

The interaction of the Maxim of Quality and face concerns: An experimental approach using the vignette technique



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Abstract

Face (Goffman, 1955, 1959, 1967), the public self-image that individuals project in interaction, has been proposed (Brown and Levinson, 1978/1987) as a social psychological principle that motivates the departure from rational (Gricean) communication and conversational maxims. Although experimental research has provided evidence in favor of this explanation (e.g., Holtgraves, 1986, 1992, 1994, 1998; Holtgraves and Yang, 1990, 1992; Bonnefon and Villejoubert, 2006; Bonnefon et al., 2009), more recent critiques (Tracy and Baratz, 1994; Spencer-Oatey, 2009) have pointed toward a more nuanced understanding of face by arguing that face concerns can be relativized. Taking on board these critiques, the present study sought to examine flouts of the Maxim of Quality and relativized face concerns, and their effect on speaker meaning. Results of the experiment reported here revealed that flouts of Quality produced inferences in the predicted direction (friendly, teasing readings) but perception of aspects of speaker meaning was also affected as a function of (strong or minimal) face sensitivities. This study has implications for the ways that the construction of affiliative inferences may occur. It is also suggested that the inferential process by which speaker meaning is arrived at may be mediated by reasoning about emotional consequences on the listener. Potential implications for social psychology and research on irony are also discussed.
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1. Introduction

Grice (1969, 1975, 1989) proposed that humans tend to cooperate with one another when communicating (Cooperative Principle) and they do so by abiding by a number of conversational maxims. For example, we tend – and are expected – to be truthful in our exchanges with others by following the Maxim of Quality (Grice, 1989:27). When we do not conform to the maxims, usually there is a good reason to do so, and this gives rise to implied meanings, the so called *implicatures*. For example, if I say “Wanna go for a beer tonight?” and you say “I have to finish a report”, you do not directly answer my question, and, by flouting the Maxim of Relation (i.e. ‘Be relevant’), you produce an implicature (and I derive the inference) that you probably do not have the time to go for a beer. Although several scholars subscribed to the Cooperative Principle and (breaches of) the maxims as the primary mechanisms by which implicatures are generated, a heated discussion emerged in the 1970s about *why* speakers depart from the Gricean Maxims so often in the first place (why are we so indirect, going contrary to norms of rational communication by making things more difficult for our listener?). Most notably, Lakoff (1973), Brown and Levinson (1978/1987; henceforth B&L) and Leech (1983) argued that what is missing is a more fundamental explanation of what motivates the deviation from the maxims. More or less, the models that these researchers

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proposed in the 1970s and 1980s offered a *social* explanation, which in the case of B&L came in the form of *face* (Goffman, 1955, 1959, 1967). Broadly conceived, *face* refers to concerns that arise when one engages in social behavior, i.e. in behavior that involves interaction with an Other. More specifically, B&L (1978/1987:61–62) made a distinction between positive face (the desire to be approved of and to be liked) and negative face (the desire that our actions be unimpeded by others).

However, models such as B&L's account mainly for indirect speech usually in the form of deviations from the Maxim of Relation, by which speakers attempt to minimize or preempt the threat to their interlocutor's negative face (see discussion in Haugh, 2009:2). In other words, B&L's model focuses not on face itself (which is taken rather as a given) but on face threat and how to preemptively minimize it through indirect language. In their model, face threat is calculated from relational and situational variables: the distance between the interlocutors, the power of the hearer over the speaker, and the ranking of imposition (how much one imposes on the hearer) are the basic parameters that regulate face threat. This practically means that the closer the interlocutors are and the less the power differential and the imposition, the less the face threat and the less mitigating language must be used. Experimental studies (e.g., Holtgraves, 1986, 1992, 1994, 1998; Holtgraves and Yang, 1990, 1992; Bonnefon and Villejoubert, 2006; Bonnefon et al., 2009, 2011; Demeure et al., 2009; Feeney and Bonnefon, 2012) have provided evidence that face, conceived as the public self-image that all humans project in interaction, is taken into account when interpreting linguistic behavior, and ultimately motivates the deviation from rational communication – at least as circumscribed by the Gricean framework. However, one issue with these studies is that their focus on the parameters that regulate face threat (power, distance, imposition) (see, for example, Holtgraves and colleagues' work) has driven attention away from the concept itself. Or, when the focus is not necessarily on these parameters, authors do not engage in a discussion of face as a concept (see, for example, the work of Bonnefon and colleagues). However, this renders face a static concept by making the assumption that face concerns are the same everywhere for everybody so long as these parameters¹ are taken into account.

