



Face and identity in interaction: A focus on Tunisian Arabic

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the notions of face and facework in Tunisian Arabic (TA) interactions in relation to the notion of identity. It builds on a previous study (Labben, 2017) in which I explored the emic meanings of face as encoded in TA lay expressions from a social psychological identity perspective. To further explore the concept of face in Tunisian culture, particularly in its connectedness with the notion of identity, the present paper uses TA interactional data collected in authentic communication contexts and perception data collected by means of a post-event interview. Consistently with lexemic meanings, the paper shows that face and identity in Tunisian culture are inextricably interrelated, and that face maintenance and enhancement are contingent upon the fulfillment of culture-specific values. The study has implications for emic and etic conceptualizations of face.

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1. Introduction

The study of the notion of face has long been subsumed under im/politeness research. Recently, a number of face (and im/politeness) researchers have called for the study of face independently from im/politeness (e.g. Arundale, 2013; Haugh, 2013; Haugh and Bargiela-Chiappini, 2010), and have underscored the importance of emic insights for face conceptualization and analysis (e.g. Arundale, 2013; Haugh, 2013). While extensive research about face (and im/politeness) in Western and East-Asian cultures has been conducted, face research in Arab cultural contexts has remained scanty. In response to recent calls for studying face independently from im/politeness and the urge for examining emic conceptualizations of the notion in different cultural contexts, this paper explores the different meanings of face in Tunisian culture from different perspectives. Building on another study (Labben, 2017) in which I investigated folk conceptualizations of face in TA from an identity perspective, the present paper relies on different types of data in order to investigate how face is negotiated in interaction.¹ Specifically, the paper relies on authentic data collected in real-life contexts and perception data gathered by means of a post-event interview. At a first level, it is hoped that findings from this study contribute to emic studies of face in an under-investigated language and culture, and allow to check whether conclusions about Tunisian face conceptualizations as encoded in folk terms could be extended to interactional aspects of face. At a second level, the paper aims to contribute to etic theorizations of face by providing novel culture-specific insights.

The literature review section of the paper starts with an overview of face research with special reference to its relationship with the notion of identity and values in Tunisian culture. The methodology section describes and justifies the main methods

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¹ I am using the terms 'facework' and 'negotiation of face in interaction' interchangeably in this article to refer to how face concerns arise and are negotiated in authentic face-to-face interactions. The term 'face in interaction' is not to be confounded, however, with the interactional approach to the study of face (e.g. Arundale, 2010, 2013).

used to collect the data for the purposes of the present study. The results and discussion section of the paper subdivides into three sub-sections corresponding to the transcripts analyzed. These were taken from audio-recorded data collected during family visits on the occasion of *Eid al-Fitr* (see methodology section below). The conclusion section of the paper summarizes the main findings in light of previous face research.

2. Face research: an overview

Historically, with its origins in China (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003), the notion of face became prominent in the West through the work of Goffman (1955) and particularly influential and popular through Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) model of politeness. Goffman (1955:215) conceptualized face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" while Brown and Levinson (1987:61) defined it as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself." Brown and Levinson's model of politeness was built on the central notion of face as an individual's 'public self-image'. They argued that people have two types of face: a positive face which reflects their desire to be appreciated, and a negative face which reflects their need to be not imposed upon. According to this model, because an individual's face may be threatened by Face Threatening Acts, people attend to the different face wants of their interlocutors through politeness strategies. These divide into two main types: positive politeness strategies attend to the positive face of the interlocutor while negative politeness strategies attend to their negative face.

Brown and Levinson's model has generated a great amount of criticism. Challenging what several researchers have referred to as a claim for universality, a number of studies investigating the applicability of Brown and Levinson's model of politeness to different cultures have been conducted. Brown and Levinson's definition of face has been said to reflect a Western bias discernible in their 'individualistic' conceptualization of the notion. Studies conducted in non-Western contexts have shown that face pertains to individuals as well as to groups. For example, in Chinese, Japanese, Persian, and Igbo cultures (Gu, 1990; Koutlaki, 2009; Mao, 1994; Matsumoto, 1988; Nwoye, 1992) face has been said to be collectivistic. Similarly, a recent study about the emic conceptualizations of face in Tunisian culture (Labben, 2017) has shown that face includes individual, interpersonal, and collective levels.

Recent face research has urged for revisiting Goffman's works arguing that many traits of his original conceptualization of face (such as the social psychological aspect of the notion) have been neglected in Brown and Levinson's model (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003; Locher and Watts, 2005). As a result, the notion of face has received particular attention in recent years. While traditionally face has been investigated in relation to im/politeness – largely due to the influence of Brown and Levinson's model, recent studies have urged for the study of face 'in its own right', i.e., independently from im/politeness (Arundale, 2013; Haugh, 2013; Haugh and Bargiela-Chiappini, 2010). Haugh (2013:51) explains that face (as originally conceptualized by Goffman) involves more than politeness which "constitutes just one form of facework (or relational work) among a range of various kinds of interpersonal phenomena [...]."

In addition to a heightened move back to Goffman's conceptualization of the notion, face research in recent years has also been affected by the emergence of the discursive approach to politeness which prompted the development of a number of social constructionist politeness models (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2013). In this respect, reflecting on recent developments in face and im/politeness research, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2013:3) explains that:

The turn to a constructionist approach can be seen, however, not only in the discursive/post-modern approach, but in the recent proliferation of models, described by Haugh and Bargiela-Chippini (2010) as broadly social constructionist in nature, which also includes the interactional approach (Arundale 1999, 2006; Haugh 2007); the social-psychological approach (Spencer-Oatey 2005, 2007); the frame-based view (Terkourafi 2005a), and the genre approach (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2010a).

One particular issue that has generated much debate in recent years (including within the above mentioned 'social constructionist' approaches) is the relationship between face and identity. Spencer-Oatey (2007) explains that from a social psychological perspective, there exist similarities between the two notions as both face and identity are based on the conceptualization of self in terms of a bundle of attributes. She regards face as closely connected with a person's self-construal: "self as an individual (individual identity), self as a group member (group or collective identity) and self in relationship with others (relational identity)" (Spencer-Oatey, 2008:14). Locher (2008) reasons that a postmodernist look at identity as a relational concept shows that face and identity are similar notions: both are relational and negotiable. In this sense, she contends that "the terms relational work, facework, identity work, and rapport management" have the same referent: "the negotiation of relations and identities in interaction" (Locher, 2008:533). Within the interactional approach, however, the two notions have been argued to be of a different nature and, therefore, *cannot* be comparable (Arundale, 2010, 2013). For Arundale, face is 'co-constituted' in interaction; it "is a non-summative phenomenon, whereas identity is a summative individual phenomenon" (Arundale, 2013: 110).

Recently, a number of face and identity scholars have revisited the topic and have urged for more research on the relatedness of the notions (e.g. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2013; Hall and Bucholtz, 2013; Joseph, 2013). Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2013) demonstrates that even Goffman's original conceptualization of face entailed an interrelated view of face and identity and argues that "it is not possible to conceptualize face without taking identity into consideration" (p.8). In the same vein, Joseph (2013:52) asserts that "the topic of face and identity deserves to be a focus of empirical, analytical, methodological and theoretical attention for quite some time to come."

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