Relational connection and separation in Iranian dissertation defences

Zuraidah Mohd Don [a,*], Ahmad Izadi [b,1]

[a] Faculty of Language and Linguistics, University of Malaya, Jalan Lembah Pantai, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
[b] Faculty of Language and Linguistics, Department of English, Abadan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Abadan, Iran

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ABSTRACT

This article examines ways in which participants achieve face in Iranian dissertation defences, while doing interactional work in their roles as candidate, examiner or supervisor. Following Arundale, we adopt the notion of face as an interactional and relational phenomenon which is conjointly co-constituted by participants as they conjointly co-constitute meanings and actions in talk-in-interaction. This dynamic conceptualization of face requires an approach grounded in Conversational Analysis. The data for analysis is taken from two PhD defence sessions conducted at Iranian universities. Selected segments of talk from the Question and Answer sessions during these dissertation defences were analyzed to investigate how participants achieve face. The data analysis shows that interpreting and doing relational work are not only influenced by the participants' culture but also by the institutional nature of the talk itself. When covert rules are flouted, the reaction from co-participants and the audience demonstrates disapproval of inappropriate behaviour.

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1. Introduction

This article reopens the discussion about the nature of 'face', and examines specific instances of actual talk to see how participants conjointly constitute face as they conjointly constitute meaning and action in dissertation defences (henceforth DDs). The data is taken from two recorded PhD defences conducted in Iran. Evidence thus adduced will provide empirical grounds for the analysts' understanding of the participants' relational work. The approach taken is consistent with the Conjoint and Co-constituting Model of human communication, and the social constructionist view that social phenomena are interactionally achieved in talk-in-interaction (Sacks, 1992). The question addressed is how participants achieve face in a situation which is inherently highly sensitive to interpersonal relationships. To find an answer, we take an approach grounded in Conversational Analysis (henceforth CA) to analyze selected segments of talk typically containing some elements of negativity (Thompson and Hunston, 2000) such as the Question and Answer (Q & A) sessions which form part of the DDs under investigation. Central to CA are three principles, namely adjacency in talk, recipient design, and speaker designing, which show how participants conjointly achieve relational phenomena, one of which is face, as part of their interpretation of each other's behaviour (Heritage, 1984).

Face is here considered from a new perspective that has been developed in recent years and as a notion in its own right distinct from politeness or impoliteness (Haugh and Bargiela-Chiappini, 2010). This follows consistent and long-standing criticisms (Ide, 1989; Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003; Bravo, 2008) of Brown and Levinson's (1987:24) treatment of face as a matter

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +60 3 79673177/12 9135556; fax: +60 3 79579707.
  E-mail addresses: zuraida@um.edu.my (Z.M. Don), izadi53fa@yahoo.com (A. Izadi).
[1] Tel.: +60 3 79673177; fax: +60 3 79579707.

of individual wants, based on the assumption that "some speech acts are intrinsically face threatening". The criticisms focus on claims to universality and individual cognivitism. In their reviews of Brown and Levinson's work, Bargiela-Chiappini (2003), Spenser-Oatey (2002, 2005) and Koutlaki (2002) argue that they have in fact deviated from Goffman's conceptualization of face (1955), which is a psycho-social construct claimed in the course of interactions with others and gained through collaborative efforts between individuals in the flow of events in the encounter (see also Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003; Werkhofer, 1992). The consideration of the other's face is regarded as a social 'duty' assigned to human beings, and this constrains the conduct of a person in the presence of another (Goffman, 1955). However, despite the importance given to society, a central position is given in Goffman's definition and treatment of face to Western individuals "who are concerned with protecting and enhancing their own self-image" (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003, cited in Editorial, 2010:2074). Here face is still a personal attribute of speakers as individuals who passively follow rules and scripts imposed on them by society (Arundale, 2009; Eelen, 2001).

