



## The dynamics of face in the fictional dialogue of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*

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**B**rown and Levinson's (1987) facework model is the most well-known stylistic approach to the study of politeness in dialogue (Culpepper, 2001: 247; Fraser, 1990: 228; Short, 1996: 212). They expounded and developed their theory based on the fundamental assertion that conversational participants bring to their dialogue an awareness of their own, and others', "faces"; that is, a perception of "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61). They postulate that face "can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61). Speakers use politeness strategies to "maintain" and support the faces of listeners (Fraser, 1990: 229). This analysis will test the strength of Brown and Levinson's facework model by taking it out of the context of politeness usage and face support that it originally appeared in, and placing it within the domain of *impoliteness* usage and face damage.

This study will use the principles and precepts of facework expounded by Brown and Levinson (1987) in an analysis of dialogue from Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991). In applying Brown and Levinson's (1987) theories to the selected literary text, my analysis shall seek to test the stylistic value of their framework. The chosen extracts see protagonist Patrick Bateman engaging in the conversation of banter with his colleagues. Their dialogue takes place in the informal settings of a bar and a restaurant. I have selected these extracts because of their interesting and complex dynamics of face. In their efforts to maintain and enhance their own faces, conversational participants in the dialogue go against Brown and Levinson's (1987) general assumption that "[it is] in every participant's best interest to maintain each others' face" (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61). Rather, participants are impolite, attacking each other's face to add to their own. I shall analyse the dynamics of face in the text by examining the motivations, conditions, execution, and reception of face-threatening acts (FTAs) in the dialogue. The overarching aim of this commentary is to apply Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework critically so as to ascertain its usefulness, reliability and versatility.

### FACE WANTS AND FACE-THREATING ACTS (FTAs)

The concept of face has two primary aspects:

- (1) negative face: the member's claim to freedom of action and freedom from imposition
- (2) positive face: the positive, consistent self-image of members and their desire that this self-image be recognised and approved by others (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61)

Culpepper (2001) points out that a limiting factor of face theory is the notion that face only reflects the self. He states that "it should be stressed that face is not confined to the self, but includes all that the self identifies with" (239). The validity of this criticism is affirmed in *American Psycho* in a series of conversational exchanges that border on the ridiculous. In this

segment, the vanity of the characters is demonstrated as they compare the colourings, letterings and textures of their respective business cards. Upon presenting his card to the group, Bateman's first person narrative reads, "I try to act casual about it but I'm smiling proudly" (Ellis, 1991: 42). Bateman's proud regard of his business card suggests his conviction that he is a man of refined taste. The object is therefore linked to his positive face. Confident in the aesthetic beauty of his card, Bateman seeks gratification of his positive face by asking, "What do you think?" (Ellis, 1991: 42). This backfires on him, however, and he is left feeling dejected when confronted with the more impressive fonts and textures of the others' cards: "I am unexpectedly depressed that I started this" (Ellis, 1990: 43). Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that "face is something that is emotionally invested" (61). Based on this supposition and the evidence above, it should be understood that anything which one emotionally invests in – even if it is external to one's self – is part of one's face.

In conversation, face wants arise from the two primary aspects of face. Correspondingly, negative face wants reflect the desire of freedom from imposition, while positive face wants include the desire to have one's identity "ratified, understood, approved of, liked or admired" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 62). Culpepper (2001) explains, "Any action that impinges in some degree upon a person's face (typically, orders, insults, criticisms) is a 'face-threatening act'" (239). FTAs can be issued unintentionally. When face damage is intended, however, it is enacted through impoliteness super-strategies. Culpepper (1996) identifies the following as impoliteness super-strategies:

- (1) *Bald, on-record impoliteness* - the FTA is performed in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way in circumstances where face is not irrelevant or minimised.
- (2) *Positive impoliteness* – The use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's positive face wants.
- (3) *Negative impoliteness* – The use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's negative face wants.
- (4) *Sarcasm or mock politeness* - the FTA is performed with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere.
- (5) *Withhold politeness* - the absence of politeness work where it would be expected. (summarized; 356-357)

