

---

## A STUDY OF AVOIDANCE STRATEGY OF FACE THREAT OF NATIVE SPEAKER AND NON-NATIVE SPEAKER BY USING GOFFMAN'S FACE-WORK THEORY

Salmon Pandarangga

Wira Wacana University (UNWINA) of Sumba

(spsumba@gmail.com)

---

Received: 12<sup>th</sup> Mei 2015; Revised: 19<sup>th</sup> August 2015; Accepted: 25<sup>th</sup> October 2015

---

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to analyze the avoidance strategy of face threat by English native speaker and non-native speaker who learnt other language e.g. English. This study used Irving Goffman's face-work theory and its relation to avoidance face threat as a framework. 2 participants (one Australian and one Indonesian) took part in this study. Both participants were interviewed in English language in English speaking environment for about 30 minutes each. The participants were asked to tell about their hobbies with some open-ended questions. This study focused on spoken sentences produced by both interviewees that indicated avoidance of face threat. The findings revealed that the native speaker and non-native speaker reacted differently to avoid face threat. In addition, they also had their own strategy to avoid the face threat. This study concluded that different cultures significantly contributed to the strategy of avoidance of face threat.

**Key Words:** face-work; avoidance of face-threat; native speaker; non-native speaker

### ABSTRAK

Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisa strategi penghindaran "face-threat" oleh penutur bahasa ibu (Inggris) dan penutur bahasa asing dalam hal ini bahasa Inggris. Penelitian ini menggunakan teori Irving Goffman tentang face-work dan hubungannya dalam menghindari "face-threat" sebagai kerangka acuan. Dua orang partisipan (satu orang Australia dan satu orang Indonesia) mengambil bagian dalam penelitian ini. Masing-masing partisipan diwawancara dalam bahasa Inggris di lingkungan bahasa Inggris (Australia) selama kurang lebih 30 menit. Masing-masing partisipan ditanyai tentang hobi mereka. Penelitian ini berfokus pada kalimat-kalimat yang diucapkan oleh partisipan yang mengindikasikan penghindaran "face-threat". Hasil analisa mengungkapkan bahwa penutur bahasa ibu (Inggris) dan penutur bahasa asing (Inggris) merespons secara berbeda untuk menghindari "face threat". Selain itu, mereka juga mempunyai strategi tersendiri untuk menghindari "face threat". Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa budaya yang berbeda juga mempunyai kontribusi yang penting terhadap strategi dalam menghindari "face threat".

**Kata Kunci:** face-work; penghindaran "face threat"; penutur bahasa ibu; penutur bahasa asing

**How to Cite:** Pandarangga, S. (2015). A Study of Avoidance Strategy of Face Threat of Native Speaker and Non-Native Speaker by Using Goffman's Face-Work Theory. *IJEE (Indonesian Journal of English Education)*, 2(2), 188-201. doi:10.15408/ijee.v2i2.3087

**Permalink/DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.15408/ijee.v2i2.3087>

---

## INTRODUCTION

It is widely believed that Irving Goffman (1922-1982) is one of the founding fathers and centre of modern sociology in society. His contributions to modern sociology are widely known all over the world. Many scholars such as Brown and Levinson with their politeness theory acknowledged Goffman's influences on their work. Goffman has particularly interests in observing and learning people's behaviours and interactions either in verbal or non-verbal communication in society. It is believed that Goffman, an expert about modern urban life and its social interaction, has ability to perceive insignificant aspects of everyday activities as well as help people to see the importance, stability and complexity of social interactions in society (Manning, 1992). In addition, some theorists such as Burns (1992) noted that Goffman seemed to believe that the finding of social interaction or practice as discovery. However, as Burns further explained, it did not necessarily mean that Goffman discovered something new which was previously unknown but he made clear information.

It is believed that it is the nature of human beings to have and maintain a good and positive relationship with others. In order to have a good

relationship, Goffman in one of his theories, face-work interaction, suggested that participants in a certain interaction need to maintain each other's face. It can be said that while a participant maintains his own face, he also needs to maintain other faces in a certain interaction. Further, it is believed that it is likely to help the participants to avoid their face from being potentially embarrassed or offended. This face-work theory focusses on the variety of social interaction among participants particularly on how to maintain their face they have emotionally and deliberately created in a certain interaction. It seems that these participants use a face maintaining strategy to avoid face threat e.g. embarrassment.

