

EWA JAKUBOWSKA  
University of Silesia  
Katowice

## FACE AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

The subject of this paper is the nonverbal realization of selected polite "speech" acts. The aim of this paper is to analyse nonverbal facework strategies observed in Polish culture. The main theoretical assumptions of the two theories, Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness and Ting-Toomey's face-negotiation theory, serve as a theoretical framework for the analysis.

Face is central to the functioning of people in any social setting. It is the image of self created on the basis of judgements concerning a person's adherence to moral rules of conduct and position within a given social structure. These judgements are both internal and external to the individual, as face reflects the interaction of self and others' perceptions and attributions (Earley, 1997). Thus, face is a public property, determined by the participation of others and earned through social interaction (Goffman, 1967; Lim and Bowers, 1991; Mao, 1994). To gain and maintain our own face (*self-face*) and the face of other participants (*other-face*) we engage in *facework* involving verbal and nonverbal action. Facework strategies are used to "diffuse, manage, enhance, or downgrade self and/or other's face" (Ting-Toomey, 1994:3).

The aim of this paper is to analyse nonverbal facework strategies.

### 1. Four aspects of face

Face is determined by the participation of others, but at the same time it is "an image intrinsically belonging to an individual" (Brown and Levinson, 1987). According to Brown and Levinson, it has two related aspects: *negative* and *positive face*. In the *face-negotiation theory* (1988) Ting-Toomey accounts for these two types of face, calling them *autonomy* and *approval face*, respectively. She also distinguishes between *self-* and *other-face*. Combining these two dimensions we may arrive at four aspects of face (cf. Ting-Toomey, 1988):

- negative other face
- negative self face
- positive other face
- positive self face

From this perspective, face appears to be a multi-dimensional concept playing a critical role in interpersonal communication.

## 2. Face-saving/giving acts and face-threatening acts

During social interaction people perform different acts; some of them are face-saving/giving, others face-threatening. These acts may involve the four aspects of face mentioned above. Thus, we can differentiate between acts which:

- give negative face to other (e.g. giving choice/options to other)
- give negative face to self (e.g. giving choice/options to self)
- give positive face to other (e.g. compliments or congratulations)
- give positive face to self (e.g. self-presentation)

and acts which:

- threaten negative other face (e.g. requests or suggestions)
- threaten negative self face (e.g. promises or offers)
- threaten positive other face (e.g. e.g. expressions of disapproval, mention of taboo topics, use of address terms and other status-marked indications in an offensive or embarrassing way)
- threaten positive self face (e.g. apologies, excuses).

We perform other-face-threatening acts openly expressing our negative emotions and showing power over other people. Self-face-threatening acts are often caused by self-dissatisfaction (self-criticism) and altruistic goals (promise, offer).

Face-giving acts are performed for completely different reasons. Other-face-giving acts are pragmatically motivated, and usually performed for the sake of politeness (compliments, congratulations), while self-face-giving acts serve to create a positive self-image.

## 3. Nonverbal communication

In most communicative events “speech” acts are performed by means of both verbal and nonverbal codes simultaneously. Each type of code can be transmitted by both vocal and nonvocal channels (Saville-Troike, 2003). The nonverbal code transmitted by the vocal channel includes paralinguistic and prosodic features, and laughter, while that transmitted by the nonvocal channel includes silence, kinesics, proxemics and eye behaviour (ibid.).

Sometimes “speech” acts are performed only nonverbally, especially in ritual contexts (ibid.). This may involve special clothing and adornment, special setting, posture, movements and gestures, and different kinds of vocalisations (Robinson, 2003).

It is true that “just as one can utter words without saying anything” (Searle, 1969:24), one can say something without uttering words” (Saville-Troike, 2003).

#### 4. The universality of nonverbal behaviour

In face-to-face conversation the nonverbal features form an integrative component of communicative acts (Robinson, 2003). Most of these features are culture-specific (e.g. gestures, distance between interlocutors).