Examples of face-threatening acts (FTAs) executed via the use of all of these impoliteness super-strategies can be seen in the utterances made by Price below:

"Oh wait, guys, listen, I got a joke." Preston rubs his hands together.  
 "Preston," Price says, "you *are* a joke. You do know you *weren't* invited to dinner. By the way, nice jacket; nonmatching but complementary." (Ellis, 1991: 36)

Preston displays his want of inclusion in the group by approaching the party, participating in their conversation, and referring to them with the informal collective noun "guys", which has connotations of equality and friendliness. Price rebuffs this face want with negative impoliteness by implying that Preston has no right to join the "guys" for dinner. Furthermore, by interjecting in the moment when Preston is about to tell his joke, Price withholds politeness. This act also impedes on Preston's right to speak and be heard, and is thus negative impoliteness.

Culpepper (2001) states, "The want to be liked lies at the heart of positive face concerns" (253). Price uses multiple acts of positive impoliteness against Preston in a display that ultimately attests to his personal dislike for Price. The first positive FTA presents itself in the insinuation that Preston does not warrant the respect of being taken seriously: "you *are* a

joke". This is a bald, on-record FTA as it is an insult that appears in declarative form. There is also an off-record, mock politeness attack on Preston's positive face in the final utterances of Price's dialogue. The face-enhancing remarks "nice jacket" and "[it's] complementary" are rendered insincere by the observation, embedded in the compliments, that Preston's suit is "nonmatching". Attire receives an inordinate amount of scrutiny in the men's preceding dialogue (what one should wear; how one should wear it). Drawing attention to Preston's failure to comply with a fundamental rule of fashion (that garments should match) can thus be seen to be a personal slight. The sarcasm latent in this veiled, yet apparent, attack complements the sentiment of the original positive FTA, emphasising that Preston is indeed "a joke".

The statement "You do know you *weren't* invited to dinner" – which, as established above, constitutes a negative FTA – could also be read as a positive FTA as it suggests that Preston's company is not desirable. As Culpepper, Bousfield and Wichmann (2003) note, "A particular problem we inherited from Brown and Levinson (1987)... is the distinction between both positive and negative face" (1576). Brown and Levinson (1987) propose, "We may make a... distinction between acts that threaten negative face and those that threaten positive face" (65). This suggests that negative and positive FTAs are mutually exclusive. This is an area of weakness in their framework that requires revision. It must be acknowledged that FTAs can be motivated by multiple purposes and achieve multiple effects, and may therefore threaten both negative and positive faces simultaneously.

### **SOCIOLOGICAL VARIABLES AND MEASURING FACE THREATS**

Short (1996) posits that in addition to performing FTAs on-record and without redress, impoliteness may be demonstrated by maximising "the number and size of your FTAs" (214). Assuming that Short (1996) uses "size" to refer to the degree of threat posed, how does the speaker anticipate the "size" of the FTA he/she is to deliver? How does the listener interpret the "size" of received FTAs? The measurement of face threats is integral to how speakers choose to present FTAs and how their listeners choose to respond to them. Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that the "seriousness of an FTA (that is, the calculations that members actually seem to make)" depends upon three "sociological variables":

- (i) the social distance/proximity of the speaker and listener
- (ii) the relative power dynamic shared by the speaker and listener
- (iii) the absolute ranking of the imposition(s) performed on the listener's face wants in the particular culture and situation in which the FTA takes place (summarised; 74)

The first two variables are problematic as they do not fully account for the complexity and volatility of contextual, situational and subjective conditions, and their ability to alter social distance and relative power dynamics. Simpson (2002) asserts that the "most significant... [of] basic assumptions about the communication properties of language in general and about the nature of spoken interaction... is that all interaction occurs in a *context*" (37). In contrast to the other two, the third variable benefits from the acknowledgement that the ranking of various impositions depends on the particular culture and situation in which they arise. For example, individuals who enter the setting of a restaurant enter into the agreement that the customer/employee relationship assumes a boss/server dialectic. It is therefore socially acceptable for Price to deliver the imperative "Just take them all" to the waiter who he wishes to take the party's drinks away. In the physical context of the restaurant, such commands do not constitute strong negative face threats because staff and customers are in agreement that waiting staff are subservient. Similarly, Bateman's bribing a waitress so that he and his friends may smoke cigars creates a context of transaction.

