Politeness and Face

Proponents of **politeness theory** and **face negotiation theory** contend that they are universal theories which account for the role of politeness in social interactions.

Politeness Theory

Politeness theory was first formulated in 1978 by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson and presented as a set of universal concepts. A central concept is **face**, defined as "the projected image of one's self in a relational situation" (Ting-Toomey, 2012, p. 407). Brown and Levinson (1987) divided face into two components. **Positive face** relates to a person's desire that his or her self-image be appreciated and approved by others. **Negative face** is the desire for freedom to act and freedom from being imposed upon.

The theory describes acts that threaten a person's positive face or negative face. Examples of acts that threaten positive face are expressions of disapproval, contradictions, disagreements and challenges. All of these may damage a listener's positive face. Negative face threatening acts include orders, requests, suggestions, advice, reminders, threats and warnings. They may obstruct a listener's freedom of action. Brown and Levinson compiled a typology of face threatening acts that threaten the positive or negative face of speakers or hearers. The level of threat is also related to status relations between interlocutors and how well they know each other (Guirdham, 2005).

Politeness in communication is "the attempt by the speaker to minimise or reduce the threat to the hearer's face" (Guirdham, 2005, p. 101). Four main types of **politeness strategy** have been identified:

- Bald on-record – making no attempt to reduce the threat;
- Positive redress – minimizing the threat to a listener's positive face by, for instance, expressing approval or solidarity;
- Negative redress – minimizing the threat to the listener's negative face by expressing deference or a reluctance to impose;
- Off-record – using indirect strategies to mask the threat (Goldsmith, 2009).

To avoid good and bad connotations of the labels "positive" and "negative", and noting the range of terminology used in the sociolinguistic literature, Scollon et al. (2012) proposed alternative terms: **involvement** instead of positive redress/politeness, and **independence** in place of negative redress/politeness. By using these terms, Scollon et al. (2012, p. 49) wished to emphasise that "*both* aspects of face must be projected simultaneously in any communication". They also made the salient observation that miscommunications are liable to take place across the boundaries of discourse systems because members of one social group may not be familiar with the different face values of another group.

Face Negotiation Theory

Face negotiation theory was developed by Stella Ting-Toomey in the 1980s. It draws on multiple sources: Brown and Levinson's politeness theory; Erving Goffman's study of

facework; research by Harry Triandis on the distinction between collectivism and individualism; and Chinese concepts of face. The theory's claim to be universal is reflected in the first core assumption: "people in all cultures try to maintain and negotiate face in all communication situations" (Ting-Toomey, 2009, p. 371). A key concept is **facework**, which Ting-Toomey (2012, p. 408) defined as "specific verbal and non-verbal messages that help to maintain and restore face loss, and to uphold and honor face gain".

One of the fundamental ideas of face negotiation theory is related to the frameworks of Hall, Hofstede and Trompenaars. It states that "people from **collectivistic/high-context** cultures are noticeably different in the way they manage face and conflict situations than people from **individualistic/low-context** cultures" (Ting-Toomey, 2012, p. 410). Since face negotiation theory first appeared, Ting-Toomey has developed several versions of the theory with adjustments to its core assumptions and propositions.

Criticism of Politeness Theory and Face Negotiation Theory

While noting that a lot of research has supported politeness theory, Goldsmith (2009) also listed several criticisms. One concern is the lack of attention the theory pays to nonverbal communication. Another issue is that threats to a listener's face are emphasised at the expense of threats to a speaker's face. The main criticism, however, concerns the cross-cultural validity of the theory, with scholars pointing out there are national, ethnic and gender differences in the politeness strategies that people use (Guirdham, 2005).

Face negotiation theory, as originally conceived, was founded on the differing perceptions held by people from individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Ting-Toomey has, though, acknowledged deficiencies in the concepts of individualism and collectivism. As a work in progress, face negotiation theory has in recent years switched its focus to the concept of **self-construal**, which is defined as: "self-image; the degree to which people conceive of themselves as relatively autonomous from, or connected to, others" (Ting-Toomey, 2012, p. 410).

Applications to Aviation

The concepts of politeness and face have not been widely applied in aviation, but two notable research projects have incorporated politeness theory. Firstly, Linde (1985) used transcripts from accident reports to investigate the role of **mitigated speech** in intra-cockpit communication at US airlines. Secondly, Fischer and Orasanu (1999) conducted studies of intra-cockpit communication strategies used by pilots in the USA and Europe to mitigate errors made by fellow pilots.

Additionally, it has been suggested that face was a causal factor in the 1977 crash of Japan Airlines Flight 8054 in Anchorage, Alaska. Strauch (2010) hypothesized that the first officer and flight engineer (who were both Japanese) were unwilling to threaten the face of the captain (who was American). Prior to takeoff, the Japanese crew members did not challenge the captain about his intoxicated condition or about icing on the airframe. The plane crashed shortly after takeoff with the loss of all five people on board.

The role of face in airline accidents and incidents would seem to have important explanatory potential, but so far this is an under-researched field. What is clear, though, is

that misunderstandings are liable to occur when people from different cultures cannot interpret each others' face signals and behaviour.

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