Only the ways of expressing emotions are said to be universal. However, constraining gestures and facial expressions in various situations differs across cultures.

In this paper I would like to focus on nonverbal facework strategies observed in Polish culture.

#### 5. Nonverbal facework strategies in Polish culture

I based my research on long-term participant observation and introspection. I will not discuss all nonverbal communication, but I will concentrate on silence and gestures.

##### 5.1. Silence

*Silence* is usually negatively defined as “the absence of speech”. But it can perform many different functions in interpersonal communication. “It should be considered along with the production of sentence tokens as a basic functional unit of linguistic communication” (Saville-Troike, 2003:117). It has a boundary-marking function delimiting the beginning and end of utterances. Saville-Troike (2003) distinguishes between *silence carrying meaning*, but not propositional content, and *silent communicative acts* which depend on adjacent vocalisations for interpretation, and which have their own illocutionary force. Silences are symbolic and conventional; these are pauses or hesitations occurring within or between turns of talking. They may be volitional or not. Silent communicative acts convey propositional content, and may also include gestures.

The occurrence of silence has been observed in the performance of the majority of speech act types, polite speech acts included. Trying to be polite people perform *interaction rituals* (Goffman, 1967). The function of these rituals is to establish and/or maintain a state of ritual equilibrium, which is necessary to sustain one’s face (ibid.).

The point of performing greeting and farewell rituals is “to enact an emotion that attests to the pleasure produced by the contact” (Goffman, 1971:47). These two acts can be performed verbally and/or nonverbally. Nonverbal greetings and farewells are socially acceptable only when silence is accompanied by certain gestures, e.g. a head nod, slight bowing, raising a hat by a man, waving a hand, shaking hands, and a smiling expression. In Poland, when a man wants to be especially polite to a woman,

or when his interlocutor is a respectable elderly lady, greeting her or bidding her goodbye he kisses her hand. This ritual may or may not be accompanied by a polite formula.

Silence which is tantamount to the non-performance of those acts may imply the lack of pleasure produced by the contact on the part of the person, or his negative attitude towards the other. In this case silence means both a threat to positive self-face and to positive other-face. The person acting in this way presents himself as somebody lacking "social charm" and tact (Edmondson, 1981), or simply ill-mannered. At the same time he implies that he does not appreciate the other.

Silence has the same propositional content when the person fails to respond to the other's greeting or farewell.

The formula *przepraszam* ("I'm sorry", "Excuse me", "Pardon me") can be classified as a ritual apology. It is used to facilitate the interaction between interlocutors in every kind of situation. If routine impolite behaviour (e.g. sneezing, coughing, hiccuping, or burping), or offences such as slips of the tongue and momentary slips of physical control (e.g. dropping things), bumping into somebody, or contradicting somebody and then being proved wrong, if this kind of behaviour is followed by silence on the part of the offender, his positive face is threatened. This behaviour attests to his lack of social competence or negligence of social norms. On the other hand, such behaviour can also be treated as a threat to the face of the other who as a result of such treatment may feel neglected and not worthy of respect.

Silence is very often used as a response to apologies. There are two categories of responses to apologies: those that recognise the object of regret, and those that deny the existence of such an object. In both cases resorting to silence can be observed in certain situations, but its propositional content is different. When the person recognises the object of regret, but does not want to accept the apology, he does not make any verbal response to it. This is often accompanied by lowering the head and eye contact avoidance. Such behaviour is definitely threatening to the positive face of the other.

In the case of responses to apologies that deny the existence of the object of regret, the occurrence of silence has a totally different propositional content. When somebody apologises for routine impolite behaviour, slips of physical control, or slips of the tongue, which as such are threatening to his positive face, the most polite response is remaining silent, because any verbal response acknowledging the object of regret would be threatening to the offender's positive face. Thus, this silent communicative act saves the face of the other.

