

# Discourse Analysis Based on Face-Threatening Theory—A Case Study of *Tucaodahui III*

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Face and politeness are very important parts in people's daily communication. But people will violate the principle of politeness for protecting their own face. Therefore, they usually choose to use more humorous words or jocular words to communicate in order to avoid direct contradictions. Starting from the face-threatening acts in the face theory and politeness principle, this paper briefly analyzes the face-threatening acts and its humorous usage in the *Tucaodahui III*.

*Keywords:* face theory, face-threatening acts, *Tucaodahui III*

## Introduction

As early as the 1950s, British sociologist Goffman put forward the theory of face drama, face communication, and face work after repeated consideration. Goffman believes that face is the way people obtain positive social value for themselves through verbal behavior in the process of communication. It is self-worth created in accordance with the attributes approved by society. He is also known as a pioneer in the development of early face theory. In 1987, Brown and Levinson retained the face-saving theory in Goffman's "face-engineering" and proposed a face theory based on the polite strategy framework. They noticed that different language forms can express different social relationships, and proposed a systematic explanation of the universality of politeness from three aspects: face, face-threatening acts (FTA), and politeness strategies. Brown and Levinson believe that politeness is a variety of rational behaviors taken by "Model Person" to satisfy the need for face. Face is divided into positive face and negative face. Positive face hopes to be recognized and loved by others. If one of these conditions is met, positive face can be maintained and preserved; relatively speaking, negative face refers to the right to be autonomous, freedom of action or self-behavior free from interference and hindrance by others. In social communication, it is necessary to respect the positive face of other people and also protect the negative face of the other in order to ensure the smooth and successful progress of the communication.

Gao (1997) conducted a research survey on the politeness theory of language communication and the concept of face proposed by Brown and Levinson, he found that most scholars have conducted a lot of research on politeness phenomena in different societies based on the theoretical framework proposed by Brown and Levinson, and deepened its understanding of the subject; on the other hand, some scholars, starting from non-Western cultures, questioned Brown and Levinson's concept of face, especially the concept of negative face. Brown and Levinson (1987) did a more systematic research on politeness and face in verbal communication. They pointed out that rational communicators have their own idea on face, and both sides will maintain face in

communication. If the speaker's verbal behavior threatens the face of the hearer, it is a FTA. They also believe that there are many FTA in daily life, such as orders, suggestions, or proposals. In this case, people with thinking will choose appropriate strategies to avoid these FTA or take certain measures to reduce the degree of threat.

### **Face-Threatening Acts (FTA)**

The essence of verbal communication is to realize how people apply language in real life. If the language is used appropriately and courteously, the communication will proceed smoothly. Otherwise, the communication goal will be difficult to achieve. Brown and Levinson believe that some words themselves are face-threatening, and politeness is to alleviate the threat to face caused by these communicative behaviors. They proposed in the face-threatening theory that some speech acts have a fixed face threatening nature. In other words, there are some words that run counter to the speaker's face needs. They can threaten both positive face and negative face. Threatening the hearer's negative face means that the speaker interferes with the hearer's freedom of behavior, including verbal behaviors, such as commands, requests, advice, and threats; threatening the hearer's positive face means that the speaker does not care about his feelings, and in some aspects, the hearer's needs are not considered, including negative comments on certain aspects of the hearer, disagreement, criticism or not considering the hearer's positive needs, embarrassing the hearer, and so on. In verbal communication, the speaker and the hearer will cooperate to a certain extent to maintain each other's face, but there are still verbal threats between both parties in verbal communication. Therefore, the speaker needs to consider the extent to which both parties benefit and suffer according to the communicative context. At this time, we must consider choosing certain strategies to avoid these face threats or reduce the degree of face threats.

According to the politeness strategy proposed by Brown and Levinson, there are five main methods: bald on record strategy. That is, the speaker does not take remedial measures, and openly threatens the face: positive politeness strategy, which is that the speaker satisfies the hearer's positive face needs or that the hearer feels recognized; negative politeness strategy, which is that the speaker partially meets the hearer's negative face needs; off record strategy, which is that the speaker uses exaggeration, irony, and other means to leave the other party with a serious threat to the face; refraining from the acts, if the FTA is sufficient to threaten the face of the other party, the speaker may abandon the act of threatening face. Many scholars have conducted in-depth research on face threat theory. Ran (1996) conducted a pragmatic analysis based on the speech act that threatened the recipient's affection in verbal communication and its regulating strategy. He mentioned that politeness and affection are important topics in the study of speech acts and pragmatics. To interact and communicate, it is necessary to cooperate; to maintain politeness and maintain mutual affection, it is necessary to consider the "Benefit Center" in order to maximize the preference for the recipient. Hu and Dai (2009) also conducted FTA and strategy analysis in teaching discourse. Based on the framework of the theory of face, they investigated the classroom discourse of college English teaching and found that there are some face-threatening acts in English teaching discourse. The strength of their behaviors depends on the social distance between the teachers and students, the relative power, and the degree of specific cultural recognition of specific speech acts perception. Gong (2018) explained why potential FTA in communication is a discourse strategy with speaker's advantage based on the theory of face-constituting. In order to achieve specific communicative purposes, communicators use potential FTA to regulate different degrees of relationships, and produce different interactive effects.