It is believed that the main concept of the face-work theory is based on the social interaction among participants in a society. In one of his essay, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman suggested that participants, before entering a social setting for interaction, need to know and have information about the situation and other participants involved (Meyrowitz, 1990). He further suggested that the need to know the situation in the social setting as well as the participants is highly likely to help

other participants to know whether, for example, the situation is in formal or informal, sad or happy, what or how to speak. On the other hand, as he continued, participants in the situation also need to know about the participants who entered the situation e.g. the purpose or reason for being there. In short, knowing each other well and the situation are believed to help each of the participants to interact in appropriate way. For example, the participants display what is called "civility or a good manner-socially acceptable or proper behaviour-in the presence of others" (Burn, 1992, p. 27).

Having known and understood the meaning of social situation and the participants involved, it can, as Goffman believed, help the participants to understand as well as interpret most everyday social interactions e.g. daily conversation (Manning, 1992). However, as Goffman continued, in interaction, participants also need some background assumptions what used to be called as the "syntax" or language in which without the language the assumption is incomprehensible. Goffman believed that the background assumption enable participants to know and interpret more comprehensively, for instance, the hidden messages of conversation in interaction. Further, without the background assumption,

the social interaction is "only a chaotic abundance of fact" (p. 118).

Therefore, to avoid incomprehensible assumptions in social interaction, it is argued that people need to know some principles of social interaction. Some theorists such as Grice (as cited in Brown, 2012, p. 147) have formulated four aspects of interaction principles, often called "Gricean maxims: 1) the quantity maxim: make your contribution as informative as is required, but not more, or less, than is required; 2) the quality maxim: do not say something which you believe to be false or for which you lack of evidence; 3) the relation maxim: be relevant; 4) the manner maxim: be clear, brief and orderly.

Brown (2012) added that this principle interaction might not work in conversational exchange in daily basis but it might help to explain conversation between two or more people. These four principles can help people to effectively and efficiently interact with each other. In can be said that, as Brown further claimed, the interaction principles can also help persons to maintain each other face in social interaction.

Moreover, Goffman (1967) explicitly acknowledged that the concept of face he introduced originally

came from two sources, i.e. Chinese and American Indian conception of face. Chiappini (2003) claimed that one of the sources in which Goffman directly indebted to is Durkheim's work. Chiappini continued that the central idea of Durkheim's work is how to keep the sacred (gods) from the profane (believers) yet both the sacred and profane may be able to communicate through ritual only. Goffman (1967) postulates the sacredness of the participants' face, the maintenance which, requires ritual order in which "it shows how worthy he is of respect or how worthy he feels others of it" (p. 19). Based on Durkheim's works, Goffman defines face as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. The line, as he further explained, is a pattern of verbal and nonverbal expression in which the person articulates his point of view of the situation as well as makes evaluation about the participants, especially himself. Moreover, it is believed that face is "an image of self" (p. 5) which is sacred and therefore need to be protected. In other words, the face the participants have actually show who they really are in the society. For example, a respected person in society needs to protect his face from doing

something inappropriate, which is socially unacceptable.

In addition, Goffman (1967) strongly argued that a person is said to "have, or be in, or maintain face when the line he effectively takes presents an image of him that is internally consistent" in which other participants support him with their good impression and judgement about his consistency between face and line (p. 6). It can be assumed that the person should give a good impression about himself first so that other participants who had an impression about the person would do the same thing as return. In this way, a good interaction could be positively established and maintained among the participants including the person involved in a particular contact.

It is highly likely that the impression is closely related to the feelings of responses to the face experienced by the participants. In other words, the "feelings attached to self, and a self-expressed through face" (Chiappini, 2003, p. 1457). Chiappini further argued that as the feelings are involved, then, the face is not purely rational. It is thus claimed that the feelings can be either good or bad for the face. To support this argument, Goffman (1967) pointed out that if in a particular contact, the face can be

established and maintained even better than the person could have expected, he is highly likely to feel good and thus responds the particular situation with feelings of confidence and assurance. Further, the confident person who is firm in the line is likely to open his arms and heart to others because he feels safe and secure with his current situation. Another thing, he puts his trust on others while others put their trust on him.