Both compliments and congratulations "focus on the addressee's positive face wants" (Holmes, 1989:196). Although there are no specific rules stating when they should be uttered, their absence can be understood as a wilful threat to the other's positive face. It could imply that the person does not appreciate and approve of the other's self-image (cf. Brown and Levinson, 1987). Or more likely, it would mean that the person cannot control his real feelings and shows his true self, which does not agree with his public self-image. In this case, silence is, certainly, threatening to his positive face.

Silence instead of good wishes may be interpreted in the same way as the silence instead of compliments or congratulations.

## 5.2. Gestures

There is cross-cultural variability in gestures appropriate for marking particular states and attitudes (Robinson, 2003). Johnson, Ekman and Friesen (1975) distinguish between two different types of gestures: *emblems* and *illustrators*. The former stand for commands, requests, marking one's own state, encounter regulation, insults, replies and others. The latter, illustrators, are coordinated with speech.

The Polish custom of kissing a woman's hand can be used either as an emblem or as an illustrator. This gesture as a sign of great respect for the woman can be interpreted as a positive-face-giving act.

Some responses to thanks and apologies may also be replaced by gestures. In the situation when the benefactor denies the existence of the object of gratitude or plays it down, or when the recipient of an apology denies the existence of the object of regret, he may simply wave his hand, meaning "there is nothing to thank/apologise for". The same gesture can be used as an answer to how-are-you-type questions, and can be interpreted as a complaint.

Verbal compliments or congratulations may be accompanied or replaced by shaking the other person's hand, patting him on the shoulder, putting one's thumb up, clapping one's hands, or shaking one's head as in disbelief. They can be accompanied by nonverbal vocalisations (e.g. *nn no, ho ho, o ho ho*). These nonverbal communicative acts are limited to interactions between friends in informal situations.

## Conclusions

The aim of the study was to analyse the role of nonverbal behaviour in face management. Much research has been carried out concerning facework strategies in face-threatening situations, but the researchers have mainly investigated verbal aspects of face-to-face communication. The role of nonverbal facework has been almost totally ignored (Ting-Toomey and Cocroft, 1994).

In this paper, I tried briefly to discuss how four aspects of face, negative other-face, negative self-face, positive other-face, and positive self-face, can be saved or threatened by nonverbal ritual acts in Polish culture. In my research I concentrated on the most important nonverbal features, silence and gestures, even though the role of the others, like eye contact, posture, distance, or vocalisations, cannot be neglected either.

## References

- Brown, P., Levinson, S.C. (1987). *Politeness. Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Earley, P.C. (1997). *Face, Harmony, and Social Structure*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Edmondson, W. (1981). *Spoken Discourse*. London: Longman.
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face-to-Face Interaction*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Goffman, E. (1971). *Relation in Public*. New York: Harper.
- Holmes, J. (1989). Sex differences and apologies: One aspect of communicative competence. *Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 10, No. 2.
- Johnson, G., P. Ekman, W.V. Friesen (1975). Communicative body movements. *Semiotica* 15.
- Lim, T.-S. (1994). Facework and interpersonal relationships. In: S. Ting-Toomey (ed.). *The Challenge of Facework*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Lim, T., J. Bowers (1991). Face-work: Solidarity, approbation, and tact. *Human Communication Research* 17.
- Mao, L.R. (1994). Beyond politeness theory: "Face" revisited and renewed. *Journal of Pragmatics* 21.
- Robinson, W.P. (2003). *Language in Social Worlds*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Saville-Troike, M. (2003). *The Ethnography of Communication*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Searle, J. (1969). *Speech Acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- Ting-Toomey, S. (1988). Intercultural conflict styles. A face-negotiation theory. In: Y.Y. Kim and W.B. Gudykunst (eds.), *Theories in Intercultural Communication*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.
- Ting-Toomey, S. (1994). Face and facework: An introduction. In: S. Ting-Toomey (ed.). *The Challenge of Facework*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Ting-Toomey, S., B.-A. Cocroft (1994). Theoretical and research issues. In: S. Ting-Toomey (ed.). *The Challenge of Facework*. Albany: State University of New York Press.