

According to Hoijer, one of the key elements in Sapir's understanding of language is that "the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group" (Hoijer, 113). That is to say that language is the medium through which individuals make meaning from the full array of sensible perceptions, not in their own idiosyncratic fashion, but after the linguistic conventions of their society. Therefore, "language functions, not simply as a device for reporting experience, but also, and more significantly, as a way of defining experience for its speakers" (Hoijer, 114). In so doing, language is seen in its pragmatic sense—being used to actively structure the lived experience, not simply carrying the semantic load of preexistent categories of entities. Given this, Hoijer argues that the aim of linguistic anthropology ought to be an understanding of the manner in which a language organizes "through its structural semantic system, the world of experience in which its speakers live" (Hoijer, 116). While often considered an exponent of linguistic relativity, Sapir's concerns have led to assertions of universal human experience, by means of proposed universal aspects of language use. Investigations into the manner in which language orders the experienced world have been undertaken by Erving Goffman and later by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, furthering Goffman's theory.

Goffman perceived that a universal concern for *face* arose as a necessity of social interaction between persons. In so doing, he argues that the "maintenance of face is a condition of interaction, not its objective" (Goffman, 12). The objective of interpersonal communication is the accomplishment of the myriad tasks that human beings, as social beings, undertake. However, to make such interactions possible human beings implicitly adopt the rules of face and carry out face-work in the course of every such interaction.

Face is the socially co-constructed image of a person. Face is neither wholly the possession of a person that can be altered at will, nor is face entirely independent from an individual. Face is both given and maintained by the audience, but not without the actions of the actor influencing the line take and thus the face likely to be given.

Building on his dramaturgical model, Goffman sees face as the persona, the mask worn and the accompanying role played, of a given social actor. In engaging in face work the social actor engages in actions to insure the consistency of all activity with his face (Goffman, 12). In this way the actor is creating his face according to the line taken, however, this face is only given and upheld by the audience.

Goffman postulates that “face, by its very nature can be saved only in a certain number of ways, and...each social grouping must make its selections from this single matrix of possibilities” (Goffman, 13). This limited range of possibilities is what allows Goffman to assert that “underneath their differences in culture, people everywhere are the same” (Goffman, 44). The limited range of possible actions for saving face is of primary interest to Brown and Levinson, who developed a hierarchical schema of the different possibilities to save, or rather to redress assaults upon, face. Brown and Levinson have extended Goffman’s original proposition that there is only a limited range of available strategies for attending to face to develop a universal ordering of such strategies. The result is the formulation of a hierarchy of strategies, with social actors seeking to threaten the face of their interlocutor as little as possible, depending on the weight of the matter, the situation, and the status distinction between the speakers.

The concern for face hinges on what Brown and Levinson argue is a set of universal principles for politeness, principles that guide action so as to acknowledge and attend to

two aspects of one's face. These two aspects are positive face and negative face, or alternatively solidarity seeking desires and the desire to be free from impingement by others. These manifest themselves in forms of politeness that express solidarity and show deference, respectively. Brown and Levinson argue that all agents "have positive face and negative face, and all...are rational agents – i.e. choose means that will satisfy their ends" (Brown and Levinson, 64). While it may be contested that all agents are indeed rational agents, the denial of which would undermine any theory of universal politeness, it seems safe at present to accept that as social beings, all humans have positive face and negative face, whether or not they are conscious of or attentive to them.

Neither Goffman nor Brown and Levinson see a universal concern for face or the subsequent theory of universal politeness as a natural quality of human beings, but rather one that is born out of the social interaction in which humans engage. "The interchange seems to be a basic concrete unit of social activity and provides one natural empirical way to study interaction of all kinds" (Goffman, 20). So it is through interchanges, the small exchanges engaged in by people to maintain social relations, that face is developed and maintained. Building on this proposition that social relations must be studied in the actual interchanges between persons, Brown and Levinson argue that "discovering the principles of language usage may be largely coincident with discovering the principles out of which social relationships, in their interactional aspect, are constructed: dimensions by which individuals manage to relate to others in particular ways" (Brown and Levinson, 60). It is only through the discovery of the language used to maintain social relationships, namely the small interchanges in which all persons are assumed to engage, that one can discover how the social relations are actually formed, namely

through talk. As Austin argued, language does interaction, language does not simply report on such interactions.

It may seem paradoxical, but one of the strengths of Goffman's idea of a universal concern for face is that the universal is rooted in the particular daily interactions of persons, rather than in some abstract or archetypical *ur*-interaction. Goffman insists that the "rules of talk pertain not to spoken interaction considered as an ongoing process, but to *an* occasion of talk or episode of interaction as a naturally bounded unit" (Goffman, 35). That is to say, that while a person may be in solidarity with another and share a great deal with them, it is through the particular interaction, grounded in a particular context with particular actors, and bearing a particular socially prescribed meaning that one may see the actual construction of social interactions. Because of these social interactions a concern with attending to one's own face and the face of others arises. In order to maintain face in such specific interactional encounters, the rules of talk are employed. These are the specific linguistic strategies used to show deference or solidarity in a particular instance. These specific strategies may be studied by the linguistic anthropologist in order to examine analyze the actual interactions between persons, as Keith Basso has done among the Apache. Brown and Levinson argue that because "larger-scale social facts (institutions, jural rules, rights, and duties) are embedded in, and in part exist in, interactional detail,...to yield this subject matter to some other discipline is to denude social anthropology of one of the slender columns by which its theoretical concepts rest on observable facts" (Brown and Levinson, 245). In order to understand something of the larger social facts with which social anthropology is

concerned, attention must be paid to the details of linguistic exchanges and the information they carry about the social relations between persons.