Drawing on the Conjoint and Co-constituting Model of human communication and Face Constituting Theory (henceforth, FCT), Arundale (2006:200–203) conceptualizes face "in terms of relationships between persons", i.e. their relational connection with and separation from each other in talk-in-interaction. Relationships are in this case defined "by the non-summative properties that arise in the interdependencies among two or more individuals" (Arundale, 2010:2086). According to him (2010:2088), "participants interactionally achieve and conjointly co-constitute both connection with and separation from others as they interactionally achieve and conjointly co-constitute meanings and actions in talk-in-interaction".

Conceptualizing face requires face to be examined in the context of actual interaction, not only as an interactional phenomenon (Arundale, 2009; Haugh, 2010) unfolding as the interaction progresses, but also as a relational phenomenon "in terms of the relationship two or more persons create with one another in interaction" (Arundale, 2010:2078). Face is no longer an individual person-centred attribute, but a dynamic social phenomenon created and recreated by participants in an ongoing sequence of talk, transcending the characteristics of the individuals that jointly produce it.

The use of CA requires the interaction itself to be at the centre of the face analysis, which is appropriate for the conceptualization of face adopted in this study. A basic idea in CA is that participants reveal their interpretations of meaning/action during the course of interactions as they unfold. The analyst's job is therefore to demonstrate that his/her interpretations are consonant with those of the participants as evident in talk (Schegloff, 1992; Heritage, 1997, 2005; Haugh, 2007; Arundale, 2010). Evidence of interlocutors' engagement in relational work is made available to the analysts in part from their projectings and interpretings of relational connection and separation to one another in their talk (Arundale, 2010:2090).

2. Relational connection/separation in talk-in-interaction

Face is achieved through achievement of connectedness and separateness, where connectedness and separateness form a dialectic (Arundale, 2010). Connectedness refers to "meanings and actions that may be apparent as unity, interdependence, solidarity, association, congruence, and more" (Arundale, 2006:204), and separateness refers to "meanings and actions that may be voiced as differentiation, independence, autonomy, dissociation, divergence, and so on". Connectedness entails (some degree of) separateness and vice versa (Arundale, 2010). Participants simultaneously project and interpret meaning and actions in interactions and relational connection and separation which are endogenous to talk. As they frame and design utterances for their recipients, they project their recipients' interpretations of them. These projections are provisional and become operative and confirmed only when recipients 'uptake' the same interpretation and put their utterances adjacent to them (Arundale, 2010:2080).

The dialectics of connectedness and separateness are not fixed but dynamic. They are perceived differently in different contextual situations and by different individuals (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996; Arundale, 2009), and are relatively general from a cultural point of view, and they can be filled with culture specific concepts (Arundale, 2009:43). This makes it necessary to carry out new ethnographic research (or make use of existing research) on the ways members of different cultural groups voice and interpret connection and separation; and as Hymes (1972:45) pointed out long ago, "one good ethnographic technique for getting at speech events ..., as at other categories, is through words which name them".

The Persian language has special terms referring to rules of social behaviour and reflecting the underlying expectations that Iranians bring with them into their interactions. These terms include *aberu, ta'arof, shaxsiat* and *ethteram*. The term *aberu* 'honour' metaphorically "embodies the image of a person, a family, or a group, particularly as viewed by others in the society" (Sharifian, 2007:36), and provides valuable insights into the relational account of the social self and so of face in Iran. *Aberu* is a powerful social force, and it is manifested in the way Iranians "measure themselves ...by the honour they accumulate through their actions and social interrelations" (O'Shea, 2000; cited in Sharifian, 2007:37). According to Sharifian (2007:37) "how other people think about a person, surfaces itself in the care that one should give to *harfe mardom* 'people's talk'", i.e. what others may think about them is a consequence of their conduct, which is somewhat equivalent to the term "persons-in-relationship-to-other-persons" (Arundale, 2006:204). Closely linked to *aberu* is *ta'arof*, a kind of ritual politeness which expresses good will and intentions and "provides a means for exercising a degree of 'face work', or *aberu*, before a request, for example, is made" (Sharifian, 2007:39).

The other two components of face are *shaxsiat* (character, honour, social standing) and *ethteram* (respect, deference). While *shaxsiat* is distinctly individualistic "dependent on the way s/he behaves and his/her educational background"