

POLITENESS

Sociolinguists often discuss politeness phenomena in terms of **face**.

Face is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction.

In general, people cooperate (and assume each other's cooperation) in maintaining face in interaction, such cooperation being based on the mutual vulnerability of face.

Face refers to the respect that an individual has for him or herself, and maintaining that "self-esteem" in public or in private situations. Usually you try to avoid embarrassing the other person, or making them feel uncomfortable. Furthermore, while the content of face will differ in different cultures (what the exact limits are to personal territories, and what the publicly relevant content of personality consists in), we are assuming that the mutual knowledge of members' public self-image or face, and the social necessity to orient oneself to it in interaction, are **universal**.

We may distinguish between:

- **positive face** (your need to maintain and demonstrate your membership in a social group, the desire to be appreciated and liked by others)
- **negative face** (your need to be individual and independent, to get what you want without offending anyone).

We may **save face** or **lose face**

A **face-threatening act (FTA)** is any piece of behaviour which can easily make another person lose face;

A **face-saving act (FSA)** is any piece of behaviour which lessens or removes the threat of losing face.

A face threatening act can be directed towards our negative or positive face.

Negative face-threatening acts

Negative face is threatened when an individual does not avoid or intend to avoid the obstruction of the hearer's freedom of action.

It can cause damage to either the speaker or the hearer, and makes one of the interlocutors submit their will to the other.

Freedom of choice and action are impeded when negative face is threatened.

NFTA to the hearer (the negative face of **the person being spoken to** is threatened).

An act that affirms or denies a future act of the hearer creates pressure on the hearer to either perform or not perform the act: *orders, requests, suggestions, advice, reminders, threats, or warnings*.

An act that expresses the speaker's sentiments of the hearer or the hearer's belongings: *compliments, expressions of envy or admiration, or expressions of strong negative emotion toward the hearer (e.g. hatred, anger, distrust)*.

An act that expresses some positive future act of the speaker toward the hearer. In doing so, pressure has been put on the hearer to accept or reject the act and possibly incur a debt: *Examples: offers and promises*.

NFTA to the speaker (the negative face of **the person talking** is threatened)

An act that shows that the speaker is succumbing to the power of the hearer.

- Expressing thanks
- Accepting a thank you or apology
- Excuses
- Acceptance of offers
- The speaker commits himself to something he or she does not want to do

Positive face-threatening acts

Positive face is threatened when the speaker or hearer does not care about their interlocutor's feelings, wants, or does not want what the other wants.

Positive face threatening acts can also cause damage to the speaker or the hearer.

When an individual is forced to be separated from others so that their well being is treated less importantly, positive face is threatened.

PFTA to the hearer

An act that expresses the speaker's negative assessment of the hearer's positive face or an element of his/her positive face: *expressions of disapproval (e.g. insults, accusations, complaints), contradictions, disagreements, or challenges*.

An act that expresses the speaker's indifference toward the addressee's positive face: *disrespect, mention of topics which are inappropriate in general or in the context, belittling, boasting, interrupting*

PFTA to the speakers: An act that shows that the speakers are in some sense wrong, and unable to control themselves:

- Apologies: In this act, speaker is damaging his own face by admitting that he regrets one of his previous acts.

- Acceptance of a compliment
- Inability to control one's physical self
- Inability to control one's emotional self
- Self-humiliation
- Confessions

Politeness strategies are developed for the main purpose of dealing with these *Face Threatening Acts*

What would you do if you saw a cup of pens on your teacher's desk, and you wanted to use one? Would you

- say: "Ooh, I want to use one of those!"
- say: "So, is it O.K. if I use one of those pens?"
- say: "I'm sorry to bother you but, I just wanted to ask you if I could use one of those pens?"
- Indirectly say: "Hmm, I sure could use a blue pen right now."

If you answered **A**, "Ooh, I want to use one of those!" you used what is called the **bold-on record** strategy which provides no effort to minimize threats to your teacher's "face."

A speaker makes a suggestion, request, offer in an open and direct way.
It is the most face threatening mode of action.

Sometimes, *bold on record* events can actually be oriented towards saving the hearer's face.

In "Have another biscuit!" or "Marry me!", the risk that the hearer may not wish to be imposed on is small.

No, I can't possibly deprive you of another biscuit!

No, I really shouldn't occupy your life like that!



Generally, **bold on record** strategies provide no effort to reduce the impact of the FTAs. You will most likely shock the person to whom you are speaking to, embarrass them, or make them feel a bit uncomfortable. However, this type of strategy is commonly found with people who know each other very well, and are very comfortable in their environment, such as close friends and family).

An Emergency: *HELP!!*

Task oriented: *Give me that!*

Request: *Put your coat away!*

Alerting: *Turn your headlights on!* (When alerting someone to something they should be doing)

If you answered **B**, "So, is it O.K. if I use one of those pens?", you used the **Positive Politeness** strategy.

In this situation you recognize that your teacher has a desire to be respected. It also confirms that the relationship is friendly and expresses group reciprocity.

Positive politeness strategies aim to save positive face, by: demonstrating closeness and solidarity, appealing to friendship, making other people feel good, and emphasising that both speakers have a common ground.

If you answered **C**, "I'm sorry to bother you but, I just wanted to ask you if I could use one of those pens?" you used the **Negative Politeness** strategy which is similar to Positive Politeness in that you recognize that they want to be respected.

However, you also assume that you are in some way imposing on them. Some other examples would be to say, "I don't want to bother you but..." or "I was wondering if ..."

The main focus for using this strategy is to assume that you may be imposing on the hearer, and intruding on their space. Therefore, these automatically assume that there might be some social distance or awkwardness in the situation.

Negative politeness strategies pay attention to negative face, by demonstrating the distance between interlocutors, and avoiding intruding on each other's territory.

The speakers use them to avoid imposing or presuming give the hearer options

Speakers can avoid imposing by

- emphasising the importance of the other's time and concerns,
- using apology and hesitation or
- a question, giving them the opportunity to say no

"Feel free to come to the party if you have got the time"

The extent of option-giving influences the degree of politeness. In many cases, the greater chance that the speaker offers the hearer to say "no", the more polite it is.

If you answered **D**, "Hmm, I sure could use a blue pen right now", you used **off-record**, indirect strategies. The main purpose is to take some of the pressure off of you. You are trying not to directly impose by asking for a pen. Instead you would rather it be offered to you once the teacher realizes you need one, and you are looking to find one

This off-record strategy is an indirect speech act in which you are using a declarative representative functioning as a question "to yourself" that also needs the hearers to interpret it as a directive, a request for help.