Bateman's payment for a service is accepted, and so the waitress is expected to provide it. Bateman's bald, on-record command "if anyone complains, well... Kick 'em out" (Ellis, 1991: 45) does therefore not signify a significant FTA.

I, therefore, have no significant misgivings with the analytical variable of absolute ranking of impositions in the context in which they appear. I would perhaps, however, seek to improve it by adding the important factor of the particular subjectivities of both speaker and listener. I shall elaborate on this factor in discussing the other two variables. In determining the "seriousness" of a face threat, the variables of social distance and relative power should likewise be examined with significant regard to their sensitivity to contextual and situational conditions. I shall demonstrate this by applying each of the two variables to dialogue from the selected text.

(i) social distance/proximity – Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that "the reciprocal giving and receiving of positive face is symptomatic of social closeness" (74). Conversational participants who share a close social distance may also, however, perform "mock" positive FTAs – that is, pretend to attack listeners' positive faces – in a spirit of playfulness. Culpepper (2001) remarks that "[a speaker] might use *mock* impoliteness (banter), perhaps to reinforce social solidarity" (246). Banter, then, can be seen to be a strategy in which FTAs are performed with humorous (rather than harmful) intent in order to decrease social distance/increase social proximity. It is an invitation to a conversational game, and can therefore complement the listener's positive face by suggesting the perception that the listener is fun and that the listener's company in play is desirable. This is not to say that harm cannot be an effect of banter, however. Take the following:

Outside Pastels a different bum sits in the street [...]  
 "That dude needs a facial *real* bad," I say.  
 "Hey McDermott," Price cackles. "Throw him your tie."  
 "Oh shit. What's *that* gonna get him?" I ask, staring at the bum.  
 "Appetizers at Jams." Van Patten laughs. He gives me high-five.  
 "*Dude*," McDermott says, inspecting his tie, clearly offended.  
 (Ellis, 1991: 49)

Here, McDermott's positive face is victimised by the positive FTAs made against his tie. Each of the other men contributes a positive FTA on McDermott. Social solidarity is indeed achieved, as indicated by Van Patten's "high-five" gesture. Solidarity with the target of the FTAs is not achieved, however, as McDermott is "clearly offended". His positive face has been damaged by the criticisms aimed at his tie.

Following Brown and Levinson's (1987) model unquestioningly may result in a reading of the extract that views such FTAs exchanged between the characters as a playful reflection of their social closeness. When taking into consideration the actual threat posed by an FTA, however, one must also consider the following contextual and situational factors:

(1) Participants' cultures external to the immediate conversational situation. The conversational participants in the text are all Wall Street bankers. As has been established, face includes that which the self identifies with and so one's work may factor into one's face motivations, even outside that environment. Participating in a highly competitive business culture may motivate "serious" FTAs in order to complement one's own negative and positive faces by achieving a sense of power; power being a valuable, yet vulnerable commodity in business.

(2) Participants' relationships external to the immediate conversational situation. In the dialogue from the extract, participants share jokes, opinions and knowledge, seeming to demonstrate jovial, close relationships with one another. It should also be noted, however,

that these men are all equal colleagues at the same company. Connected with the importance of their shared culture, an element of competition may undercut the men's relationships with one another, even in informal settings and situations.