### Humor, Banters, and Jocular Mockery

Humor is a universal speech phenomenon that exists in all areas of human life. Humorous language, as a special communication tool, can relieve tension between people and close mutual relations. Brown and Levinson (1987) believed that humorous jokes are a positive politeness strategy that can be used to reduce face threats to the other party. Zajdman (1995) conducted a relative study on the expression of face-threatening acts combined with jokes, and found that humorous FTA have the same effect as regular FTA, and the former can also threaten the positive or negative face of the recipient. The jocular discourse is a special form of teasing. Combined with the specific context, this type of discourse can be regarded as a FTA or a face-saving act (Haugh, 2010). It is also a conscious application of speech, which can reflect the speaker's knowledge, wisdom, cultivation, and speaking skills. The characteristic of this kind of words is that they first circumvent the original meaning of the language to a certain extent, and only the hearer can interpret its connotative meaning in combination with the specific context. And this kind of language itself has a certain humorous effect on the hearer. In daily communication, people usually make humor and mockery through teasing. Some scholars believe that banter is "a deliberate provocation that is marked as a joke and makes negative comments on the target". The banter has some more obvious typical characteristics, for example, the subject uses words to achieve it, and has a hidden mockery; the banter is usually accompanied by laughter or smile; the communicative intention of the banter is generally kind. Haugh (2010, p. 2108) referred to "social actions whereby the speaker somehow diminishes something of relevance to self, other or a non-co-present third party, but does so within a non-serious or playful frame". Jocular mockery is often employed as a response to a target's exaggerated complaining, bragging, extolling of his/her virtues, slip-ups, conversational ambiguity, and so on. Jocular mockery is usually regarded as a complex pragmatic act, because it can express both face-threatening and identification. Mockery is often considered to be an act directed at oneself or directed at others. When the speaker laughs at different types of people, the speaker may adopt different strategies.

### Data Source

In order to explore the performance of phenomena, such as "losing face and hurting face" in reality TV shows, this paper selects the third season of the famous Chinese show *Tucaodahui*. The essence of the show is a large-scale comedy performance in the form of a comedy talk show. Guests are invited to take turns to banter each other by telling stories, conveying that "*Tucao* is a craft, and laughter requires courage". The "elegant spit" in the program, called spitting, is actually a unique way of communication, and it is a unique way of decompression for modern people with huge pressure in life. This paper combines the face-threatening theory and politeness strategy with the humorous language in the show to analyze the FTA.

### Analysis and Discussion

#### Example 1:

池子:《吐槽大会》每期都会请一些主咖,在某些领域有建树。他们有的是搞音乐的,有的是搞电影的,今天这位是搞水产的,锦鲤杨超越。你们不能怪她忘记动作,因为她是锦鲤,是条鱼啊,鱼只有七秒钟的记忆啊!

In some aspects of this speech, the speaker does not consider the feelings of the hearer, threatening the positive face of the hearer, and the speaker excessively expresses teasing. Yang Chaoyue was originally a female idol group draft debut, but she is not strong enough, singing out of tune, dancing with forgetting moves. Many

people call her “the girl of heaven”. They think she is very lucky and banter that reporting this “Yang Chaoyue” is equivalent to reporting the lucky carp. The speaker here expresses a mockery of the main character. The Chinese expression of “gao + xx” is actually a relatively crude expression, and it is impolite to describe the other party. The speaker said that she is a fish, and that it is normal for her to forget dancing move. After all, fish only has a seven-second memory, but in fact the speaker expresses that as a member of the women’s team, forgetting dancing move needs to be criticized. “Zhuka” is the most important character in this show. The show team set Yang Chaoyue as the main person, and on the surface, everyone is here to mock with more jokes, saying that she is a koi, which is actually an expression that currently Yang Chaoyue is very popular and has a large market share. The speaker here uses jocular words to speak. On the one hand, he can clearly express his thoughts. On the other hand, although it will threaten the face of the hearer, the degree of damage in this way can be reduced to relatively low.

Example 2:

张：超越，开始之前，咱们先把这个事做完，你说一下，《吐槽大会》破50亿。

杨：……不行，我们家长出来有交代过的，就是……

庞：（紧接着）远离张老师这样的人。

In this conversation, Zhang and Yang were originally discussing advertising for their programs. As mentioned earlier, Yang is now called “Koi” and can achieve most of what she wants. So Zhang wants her to promote her program. In fact, Zhang indirectly maintained Yang’s positive face here, and he agreed with Yang’s previous personal settings. However, Yang directly denied the answer and damaged Zhang’s positive face. She did not agree with the speaker’s thoughts or actions. Immediately after Pang’s sudden interruption, it also damaged Yang’s negative face, and directly gave her some order. In fact, in the process of daily communication, the words of one party maintain the positive face of the other party, and the other party can also maintain the positive face of the other party. Both parties retain each other’s face, forming a good dialogue environment and not embarrassing each other. In this show, Zhang as the host takes the program, while Yang as a guest is led by Zhang. But after the show, Yang’s popularity is far greater than Zhang. Therefore, in the entire dialogue, Zhang and Yang’s face threat behaviors were relatively gentle, not too direct and unsparing.