However, as Goffman continued, if the face is not what the person has expected, he is likely to feel embarrassment. He believed that the embarrassment happens because the person feels inadequate and a lack of confidence and competence to do certain activities. At some extreme case, the person who becomes shamefaced "may falter, collapse and crumble" (p.8) which may lead further "disorder to the expressive organization of the situation" (p. 9). In other words, the shamefaced and crumbled person will be likely to have some difficulties to express himself even to say some simple words. However, Goffman believed that so long as all the participants in the particular interaction accept and respect each other's lines, it is not highly unlikely the embarrassment feelings can be actually avoided or at least minimized. In other

words, participants need to cooperatively and continually accept each other's weakness and strength as well. The participants, for example, may help and encourage each other to improve their weakness as well as learn from their strength. Another suggestion, others need to protect his face and feelings in order to "presumably make it easier for him to regain composure" (p. 103) and his self-confidence. Goffman further noted that the mutual acceptance of lines which is "a basic structural feature of interaction, especially the interaction of face-to-face talk" (p. 11) has an important role to maintain face. In addition, it is strongly believed that this way does not only maintain face but also save each other face which possibly lead to establish a good and mutual relationship among the participants because of respect and dignity. In other words, the strategies of saving each other face are highly likely to avoid the participants to feel alienated to one another.

Furthermore, Goffman (1967) clearly pointed out that face-saving strategy is "the traffic rules of social interaction" (p. 12) among the participants in a particular interaction. He further noted that there are at least two main important rules of face-saving in interaction. Firstly, because of his own emotional feelings such as honour

and pride attached to the image of self, he is likely to believe that it is very important to protect his own image from being ridiculed or offended. Secondly, as an image of others is attached to his emotional feelings, he tends to believe that it is necessarily important to protect other face because he wants to avoid the embarrassment directed toward him if they fail to maintain their face. In other words, Goffman believed that in order to retain his own face, he needs to “be considerate of the line taken by the other participants” (p. 12).

Unlike face, face-work is “the action taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face” (Goffman, 1967, p. 12) including his verbal behaviour (Chiappini, 2003). For instance, a staff who has a lower position in a company is likely to behave or talk politely to his manager. The face-work theory has been largely known as a way to describe “only appropriate and polite behaviour with a focus on face-threat mitigation” (Locher & Watts, 2005, p. 11) as well as save the face from being threatened. They further added that face-work theory excludes rudeness, impoliteness and inappropriate behaviours.

In addition, in face-work, as Goffman claimed, the person has two points of view, that is, “a defensive

orientation toward saving his own face and a protective orientation toward saving others’ face” (p. 14). He further explained that in saving his own face, the person is likely to protect his face from being ruined or offended which may also entail and ruin others; whilst saving others, the person tends to protect face which may not also lead to loss his own.

In order to avoid the face threat, Goffman (1967) suggested that the person not needs to talk about topics that might possibly lead to the expression of information which is not consistent with the line he is maintaining. Therefore, it is strongly believed that the person is courage not to tell any information that he does not know exactly or he is not sure what to say about a certain topic. If, for example, the person still talked about uncertain information to other participants who had already known the right information, it would negatively affect his line which might lead to embarrassment to his face. It is therefore suggested that the person needs only to talk about something he knows. In this way, it would save not only the person face but also possibly other participants face. Goffman further suggested that the person needs to be as realistic as possible in the interaction e.g. conversation with other

participants. For instance, the person is expected not to lie otherwise it might embarrass him and lose his face as well (Goffman, 1981). Another suggestion, the person and the participants need to have and show respect and politeness in interaction in which in this way "their self-respect is not threatened" (p. 17).