(3) The respective subjectivities of the FTA performer and the FTA target. As evidenced in the example above, an FTA can be construed as threatening even when the intent with which it is delivered may not be malicious. The distinction between illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect is helpful in identifying such differences. Short (1996) notes that the illocutionary force is the "[a]ct performed by speaking" while the perlocutionary effect is the "[a]ctual effect caused by the act" (197). While the illocutionary forces delivered by Price, Bateman and Van Patten in criticising McDermott's tie may appear to be mock FTAs (banter) that reflect social proximity, their perlocutionary effect is insult, as McDermott is left "clearly offended" (Ellis, 1991: 49). If one is to attempt to measure an FTA one must consider the subjective contexts in which it is delivered and received, for face is ultimately a subjective entity. This is conducive to reaching greater understandings of the operative motivations and relational dynamics in conversations. The discrepancy between the illocutionary force and the actual perlocutionary effect of the FTA against McDermott illustrates that, despite the seeming banter of the men's illocutionary forces, face is indeed vulnerable to damage in their company.

The contextual considerations of (1) and (2), and the situational consideration of (3), suggest that there is a wider social distance between the men than may initially seem apparent in the dialogue's banter. For, in light of the examination of these factors, it may be observed the men assume competitive roles in their conversation with each other. Performing bald FTAs against conversational participants seen as competitors functions to enhance speakers' own faces: negative face is added to by virtue of realising one's potential to beat the competition; positive face is added to in its asymmetrical alignment with the competitor's damaged face; and FTAs that are met with the support of others (as above) naturally gratify the positive face want of approval. Insights of face in interaction may also be reached by applying the contextual and situational factors expounded above to the sociological variable of the relative power dynamic:

(ii) relative power dynamic – While the businessmen are waiting for their appetisers to arrive, Scott Montgomery, an acquaintance of theirs, enters the restaurant. Van Patten notices this and entices his fellow diners to guess whom he has spotted. Van Patten hints, "He's twenty-four and worth, oh, let's say a *repulsive* amount of dough... A veritable *shitload*" (Ellis, 1991: 39). Despite exhibiting positive impoliteness against Montgomery in his absence ("It's that dwarf"; "Watch me act thrilled. Well, as thrilled as I can get meeting someone from Georgia" (Ellis, 1991: 40)), Price demonstrates positive politeness when Montgomery approaches their table:

"Montgomery," Price says in a kindly, conversational tone [...] "How have things been?"

"Well, fellas," Montgomery says. "See y'all got the primo table. Get the check yet? Just kidding."

"Listen, Montgomery," Price says [...] being unusually kind to someone I thought was a stranger. "Squash?"

"Call me," Montgomery says absently, looking over the room. "Is that Tyson? Here's my card."

"Great," Price says, pocketing it. "Thursday?"

"Can't. Going to Dallas tomorrow, but..." Montgomery is already moving away from the table, hurrying toward someone else [...] "Yeah, next week." (Ellis, 1991: 40)

The degree of threat to face in this passage cannot be reliably ascertained without probing the cultural, relational and subjective conditions of power between Montgomery and Price. The fact that Montgomery is worth “a veritable *shitload*” of money indicates his superior success and influence in the Wall Street banking culture. Price’s friendly positive politeness, despite Montgomery’s status as a “stranger” and Price’s supposed low opinion of him, demonstrates an attempt to redress the power imbalance between them. Montgomery maintains his upper hand in this imbalance by ignoring Price’s question “How have things been?”. This is a demonstration of the impoliteness super-strategy of withholding politeness: “Keep[ing] silent or fail[ing] to act where politeness work is necessary” (Culpepper, Bousfield and Wichmann, 2003: 1555). Montgomery’s status and his impoliteness choice attest to Culpepper’s (2001) assertion that “the more powerful speaker [is] associated with less politeness” (241).

Montgomery continues to attack Price’s face by deflecting Price’s request to play squash with him. This points to Montgomery’s refusal to establish an equal relationship between the pair, which is also implied by the businesslike gesture of giving Price his contact card. By refusing rights to equal friendship, Montgomery denies Price’s negative face want of social mobility and the possible positive face want of achieving influence through association with the powerful Montgomery. Furthermore, Price’s negative and/or positive face want of receiving the full attention of his addressee in conversation is denied. Montgomery’s participation in the conversation is distracted by the observation of another diner (“Is that Tyson?”), and he departs the conversation before it has reached polite closure. Another effect of Montgomery’s inattentiveness is positive face damage, as it suggests that Price is not liked by Montgomery; perhaps not disliked, *per se*, but not liked nonetheless.

