H to do something.

ii. The directive act threatens S's negative face. S imposes himself an obligation: S has to be consequent with his/her own words, i.e., with his want, preference or even need.

iii. The directive act threatens H's positive face. S makes an assumption about H's capacities or even social condition.

iv. The directive act *intrinsically* threatens H's negative face. S imposes H to do something.

2.2.3 Commissive Speech Acts

When S performs any commissive speech act, for example a promise such as

1) I will bring you a chocolate tomorrow, we can identify a set of conditions which are rather similar to the ones we considered before.

i. The commisive act threatens S's positive face. S admits that he/ she wants to do something in order to benefit H. In addition, S makes manifest an assumption about his/her capacities and, even, his/her social position.

ii. The commisive act *intrinsically* threatens S's negative face. S imposes himself to do something in the benefit of H.

iii. The commisive act threatens H's positive face. S makes manifest an assumption about H's wishes or preferences. For example, S believes that H wants S to accomplish the promise.

iv. The commisive act *intrinsically* threatens H's negative face. S imposes himself a future action that will certainly affect H.

2.2.4 Expressive Speech Acts

Expressive speech acts count as the manifestation of S's psychological attitude to a state of affairs. If S says

1) Good luck!

he/she is polite because he/she makes manifest his/her sympathy with H. However, S also threatens his/ her own face and H's.

i. The expressive act *intrinsically* threatens S's positive face. S's feelings or emotions are exposed to H's valuation.

ii. The expressive act threatens S's negative face. H imposes himself/ herself an obligation; i.e., S will have to be consequent with the feelings or emotions he/she expressed.

iii. The expressive act threatens H's positive face. S makes an assumption about S's wants, preferences or even needs.

iv. The expressive act *intrinsically* threatens H's negative face. S imposes H his/ her own valuation; i.e., H is expected to be thankful or charitable with S.

2.2.5 Declarations

Declarations count as the establishment of a correspondence between the propositional content and reality. They constitute "a very special category of speech acts" (Searle, 1975: 18), because they are usually performed by a person who is especially authorized to do so within some institutional framework. For example, a judge may say

1)   I declare you innocent.

Although such an utterance must be included in an institutional context as a court, it involves human interaction and deals with face threat.

i.   The declaration threatens S's positive face. S, an authorized individual, exposes something that must be institutionally legitimate.

ii. The declaration *intrinsically* threatens S's negative face. S imposes himself to give support to the new state of affairs that was generated, at least in part, by his/ her own words.

iii. The declaration threatens H's positive face. Since the declaration involves conditions and rules, it is a strong assumption about S's capacities and social position.

iv. The declaration *intrinsically* threatens H's negative face. H is part of the institutional framework where the declaration is performed, and he/she must accept it.

2.2.6 Summary

Table 1 aims at summarizing the concepts that have been developed in section 2: Every speech act threatens both S's and H's positive and negative face. Intrinsic threats have been written in *italics*. Since threats to S's and H's face have four different and simultaneous modalities, the previous considerations can be reformulated as follows:

1)   *S's positive face threat.* When saying something non-impolite, simply by choosing a subject and making a valuation, S exposes himself/herself and his/her valuation. In other words: when I speak, I am exposed to others.

2)   *S's negative face threat.* When saying something non-impolite, S imposes himself/herself to be consequent with his/her words. In other words: the things I say count as a commitment or as an obligation for me.

3)   *H's positive face threat.* When saying something non-impolite, S imposes H a subject and, consequently, his/her own valuation. In other words: when I speak, I make an option which is not, obviously, my hearer's option.

4)   *H's negative face threat.* When saying something non-impolite, S imposes H to do something, at least, H is told to believe in S's words. In other words: when I speak, I inevitably "attempt to influence on my fellow creatures" (Lamb 2004: 438).

