Interactionally achieving face in criticism–criticism response exchanges

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ABSTRACT

Arundale's Face Constituting Theory is used to examine the way face is conjointly co-constituted in criticism–criticism response exchanges in PhD vivas in Iran. This approach carried out in CA tradition on institutional talk makes it possible to explain how face is achieved in the manner grounded in the interactants' perspective. The analysis concentrates on two excerpts of talk drawn from a corpus of 12 PhD vivas. The findings show how interactants conjointly constitute meanings and social actions and at the same time establish relational connection and separation.

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1. Introduction

This article pioneers a new line of enquiry into criticism actions in PhD vivas, focusing on the sequential organization of criticism–criticism response interactions and the interactional achievement of face (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 2005). The notion of face as understood here is associated with Arundale's Face Constituting Theory (henceforth "FCT"), which is defined as "participants' understandings of relational connectedness and separateness conjointly co-constituted in talk/conduct-in-interaction" (Arundale, 2010, p. 2078). This essentially means that face achievement is accomplished relationally as well as interactionally as an integral part of but distinct from meaning-action achievement.

The investigation focuses on the way Iranian speakers of English conjointly coconstruct criticism–criticism response exchanges in the context of PhD vivas in Iran, in a culture oriented towards relationship building. Iranians are bound by rules of politeness linked to âberu, a concept of face which is "associated with a schema that embodies the image of a person . . . particularly as viewed by others in the society" (Sharifian, 2007, p. 36). In this culture, "politeness does not seem to be motivated by the face concerns of the participants, . . . but by their social standing in respect to others in their group (Reiter, 2009, p. 168). This is clearly reflected in the notion of taarof a ritual courtesy defined as compliments, ceremony, good manners, soft tongue, honeyed phrases, respect (Koutlaki, 2002, p. 1741), which is regarded as indispensable in Iranian interaction. Another two interrelated concepts concerned with face are shaxsiat and ehteram. A speaker's shaxsiat or pride depends on the way he behaves, which is perceived as indicative of his upbringing. Ehteram or honour refers to the respect shown to one another by adhering to norms of behaviour "according to the addressee's position, age, status and interlocutors' relationship" (Koutlaki, 2002, p. 1742). Vivas are predominantly made up of potentially negative pragmatic acts (Mey, 2001), such as criticisms and evaluations which may negatively affect interpersonal relationships between interactants and lead to conflict. Thus relational phenomena such as face and politeness acquire a more substantial meaning (Grimshaw, 1989, pp. 522–523).

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The specific aim is to analyze the way participants achieve face interactionally while performing and responding to acts of criticism, which is essentially a dyadic activity, taking into account the interactive context in which it occurs. The analysis will be guided by the following questions:

1. How do criticism and criticism response unfold across sequences of talk?
2. How are relational connection and separation conjointly achieved in criticism–criticism response interaction?

The sequential organization of talk forms the primary analytic utility in describing talk as action and also its relation to interaction (Schegloff, 1991). Drawing on Conversation Analysis (CA) we adopt an interactional approach taking into account both the addressor's production and the addressee's response, treating "meaning as the understandings that participants display to each other in the sequential organization of talk" (Kasper, 2006, p. 296).

In what follows we discuss the relevant literature on face and politeness and also on criticism, and relate it to the aim of this article. Following the methodology, we analyze two samples of criticism exchange to determine how participants actually do criticism–criticism response and relational work in a context in which evaluation is the *raison d'être*. Finally, we discuss the findings in relation to broader issues including the situational context invoked by the participants, the institutional practice of a PhD viva and Iranian culture.

2. Face, politeness and criticism in interaction

We view face "in terms of the relationship two or more persons create with one another in interaction" which is distinct "from the understandings of face in terms of person-centred attributes like social identity, public self-image, or social wants that characterize existing theories" (Arundale, 2010, p. 2078). The move towards seeing face as concerned with relationships and conjointly co-constituted in the interaction is consistent with the constructivist view that social phenomena are interactionally achieved and that "communication is a joint and collaborative activity" (Editorial, 2010, p. 2074). Arundale argues that an encoding/decoding model of communication, which is not grounded in interaction, cannot successfully account for the property of emergence or interactional achievement that characterizes communication in general (Arundale, 1999, pp. 122–124, 2006, p. 195). On the other hand, the Conjoint Co-constituting Model of Communication is able to explain meaning "as social, and specifically as interactional" (Arundale, 2010, p. 2085). The interpersonal dialectic of connection and separation is "the principal or fundamental dialectic in relationships because no relationship exists except as two separate or differentiated individuals achieve some form of social connection or unity." (Arundale, 1999, p. 9, cited in Arundale (2010, p. 2086)).

Goffman's view that face "is something that is not lodged in or on his body, but is diffusely located in the flow of events in the encounter" (1967, p. 7) appears on the surface to be consistent with FCT's notion of face. However, despite alluding to the importance of interaction, face is still firmly rooted in the cognition of individuals (Editorial, 2010, p. 2074). This conceptualization of face has two limitations. First, it is concerned with the protection and enhancement of the interlocutor's self image, which has been criticized as not universal (Locher and Watts, 2005, p. 16). Secondly, its conceptualization as arising "through pre-established patterns of action" (Arundale, 2006) and being embedded in "an intention-based transmission model of communication" (Editorial, 2010, p. 2) is not consistent with the "emergent, contingent and interactional nature" of face (Lerner, 1996) which requires interaction to be at the centre of the analysis of face and where meanings are negotiated through our engagement with the realities in our world (Crotty, 1998, p. 8).

The application of Goffman's notion of face in Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness (1987) has resulted in an ongoing debate concerned in particular with the conflation of politeness with face. Brown and Levinson's positive and negative politeness differs from both Goffman's elaboration of face (and facework) and Durkheim's "positive and negative rituals" (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003, p. 1460), and Chinese *Mianzi* ("a desire to secure public acknowledgement") and *Lian* ("a desire to be liked and to be approved of by others") (Ma Yingxin, 2008, p. 210). The original concept of face which is derived from Chinese face is intimately linked to "the views of the community and to the community's judgment and perception of the individual's character and behaviour" (Ma Yingxin, 2008, p. 210), and what is emphasized is "the harmony of individual conduct with the views and judgment of the community" (p. 210). Bargiela-Chiappini (2003) postulates that Brown and Levinson selectively adopt the individualistic aspect of Goffman's face disregarding its social orientation (Werkhofer, 1992, p. 178) and turn it into a cognitive individualistic construct based on Western ethnocentric assumptions. This model has been criticized by researchers working on eastern languages including Japanese (e.g. Matsumoto, 1988), Chinese (Chen, 1993) and Persian (Koutlaki, 2002) who argue for a collectivistic view of face to reflect the importance given to group rather than individual face and the dependence of one's social standing and reputation on society's recognition.

Locher and Watts' discursive approach (2005) represents a post-modern take on politeness. They argue that the theory of politeness "is not in fact a theory of politeness, but rather a theory of facework, dealing only with the mitigation of face threatening acts" (Locher and Watts, 2005, p. 10) and "Brown and Levinson's can still be used ... if we look at the strategies they have proposed to possible relations of ... relational work" (Locher and Watts, 2005, p. 10). The pre-eminence of politeness in the sense of face is thus being questioned (Locher, 2004). Although it is here to stay, "the form it takes remains a consideration for us all" (Bousfield, 2006, p. 11). Haugh (2007) calls attention to the key issues still left unresolved by the discursive approach (see e.g. Locher 2006; Locher and Watts, 2005), and one of them is concerned with "how researchers