However, Goffman (1981) mildly warned that when the person fails to save his face that might lead to embarrassment, he might openly and genuinely acknowledges an incident has occurred. For example, if the person admitted that he made mistakes, then he might say to other participants: "I am sorry" or "I do apologize to any inconveniences caused". It is further claimed by Goffman that the genuine apology is highly likely to save the person face. Another thing, when a person who is caught out of face cannot control his strong feeling e.g. excited to share information but not what had been expected, the other participants might "protectively turn away from him or his activity for a moment, to give him time to assemble himself" (p. 18). Moreover, other participants might possibly help him to turn away from the conversation for a moment so that he might have time to assemble himself.

In his latest essay, Replies and responses, Goffman (1981) believed that

whenever persons have conversation, it is very likely that the persons ask questions or give answers. For example, persons who ask questions or questioners are oriented "to what lies just ahead, and depend on what is to come" (p. 5). It can be said that the persons who ask questions are in curiosity for the answers given. The answers given might have been either expected or unexpected by the questioners. If, for instance, the unexpected answers come, the questioners are likely to follow up with other questions for more clarifications. Conversely, if the answers meet the questioners' expectation, it is likely that the questioners will ask other questions unrelated to the previous one. Unlike the questioners, the persons who answer questions or answerers are oriented "to what has just been said, and look backward, not forward" (p. 5). In other words, the answerers also in curiosity for the questions asked. Once the questions are asked, the answerers tend to answer on the basis of the information or knowledge they already have. If, for example, the answers given are not what is expected, the answerers will look backward to what they just answered and clarify the answers in a more comprehensive way.

In addition, Goffman (1981) suggested that in conversation, it is

critical for all the persons to convey the information needed correctly and appropriately to the intended recipients as to what the senders exactly wanted the information to get across. It is thus, as Goffman further stated, very fundamental requirements of conversation that the persons either the recipients or senders have comprehensively understood the messages. However, Goffman acknowledged that in conversation, the person may likely possibly experience what is called "genuine uncertainty and genuine misunderstanding" (p. 11) in understanding the messages correctly and clearly.

However, it is strongly believed that a working agreement among the persons "for all practical purposes" (p. 10) in conversation which means mutual understanding in dealing with misunderstanding. For example, if one person failed to explain a certain issue, others would likely to understand the person's situation and possibly "reply honestly with whatever they know that is relevant and no more" (p. 15) about the person as a way to support and encourage him to move forward. Goffman further stated that the mutual understanding among the persons is not only safeguards the feelings but also communication. In addition, Goffman argued that the participants

are obliged to make sure that the resources of face-to-face interaction are not unwittingly employed to do something unexpected and unintended that may possibly lead to embarrassment. He further stated that the motivation to preserve or maintain everyone's face may "end up acting so as to preserve orderly communication" (p. 19).

Face-work concept is not without critics. It is previously explained that Goffman's concept of face and face-work in social interaction has their roots in Chinese and American Indian conception of face. It is argued that even though the roots of the conception of face have originated in Chinese and American Indian, Goffman applied the concept of face in Anglo-American society (Western). Goffman explicitly acknowledged in his essay *Interaction ritual* that his essay "will be chiefly in the context of American society" (Goffman, 1967, p. 192). In order to support this argument, Chiappini (2003) strongly claimed that a careful reading of Goffman essay on face-work can reveal some distinctly individualistic elements which appear seemingly to be woven into the original concept of face from China.

Chiappini (2003) further claimed that the model of face introduced by Goffman predominantly based on "the

Western ethnocentric assumptions such as the existence of predominantly rational actor and the strategic, goal oriented nature of face-work and of social interaction” (p. 1454). Chen and Gu (as cited in Chiappini, 2003) argued that the frequently borrowing of face-work theory on the basis of Western analytical frameworks and tool as well as lack of original non-western discourse studies and its own analytical framework considered as an obstacle to the development of non-western theories and empirical work. In addition, Chiappini stated that face-work, which for Goffman seems to be equivalent to face-saving practice, are believed to be different to every person, social group or society, even though they are drawn from a similar framework. Similarly, Hymes (as cited in Dua, 1990) strongly argued that some principles in face-work theory are not universally valid to others from different cultural backgrounds. In other words, it seems that the Goffman’s face-work theory can be highly applicable for Western society e.g. individualism but not to Eastern e.g. collectivism.