Table 1. Face threat according to the varieties of speech acts

Type of speech act / utterance	Type of threat			
	Speaker's face		Hearer's face	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Assertive	S's commitment to the truth of a proposition is exposed to H's valuation.	S imposes himself an obligation: S has to be consequent with his/her own words.	S has chosen a subject and has presented it in some particular way. Subject and mood may not be valuable for H.	S imposes H a subject.
Directive	S admits that he/she wants, prefers or even needs H to do something.	S imposes himself an obligation: S has to be consequent with his/her own words, i.e., with his want, preference or even need.	S makes an assumption about H's capacities or even social condition.	*S imposes H to do something.*
Commissive	S admits that he/she wants to do something in order to benefit H. S makes manifest an assumption about his/her capacities and even social position.	*S imposes himself to do something in the benefit of H.*	S makes manifest an assumption about H's wishes or preferences. E.g., S believes that H wants S to accomplish the promise.	*S imposes himself a future action that will certainly affect H.*
Expressive	*S's feelings or emotions are exposed to H's*	H imposes himself/ herself an obligation; S	S makes an assumption about S's wants,	*S imposes H his/ her own valuation; i.e., H*

	valuation.	will have to be consequent with the feelings or emotions he expressed.	preferences or even needs.	*is expected to be thankful or charitable with S*
Declarations	S, an authorized individual, exposes something that must be institutionally legitimate.	*S imposes himself to give support to the new state of affairs that was generated, at least in part, by the declaration.*	Involving conditions and rules, it is an strong assumption about S's possibilities and social position.	*H is part of the institutional framework where the declaration is performed, and he/ she must accept it.*

* Intrinsic threats are written in *italics*.

2.3 Face Invasion

Non-impolite speech acts have already been analyzed. But a speech act may be absolutely and directly impolite, i.e., rude. In this case, S has the intention to damage or invade H's face. Invasions or offenses can be performed, for example, by means of an insult, such as (12), or a proper threat, such as the Kafkian example (13).

1) You are such an idiot!

2) Tomorrow at 5 I will hit you, son

Rude speech acts invade or damage both S's and H's face. Every face invading speech act (FIA) will damage H's face seriously. Inevitably, and maybe paradoxically, such as in Newton's action and reaction law, it will also affect S's face.

When performing a FIA, S performs an utterance which attacks, primarily, H's face. Secondly, this FIA attacks his/her own face. In this sense, threats to S's and H's faces manifest four different and simultaneous modalities.

1) *S's positive face invasion.* When saying something rude, S exposes himself because of the single fact of choosing a controversial subject and a negative valuation about H. S, then, invades his/her own face. If I insult you, I won't be positively considered by the majority.

2) *S's negative face invasion.* When saying something rude, S imposes himself to be consequent with his/her controversial words and with his/her disapprobation about H. Since the propositional content damages H strongly, the imposition dealing S's own words is equally strong and invades his/her negative face.

3) *S's positive face invasion.* When saying something rude, S is making explicit that he disapproves H (or something belonging to H). Consequently, he/she intrinsically invades H's positive face.

4) *S's negative face invasion.* When saying something rude, S imposes H a subject that expectably and obviously H won't like (example 12) or S imposes H a future action thet is expected to damage H (example 13). S, then, invades intrinsically H's negative face.

Now, Table 2 aims at summarizing the preceding concepts. Intrinsic invasions are written in *italics* again.

Table 2. Face invasion regarding two types of speech acts

Type of speech act / utterance	Type of invasion			
	Speaker's Face		Hearer's Face	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Insult, [like (12)]	S exposes his negative valuation about H.	H imposes himself to be consequent with his / her negative valuation about H.	*S despises H.*	S imposes H a subject, a valuation that, expectably, H won't like.
Rude threat, [like (13)]	S admits that he/she wants to do something against H. S makes an assumption about his/ her possibilities.	*S imposes himself/ herself a future action.*	*S makes manifest that he /she is more powerful than H.*	*S imposes H a future action that, according to S, will be negative for H.*

3. Conclusion: Three principles in language use

The inevitability of face threat and face invasion imply a set of three general principles that may have some importance in communication and cognition:

1) **Pragmatic principle of face affection.** Al speech acts (all utterances) affect both S's and H's faces.

2) **Pragmatic principle of face threat.** All non-impolite speech acts (polite speech acts included) threaten, simultaneously but in different grades, S's and H's faces.

3) **Pragmatic principle of face invasion**. All rude speech acts invade, simultaneously but in different grades, S's and H's faces.

The distinction between non-impolite and rude utterances could be the cornerstone to test some hypotheses about other pragmatic issues. For example, "irony" could be defined as the pragmatic effect of some type of reprobation that threatens intrinsically someone's positive face. Similarly, "sarcasm" could be interpreted as a strong reprobation by which some individual's positive face is, intrinsically, being invaded.

In summary: The hypothesis that every single thing we say affects the speaker's and the hearer's face does not only seem to be plausible, but it also accounts for one of those aspects underlying verbal interaction.

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