Some scholars (Tracy and Baratz, 1994; Spencer-Oatey, 2009) have pointed toward the *relativity* of face concerns: Individuals weigh face concerns according to either how contextually salient they are (for example, “the same woman in an interaction with her daughter's teacher may want to be seen as a good mother, while at her league basketball game she may want to be seen as a good athlete”; 1994:290–291) or how much importance they assign to aspects of their self (their physical appearance, abilities, features, etc.) (Spencer-Oatey, 2005, 2007, 2009). If they assign lower importance to certain aspects of their self, face concerns will be lower (for example, “if someone wants to be regarded as fashionable and is told that s/he is ‘old fashioned’, this will be more face-threatening to him/her than to someone who cares less about fashion”; Spencer-Oatey, 2009:141). In this sense, the relativity of face concerns refers to a continuum which may, at one end, involve cases where face concerns are very low (because they are less contextually relevant or because the value assigned to aspects of the self is low) and, at the other end, cases in which face concerns are very high (because they are very relevant or because the value assigned to aspects of the self is very high). Presumably this would hold true even when factoring in the relational and situational variables from which the weightiness of face threat is calculated. Taking these criticisms as a valid point of departure, I follow Spencer-Oatey (2005) in defining face as referring to aspects of the self such as physical features, abilities, roles and skills among others, some of which are more important to the self than others, such that people develop sensitivities around these self-aspects. If these self-aspect sensitivities are challenged *in interaction*, people may perceive a threat to their face and offense can result.² This also suggests that, as face is *emotionally* invested (Goffman, 1967:6, 8, 97–112; B&L, 1978/1987:61), management of relations is coupled with emotional grounding, i.e. mis/management of relations triggers emotions (as when, for example, I insult somebody, which might trigger anger or hurt feelings in them). More recent research (Culpeper, 2011; Isik-Güler and Ruhi, 2010; Spencer-Oatey, 2005, 2011; Vergis, 2015) has started uncovering the affective underpinnings of face describing the varieties of social and moral emotions implicated in im/polite interactions.

Face is associated with positively evaluated attributes that the individual wants others to acknowledge (explicitly or implicitly), and with negatively evaluated attributes that the individual wants others *not* to ascribe to him/her (Spencer-Oatey, 2007:644). Politeness, affiliation, solidarity or other evaluative notions that refer to harmonious rapport management are the result of face enhancement among other behavioral components (Spencer-Oatey, 2005:96). The reverse effect would come about if we were to criticize our interlocutor's self-aspect. Of course, Spencer-Oatey's definition of face also suggests that aspects of the self that do not matter to the individual would not be expected, when challenged (or enhanced) in interaction, to result in the same degree of offense (or ingratiation) (Spencer-Oatey, 2009:141). If the listener already assigned very low importance to his skills thus being a peripheral aspect of his self, this would presumably

¹ It has to be noted that experimental pragmatics research has uncovered more social and situational variables that might affect interpretation and politeness concerns beyond B&L's classic triad. Some of these include *relationship affect* (Slugoski and Turnbull, 1988) or the speaker's momentary *emotional state* (Vergis and Terkourafi, 2015).

² To be more precise, Spencer-Oatey (2005:102) makes a distinction between *respectability face* and *identity face*, but her discussion and analysis focus on the latter. Here *face* reflects this latter sense.

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