These two societies can be distinguished into two main characteristics, that are, individualism versus collectivism. According to Ting-Toomey and Chung (as cited in Moss and Tubbs, 2006, p. 316) individualism

tend to value the individual identity and rights as the most important thing over the group identity and rights. Individualism, as they continued, is likely to emphasize on personal goals, independency and direct communication. Further, in terms of communication, the individualism tends to say what they are thinking, be “direct, precise and absolute” (p. 318). In other words, the individualism communication style is similar to the communication principles previously suggested by Goffman with his face-work theory (1976) and Grice in Dua (1990). Unlike individualism, collectivism is likely to value the group identity rather than individual identity. The collectivism, as they further continued, tends to focus on group obligations and indirect communication. In communication, the collectivism tends to be “indirect, imprecise and probabilistic” (p. 318).

The question is whether individuals with different backgrounds, for example, native and non-native speakers have different strategies and reason to avoid face threat. Therefore, this paper is intended to analyze the avoidance strategy of face threat by English native speaker and non-native speaker who learnt other language e.g. English. The face-work theory developed by Goffman and its relation

to avoidance face threat is used as a framework. It is argued that the native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) react differently to avoid face threat. The argument is that NS and NNS have different cultural background and thus have different strategy to avoid face threat.

## **METHOD**

This methods section provided all aspects of study needed to be informed to the readers (Gass & Mackey, 2005). They further continued that these aspects of study gave detailed information about the participants, the procedure and analysis conducted as described in the following section.

### **Participants**

Two participants took part in this study. The participants were students, male and almost twenty-five years old. One of the participants was a native speaker (Australian), while the other was non-native speaker (Indonesian). According to Lightbown and Spada (2012) native speaker is someone who has learned and master a language from an early age while non-native speaker is someone who has ability to comprehend and use other language which is different from a native speaker. Both participants studied in one of the universities in Melbourne,

Australia. One of them (Australian) was doing his bachelor degree and the other one (Indonesian) was master degree. They were both interviewed in English for about 30 minutes each. The materials used for this research are some open-ended questions that had previously prepared. The questions were mainly about the participants' hobbies or activities. A mobile phone was used to record the interview which was later the recordings data would be used for analyses purposes.

### **Procedure**

First of all, both participants were contacted for the interview. They were both interviewed in different places. One of the participants was in common room in campus while the other was in his house. Both participants were basically given the same questions. Before starting the questions, the participants would be given some background information and the main purpose of the study. Having understood the purpose of the study, both would be given a brief instruction about what to talk about. After they clearly understood the instructions, they would be asked, with some questions that had been prepared the day before, to tell their hobbies. They were free to share anything about their hobbies or activities. In addition, they were asked for their permission that all

their answers during the interview were being recorded for analysis purposes.

Analysis of the data began by transcribing the participants' recording data. The findings were presented in verbal description of data. It would take some samples in the interview transcript, from the native speaker and another from a non-native speaker. It is believed that the data taken represented the characteristic of each participant "face" they attempted to maintain.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the transcript, when the interviewer asked a question to the native speaker (NS) about his opinion of learning a foreign language "how did you find it? difficult? challenging?, (paused) , then, the NS said " yea to practice my Indonesian and ah... fluent in Indonesian ah...it could ahm... that help little bit i suppose" (paused) then continued by saying "uhm...i don't know...just let the pressure". The NS participants tended to be as informative as is required yet as the same time he did not want to talk about something that he is not familiar or lack of evidence. NS did not want to say unnecessary and unimportant

information that is irrelevant to the question asked. In addition, it is believed that the NS says "uhm...i don't know ...just let the pressure " as a strategy to avoid face threat. In other words, NS wants to maintain his own face as well as interviewer face from being potentially embarrassed because of inaccurate information. The NS participant said "i don't know" because he didn't want to say something that he was not quite sure about the information he had. This strategy confirms what has been reported in the literature. For example, Goffman (1967, p. 16) clearly stated to "keep off topic" or information which is irrelevant with the line he is maintaining. Similarly, Moss and Tubbs (2006) believed that people need to be direct and precise to any information they have and share. Another interesting aspect is related to the characteristic of western face. Another question the interviewer asked, "did they help you i mean for example you make mistake or something about... don't say this in Indonesian? in this way" and he replied "uhm... yea. they did help me yea... constructively". This response indicated that the NS participant answered honestly that he was helped by the Indonesian people when he made mistake. According to Goffman and Grice (as cited in Brown, 2012) people need to reply honestly to any questions

asked and based on what they know which is relevant and nothing more.