The seriousness of the threats in this interaction may be observed from the subjective affects they appear to have on Price. When McDermott reiterates how much Montgomery is worth, Price virulently retorts, “Go over and give the dwarf *head* – will that shut you up?” (Ellis, 1991: 41). This utterance displays impolite super-strategies of both positive and negative politeness; FTAs that attack:

- (a) Montgomery’s positive face by referring to him as a “dwarf”. Montgomery is absent during the delivery of the utterance, but it still constitutes an FTA as it denigrates his public self-image (his face).
- (b) McDermott’s positive face by implying that McDermott has a homosexual desire for Montgomery. This can be seen to be a slight in the context of this conversation based the evidence that, prior to this juncture, Bateman replied defensively to the implication that he was a homosexual by qualifying his heterosexuality with hyperbole, “Ask Meredith if I’m a homosexual. That is, if she’ll take the time to pull my dick out of her mouth” (Ellis, 1991: 36).
- (c) McDermott’s negative face by delivering the insult as a command and implying that he should stop talking.

These multiple FTAs indicate the loss of face that Price has experienced, as they are triggered by the very quality that led to Price himself being the victim of Montgomery’s FTAs: awe of Montgomery’s wealth and power. Price exhibits a “tit for tat” mentality; compensating for the damage to his own face by damaging the face of another. Without provocation Price interjects later in the dialogue, “Did I forget to tell everyone that Montgomery’s a dwarf?” (Ellis, 1991: 44). Breaking the maxim of conversational relevance (Grice, 1975: 47), this superfluous attack on Montgomery’s positive face also alludes to the severity of Montgomery’s FTAs. The lasting inflictions of face damage on Price are indicated by his lasting perception that Montgomery’s disempowering FTAs warrant compensation through attacking Montgomery’s positive face in his absence.

Fraser (1990) summarises the weakness of Brown and Levinson's (1987) assumption that FTAs may be measured through the social distance and relative power of the speaker and listener, and the imposition ranking of the FTA, by observing that "participants vacillate in their social distance...[and] relative power is altered as the roles and responsibilities change back and forth even over short periods of time" (231).

The sociological variables that Brown and Levinson (1987) call upon to measure FTAs are subject to shifts along an infinite scale that fluctuates between minor and transformative alterations. Conversational analysis cannot, therefore, depend on these factors alone in seeking to reach reliably insightful conclusions. My analysis has attempted to show that reliable and valuable insights regarding FTAs are attainable by complementing Brown and Levinson's (1987) sociological variables with readings of the contextual, situational and subjective conditions surrounding FTAs.

## CONCLUSION

Following on from the previous section, I would like to propose adding to Brown and Levinson's (1987) three aspects for analysing face threats a fourth area:

- (iii) the unique contextual, situational and subjective backgrounds against which the FTA is performed and received

By acknowledging these factors alongside the other sociological variables, the analyst and the stylistician are much better placed to measure threats to face in terms of the intent of performers and the reception of targets. Such a rigorous method is particularly useful in conversation where the dynamics of face are ambiguous. This has been demonstrated by analysing face in the extract from *American Psycho*, where it has been determined that what appears to be casual conversation among friends can actually be seen to be competitive, confrontational facework.

Culpepper (2001) observes, "Brown and Levinson's work is...weakened by the fact that it is confined to facework designed to *maintain* face. Facework can also be designed...to *attack* face" (240). In my analysis I have sought to implement measures that widen facework theory's applicability so that it may be employed to examine attacks to face and face damage. In expanding the sociological variables of face theory, disputing the mutual exclusivity of negative and positive FTAs, and clarifying that face also includes anything with which the self identifies, I have set out to redress what I perceived to be key flaws in Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework. In turn, I hope to have shown facework theory's potential for proffering revelatory insights into face wants, and thus its provision of effective tools for dissecting character.

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