Example 3:

张：超越刚来参加节目的时候，大家都知道，自称是全村的希望，是吧。但是呢，她的表现，总让全村也看不到什么希望，只看到绝望。

杨：（笑笑不说话）

In this conversation, Zhang said that Yang had been in the small village in his hometown before participating in the show. She is beautiful, having this opportunity to show herself on the big stage in the big city so she should be the hope of the whole village. But in the past, “the hope of the whole village” was a very positive and commendatory description, and this was not seen in Yang. Because Yang’s performance on the show was so mediocre, singing and dancing were not good, and he was really ashamed of the hope for the whole village. Zhang also used this term to mock Yang and threatened Yang’s positive face. The speaker did not agree with the previous words of the hearer. Here, Yang adopted an off record strategy to deal with this FTA, facing it with a silent smile. Here, Zhang’s complaints are sharper, but because he picked a point that everyone and the audience are familiar with, if Yang’s response is dissatisfaction or direct denial, it will threaten the speaker’s face, but this situation is almost. It is unlikely to happen. On the contrary, Yang’s off record strategy can resolve such contradictions and embarrassments.

## Example 4:

李诞: 大王就去了一次《歌手》, 我觉得就耗尽了自己的眼泪。大王每次哭得, 我就感觉那个歌手是不是离开我们了。

大王: (大声辩解) 不要乱说, 我没有, 我没有……

This dialogue took place in a certain episode of Angela Chang as the main person. Da Wang was Angela Chang's agent when she participated in the "Singer" program. Everyone knows that some bad things have happened to Angela Chang in the past few years. Now Angela Chang's comeback is a phoenix nirvana, so the emotions Angela Chang expresses every time in her songs are very moving, especially for Da Wang. That's why Li said that Da Wang participated in the show as an agent, and almost consumed all the tears of his life, because basically every time Angela Chang sang, she would cry hard for herself. Here, Li mocked the performance of her in the show, thinking that she over-expressed her feelings and damaged the negative face of the recipient. But here he uses exaggerated rhetoric to alleviate his negative face. At the same time, the hearer's response was extremely strong. She actively expressed her dissatisfaction and denial, which also damaged the positive face of the speaker. In fact, this dialogue does not often appear in this kind of show, because the guests who come to the show have to be mentally prepared to accept any form of FTA. Like this kind of severe denial, the response to express dissatisfaction is not doing good expression management and the embodiment of behavior control.

## Example 5:

李: 汪苏泷, 1989年生人, 和我一年的。

观众: 看不出来。

李: 之前汪苏泷参加一个节目, 因为种种原因, 表演吹笛子, 没有真吹, 结果被“笛子爱好者”池子发微博批评了。汪苏泷就来找我要池子的微信, 想道个歉。这个时候, 他的用语就让我明白了为什么同为89年, 人家就那么年轻。他跟我说: 李诞哥哥, 你有池子哥哥的微信吗? 池子! 1995年的!

汪: 没看出来, 没看出来, 谢谢李诞哥哥。

This conversation is an interesting story about age brought up by Li. Li and Wang were born in the same year, but their life styles and looks make the audience feel that they are not like people born in the same year. When Li said the first sentence, he let the audience directly veto it, damaging his positive face. Later, he mentioned the reason why it looks different. It is very likely that Wang's mentality and way of speaking are younger. He used an example to explain the reason, and said vividly, adding a lot of humor here, making the audience laugh, and increasing the atmosphere of the show. As a bald on record strategy, Wang's response did not express the need to reduce the degree of damage to the speaker's face, but also directly denied it, threatening the speaker's positive face. This communication damaged the face of the speaker to a certain extent, but it was within the range of the speaker's tolerance, and it also added a funny atmosphere to the show.

### Conclusion

Everyone hopes to get the face they want in the process of communication. To maintain positive face may damage negative face, and to maintain negative face may damage positive face. Brown and Levinson's face-threatening theory allows us to realize the importance of polite language. At the same time, we need to always pay attention to whether the speech acts of both parties in the conversation threaten or harm the other party in interpersonal communication. If the speech act threatens the other party's affection, we need to follow necessary regulating strategies or measures adopted for communication purposes, objects, occasions, and so on. Through the speech and dialogue analysis of the third season of *Tucaodahui*, it is not difficult to find that this *Tucao*

method is actually very suitable for contemporary young people. It is not a direct expression of criticism and dissatisfaction with the hearer, but a kind of humor, or the way jocular words threaten the face of the hearer. This euphemistic expression is more in line with the needs of modern social communication.

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