However, when the interviewer asked question to the non native speaker (NNS) "have you any play basketball or something?", then, NNS interviewee said " i think my ages not youth age anymore. i mean im not teenager anymore. So i think its not suitable for me since here in university so many young people playing basketball so i think i, i just uhm... you know hold myself not to playing it". Another example of his response, "o.ye.ye... but badminton is maybe you can play single or double but you have to be flexible your body have to be flexible you have if may be... maybe played on the smaller field but you have to...move up and down and you have to jump or smash something in maybe135 uhm...a bit... ah...you know how to say it...ah... you have to be flexible. you have to be go up and down. and you have to know how to smash and how to give the ball in short way". From the responses above, it seemed that the NNS participant was likely to express himself by giving as much as information possible, even though the information was bit irrelevant with the question asked.

Unlike the NS, NNS participant tended to give information as many as possible even though it was not what

was expected or required to answer. Goffman claimed that indirect and imprecise information given may "discredit him and make him lose face" (p. 16). According to Grice (as cited in Dua, 1990) the NNS broke the rule of conversational principles e.g. avoid ambiguity and be brief. Grice (ibid) further argued that people should provide relevant and precise information as required and needed where talk exchange takes place. In other words, providing relevant and precise information can possibly avoid misunderstanding.

However, it is believed that NNS gives much information as a strategy to avoid face threat. It is further believed that this strategy somehow confirms Goffman's face theory to maintain face from being embarrassed yet in different way. It seemed that NNS did not want people consider him as incompetent and thus he needed to supply lots of information about the question asked. In addition, the indirect and imprecise information given by NNS confirm the collectivism communication theory (Ting-Toomey and Chung, 1996).

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

It is now believed that people are expected not only to maintain their face

from embarrassment but also others face involved in the interaction. The result of study showed that both participants have different strategy of avoidance of face threat. For example, the NS tended to talk directly while the NNS talk indirectly.

However, it is important to point out that the reason to maintain and avoid embarrassment may be universally different for each person. For example, the way people in Asia maintain their face would be different from the people in Europe. One of the factors that significantly contribute to the difference is their cultures.

Furthermore, it seems that face theory on the basis of Western framework is too dominant. The limitation of this study is that lack of study of face based on Eastern (indigenous) framework. It is therefore suggested future study could concentrate the study of face based on Eastern (indigenous) framework.

## REFERENCES

- Brown, Y. 2012. *The study of language*. Great Britain: Cambridge University Press.
- Burns, T. 1992. *Erving Goffman*. Great Britain: Routledge.
- Chiappini, F. B. 2003. Face and politeness: new (insights) for old (concepts). *Journal of Pragmatics* (35). Retrieved May 19, 2012, from [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com).
- Dua, H. R. and Riggins, S. H. (Ed) 1990. *The phenomenology of miscommunication*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co.
- Gass, S. M., & Selinker, L. 2008. *Second language acquisition: An introduction course* (3rd ed.). USA: Sheridan Books, Inc.
- Goffman, E. 1967. *Interaction ritual: Essay on face-to-face behavior*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Goffman, E. 1981. *Forms of talk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lightbown, P. and Spada, N. 2012. *How languages are learned*. Shanghai: Oxford University Express.
- Loacher, M. and Watts, R. 2005. Politeness theory and relational work. *Journal of Politeness Research* (1). Retrieved May 20, 2012, from [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com).
- Manning, P. 1992. *Erving Goffman and modern sociology*. United Kingdom: Polity Press.

Meyrowitz, J. and Riggins S. H. (Ed)  
1990. *Redefining the situation: Extending dramaturgy into a theory of social change and media effects*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co.

Tubbs, S. L., & Moss, S. 2006. *Human communication: Principles and contexts*. New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.