Another strength of Goffman's theory of face is that while a universal concern for face may be postulated, and the domain for the formation and maintenance of face located in the empirically observable interchanges between persons, intentionality need not be imputed to the actors. "Since each participant in an undertaking is concerned, albeit for differing reasons, with saving his own face and the face of others, then tacit cooperation will naturally arise so that the participants together can attain their shared but differently motivated objectives" (Goffman, 29). The mechanism is much like that of the market, proposed by Adam Smith. No one person need be in control of face, yet everyone in seeking to maintain their own face maintains the face of others. The result is a system of concern for face that may be tested for its universality. Such a system disperses the locus of the formation of social interactions in individual interchanges which occur without the need for any intentional desire to maintain the social relations. "A social relationship, then, can be seen as a way in which the person is more than ordinarily forced to trust his self-image and face to the tact and good conduct of others" (Goffman, 42). Just as the market value of a good is presumed to be collectively set through the individual exchanges, so too is the face of any given actor collectively determined through the actions of others.

The analogy between a universal concern for face and the system of establishing economic value through exchanges points to the reliance of both on a social contract. This is responsible, in large part, for both the appeal of a universal concern for face as well as a potential problem. "A person's performance of face-work, extended by *his tacit*

*agreement to help others perform theirs*, represents his willingness to *abide by the ground rules of social interaction*” (Goffman, 31, emphasis mine). The social contract being engaged in here is that each actor will help others maintain their face, assuming they will do likewise. Goffman does not provide any discussion in the literature we read for deviance from this script. The basic contract does not stipulate that each actor will maintain the face of the other insofar as the others do so, but rather with the assumption that they are going to do so. While he does allow for aggressive use of face, seeing potential face work as achieving the most prestige for oneself at the least expense to others, he assumes that all such use of face will be strategic. That is, he implicitly is using the idea of a rational agent as was explicitly argued by Brown and Levinson. For Brown and Levinson, each person is a “willful fluent speaker of a natural language, further endowed with two special properties – rationality and face” (Brown and Levinson, 63). While they see the two as separable, *concern* for face cannot be divorced from rational activity insofar as there is a *goal*, namely to maintain one’s own face and that of others. The reliance on a particular end necessitates some reliance on reason to derive a strategy—means one may employ—to achieve a certain end. The problem is that there may be individual actors who more than being unaware of their own face, do not see any correlation between their honoring of others’ face and the recognition of their own face given them by these same others. Such persons may have a socially co-constructed face, but they can hardly be said to have a concern for face, let alone a rational basis for maintaining their own and other’s face. Goffman seems to deny that such persons exist: “just as there is no occasion of talk in which improper impressions could not intentionally or unintentionally arise, so there is no occasion of talk so trivial as

not to require each participant to show serious concern with the way in which he handles himself and the others present” (Goffman, 33). For Goffman, each interchange is a locus of face-work. Goffman sees all actors as being capable of predicting the possible outcome of any interaction and so “when a person begins a mediated or immediate encounter, he already stands in some kind of social relationship and expects to stand in a given relationship to them after a particular encounter end” (Goffman, 41). That this type of rationality—a linking of the means necessary to achieve a certain ends—may be used is not being denied; however, it is to be questioned whether this type of behavior may be said to be typical of all social actors.

Despite such criticisms of the rational foundation underlying both Goffman’s analysis and to a greater extent Brown and Levinson’s analysis, the idea of face and the theory of universal politeness may be useful in analyzing the details of certain linguistic exchanges. In the context of joking relationships among the Apache, one finds a clear demonstration of Goffman’s claim that “it is often the person’s social relationship with others that leads him to participate in certain encounters with them, where incidentally he will be dependent upon them for supporting his face” (Goffman, 42). Basso noted that with regard to Whiteman jokes, they have the possibility to be both enormously humorous, as well as exceedingly dangerous. This is largely because the telling of such jokes registers a great deal of information, but most importantly conveys “the joker’s relationship with the person who is the object of his joke” (Basso, 9). The teller of a joke relies on a pre-existing relationship, established through many previous relations in which they have been good to one another (Basso, 48) and in so doing has an expectation that the object of his joke will defend his face. In the event that the relationship of solidarity is not as

expected, a joke will fail as the solidarity is not affirmed and is seen rather as an actual threat to the negative face of the object of the joke, to whom deference ought to have been shown. Basso offers an example of this with the parody of a preacher (Basso, 15), where the face of the object of the joke is perceived as slighted, the face of the joker himself is not upheld, and in response all feel a sense of shame. The analytical tools provided by Brown and Levinson, developed from Goffman, allow the linguistic anthropologist to see in the minute details of the joking interchange the structural relationship present between the joker and the object of the joke.

The concern for proper deference towards those with whom one cannot claim solidarity is not limited to the Apache. Among the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, Ochs and Schieffelin observed that “there is a cultural dispreference for talking about or making claims about what another might think, what another might feel, or what another is about to do” (Ochs and Schieffelin, 484). Such concerns for politeness are expressed in many areas of Kaluli life, including the socialization of children. Examining the precise interchange between a mother, her elder child, and a younger child reveals these principles in operation.

Although one cannot demonstrate the universality of any theory based on two roughly sketched examples, it seems as though there is a concern with the politeness present in most and possibly all social interchanges. Goffman claims that these concerns are expressions of the attention to face and face-work done by all persons. Brown and Levinson argue that this universal attention to face is manifested in a hierarchical organization of possible mitigations of any face-threatening act. That these ideas assume that a social actor is a rational agent, acting in accordance with a tacit social contract may

be debatable. However, the idea of face and the use of a universal theory of politeness are helpful in coming to understand a variety of situations presented by ethnographic sources, ranging from joking among adult Apaches to the socialization of children among the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea.