

Revisiting face and identity: Insights from Tunisian culture

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Abstract

This paper investigates how face is conceptualized in Tunisian Arabic (TA) with reference to the notion of identity. The study is based on a corpus of 139 expressions collected by the researcher using her knowledge of TA as a native speaker of the language as well as through observation of authentic conversations. The expressions included terms using the literal meaning of face as ‘the front part of the head’, figurative and idiomatic expressions, collocations, and proverbs. The paper shows that face in the Tunisian culture is closely related to identity and that in addition to situation-specific factors, adherence to prevailing cultural values plays a crucial role in determining face salience. The study has implications for face research at the emic and etic levels.

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1. Introduction

Ever since the seminal works of Goffman (1955) and subsequently Brown and Levinson (1987) on the concept of ‘face’, researchers have studied this notion from a variety of perspectives. Recent studies have called for the study of face independently from politeness (e.g. Haugh, 2013) and have stressed the importance of a multiple perspective approach to the study of face (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003; Spencer-Oatey, 2007). In particular, theories of identity as developed within social-psychology have been argued to “offer very useful insights for both the conceptualisation and the analysis of face” (Spencer-Oatey, 2007:640). The conceptualization of face as a manifestation of identity, however, has been disputed by other researchers who contend that face is different from identity in that identity is an individual phenomenon, while face is co-constructed by discourse participants in context (Arundale, 2010). Recently, a number of face (and identity) scholars have called for more studies about the relationship between face and identity (e.g. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2013; Hall and Bucholtz, 2013; Joseph, 2013).

This paper aims to provide insights into the relationship between face and identity through the investigation of emic/culture-specific conceptualizations of face. Specifically, it examines the relationship between Tunisian face¹ and identity from the perspective of social psychology. The paper starts with an overview of the identity theories that are most relevant to the purpose of this study, then overviews the literature on face with special reference to its relationship with the notion of identity and cultural values. The analysis section of this paper is based on a description

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¹ I shall use the term ‘Tunisian face’ to refer to face as conceptualized in Tunisian Arabic.

and discussion of examples of TA face expressions in order to show the relevance of face to identity and values in Tunisian culture.

2. Identity theories: an overview

A number of theories have been developed to account for the concept of identity in social psychology. Among such theories, Identity Theory (e.g. Burke, 1980; Stryker, 1968) and Social Identity Theory (SIT) (e.g. Hogg and Abrams, 1988; Turner et al., 1987) with its Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) extension (Turner et al., 1987) figure as influential accounts of the self in relation to social structure. Hogg et al. (1995) maintain that although the two perspectives have some similarities, they engender important differences at a good number of levels. Hogg et al. (ibid.) have attributed such differences to the roots of the theories explaining that while Identity Theory originated in sociology, SIT is basically a psychological theory. Differences between the two theories, however, have been downgraded by other researchers (e.g. Stets and Burke, 2000) who argue that “although differences exist between the two theories, they are more differences in emphasis than in kind, and that linking the two theories can establish a more fully integrated view of the self” (p. 224).

In line with Stets and Burke’s call for merging separate theoretical accounts into a general theory of the self, recent approaches to the study of identity have stressed the importance of an integrated approach to the study of this notion (e.g. Simon, 2004 cited in Spencer-Oatey, 2007). In this paper, and following Spencer-Oatey (2007), I will draw eclectically on those aspects of identity that are most relevant to the study of face albeit accounted for within different identity theories as dealing with differences between such theories is beyond the scope of this paper. The following section overviews the key identity features that I consider relevant for the analysis of face.

2.1. Core identity tenets

2.1.1. Identity formation

Stets and Burke (2000:225) explain that within SIT, people derive their identities from the social groups of which they are members. Hogg et al. (1995:259) stipulate that within SIT “a social category (e.g., nationality, political affiliation, sports team) into which one falls, and to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category.” Category memberships, according to the authors, have different degrees of importance in the self-concept and each of which represents a discrete social identity. Such social identity determines the characteristics or ‘attributes’ of group members in terms of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. These attributes serve to identify ‘in-group’ as opposed to ‘out-group’ members. Hogg et al. further explain that two socio-cognitive processes underlie social identity formation: categorization and self-enhancement and define them as follows:

- a- “*Categorization* sharpens intergroup boundaries by producing group-distinctive stereotypical and normative perceptions and actions, and assigns people, including self, to the contextually relevant category” (p. 260, italics original). Stets and Burke (2000) explain that categorization results in enhancing similarities between the self and other members of the in-group and accentuating differences between the self and members of the out-group.
- b- “*self-enhancement* guides the social categorization process such that in-group norms and stereotypes largely favor the in-group” (Hogg et al., 1995:260, italics original). To explain the self-enhancement process, Hogg et al., claim that people need to evaluate themselves positively vis-à-vis relevant others. This positive feeling of oneself has been conventionally referred to within social psychology as ‘self-esteem’. Stets and Burke (2000) hold that comparison as a key process involved in social identity formation results in enhancement of the self. They explain that enhancement of an individual’s self-esteem stems from different evaluations of the in-group and the out-group: while the in-group is evaluated positively, the out-group is evaluated negatively. Self-esteem (individual or collective) has been suggested as a main motive for identity activation. Self-esteem is a key notion for the analysis of face that I shall use in this article.

2.1.2. Levels of identity

Brewer (1991:476) distinguishes between ‘personal identity’ and ‘social identities’ and defines them as follows:

- a- “*Personal identity* is the individuated self – those characteristics that differentiate one individual from others within a given social context” (italics original). As the lowest level of self-categorization, Stets and Burke (2000) explain that personal identity is an individual’s construal as a ‘unique’ and ‘distinct’ entity and not as a group member.
- b- “*Social identities* are categorizations of the self into more inclusive social units that *depersonalize* the self-concept, where *I* becomes *we*” (Brewer, 1991:476, italics original). Brewer and Gardner (1996) further distinguish between two levels of social identity: identities originating from interpersonal relationships and those originating from larger social group memberships. The former have been referred to as ‘interpersonal identities’, while the latter have been referred to as ‘collective/group identities’.

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