

**UNIVERSALITY OF BROWN AND LEVINSON POLITENESS THEORY  
IN COLLECTIVE CULTURE:  
REDEFINING POWER IN CONCEPT OF FACE**

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**Abstract**

The claim of universality of Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness has encouraged the theory's debate to draw the concept of face in group society culture. This article analyzes the concept of face in several group societies claiming that Brown and Levinson missed covering. The analysis was described through library research using primary and secondary data. The primary data comes from the original book of Politeness Theory written by Brown and Levinson. The secondary data were the description and the example of the conversation, how the existence of linguistics set of a language, and the ritual of performing an interaction in the culture found in some articles supporting and debating Brown and Levinson's universality Politeness theory. This analysis concludes that Brown and Levinson's Theory covered the group society politeness and face concept by seeing the definition of power imposition on society members. While the theory of Brown and Levinson is flawed to explain the flip concept of face in a collective culture, computing the weightiness of FTAs formula has covered the role of culture and group situational interaction. It makes this concept can be applied to any cross-cultural boundary universally.

**Keywords:** *Politeness Theory, Brown and Levinson's Theory, FTAs, Collective culture, Concept of Face*

**Abstrak**

Klaim yang menyatakan keuniversalan Teori Kesopanan milik Brown dan Levinson menimbulkan perdebatan tentang kelemahan teori ini meliputi penggambaran konsep 'muka' (*Face*) dalam konteks kebudayaan kolektif. Artikel ini menganalisa konsep muka pada beberapa kelompok masyarakat yang gagal dibahas oleh Brown dan Levinson. Analisa dilakukan dengan kajian kepustakaan dengan menggunakan data primer yaitu buku original berisi teori kesopanan yang ditulis oleh Brown dan Levinson; dan data sekunder yaitu deskripsi dan contoh-contoh interaksi dan percakapan serta bagaimana eksistensi dari set linguistik dan ritual dari dilakukannya suatu percakapan yang terdapat pada artikel- artikel yang mendukung dan menentang keuniversalan teori kesopanan Brown dan Levinson. Hasil analisa menunjukkan bahwa penjabaran teori Brown dan Levinson telah mencakupi konsep kesopanan dan konsep muka pada masyarakat berkelompok melalui definisi pemaksaan kekuatan pada anggota masyarakat. Meskipun teori Brown dan Levinson luput dalam menjelaskan tentang konsep

terbalik dari muka pada kebudayaan kolektif, proses penghitungan rumus berat dari FTA telah menunjukkan cakupan peran kebudayaan kolektif dan interaksi kelompok yang bersifat situasional. Hal ini menjadikan konsep yang ditawarkan oleh Brown dan Levinson bisa diterapkan antar batas kebudayaan secara universal.

**Kata Kunci:** *Teori Kesopanan, Teori Brown dan Levinson, FTA, Kebudayaan Kolektif, Konsep Muka*

## INTRODUCTION

Politeness always tickles our curiosity and makes people effort to behave and act as polite as possible in a particular situation, whether in individual or group and cultural interaction. Brown and Levinson claim their politeness theory universality based on the statement that the concept of face exists in all cultures. People tend to do almost the same strategies in saving their face in front of society in an interaction. This universality claim of this theory, however, has raised many criticisms from many researchers. Gu (1990) argues that Brown and Levinson failed to describe politeness in a group context and challenges that it is only suitable to be applied in a western society where people do everything to fulfill their desire to be appreciated and avoid their freedom interfered.

Meanwhile, Matsumoto (1988) and Ide (1989) argue that Japanese honorific politeness is not done to mitigate the imposition and saving face. Instead, it emphasizes the showing of human relationships and how Japanese people's dependence consciousness on others. Politeness is not done to claim the individual's territory but to govern all social interaction (Matsumoto, 1988: 405).

Suszczynska (1999), on the other hand, provides the statistical data that shows that people will take different strategies based on the cultural background they have.

This paper attempts to draw the model of Brown and Levinson's Theory of face, advantages, and disadvantages of this theory. It draws the writer's conclusion about the universality of Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness in the collectivism-based culture. The

approach used to conclude this paper is by analyzing the relationship of the concept of Power, Distance, and Rating of an imposition to the cultural politeness phenomena offered by those researchers above.

### ***Model of Brown and Levinson Theory***

The universality of Brown and Levinson is based on the concept of face. They claim that this concept of face is valid universally in every culture. Brown and Levinson propose face into two primary forms; negative face and positive face. Face means the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting of two related aspects, which are positive and negative face.

Positive face means the desire of a person to be appreciated in front of the society claimed by interaction. Negative face is the need of a person to have their freedom, which is realized by no imposition to their action. Everything that can threaten the face, whether negative or positive, is called a face-threatening act (FTA). The sense of these face is

analog of investment in an interaction, so that they can be lost, maintained, or enhanced (Brown & Levinson, 1987:61)

Brown and Levinson's theory focuses on how people should behave or use their speech act as well as possible to avoid conflict with other people (Eelen, 2001). They argue that people would consider choosing to do a speech act to other people or not to do it to avoid conflict. In Brown and Levinson, it is called strategy.

The strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson aim to mitigate the FTA both to the speaker's (S) face and hearer's (H) face. The strategies which people do to mitigate would be included in two ways; positive politeness and negative politeness. Positive politeness is approach-based, where S wants to ensure that S wants what H wants. In this case, S regards and treats H as the S group member or a friend whose wants and personality characteristics are known and liked. Negative politeness is an avoidance-based where the S ensure that his negative face and want will not or

will only minimally interfere with the freedom of the addressee's action (Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987: 70)

The consideration to do or not to this FTA can be generated based on three prominent variables; those are relative power (P), social distance (D), and rating of imposition (R) from others to the speaker in a particular culture.

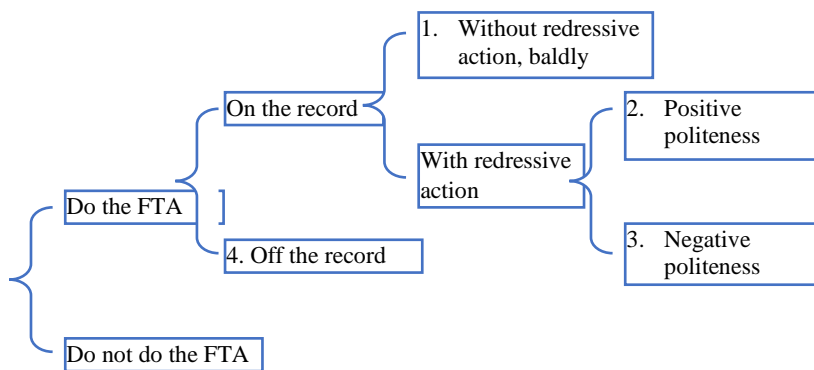
The formula of weightiness is formulated as follows.

$$W_x = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + R_x$$

$W_x$  is the numerical value that measures the weightiness of the FTA  $x$ . Power (P) is asymmetric, wherein the weightiness computation  $P(H, S)$  is realized by how far H's power can interfere with S's plan and self-evaluation. The value is not only

valid to an individual but also the roles or Roles-Set. Roles mean that a speaker has and represents interrelated to their group. Distance in  $D(S, H)$  means the symmetrical intensity of interaction between speaker and hearer, whether it is material or non-material interaction. The rating of imposition ( $R_x$ ) is cultural and situational, realized by the extent of imposition brought by the agent's wants of self-determination or approval (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987:76-77).

This weightiness formulation is used to consider if a person will do or not do the FTA to the hearer. Brown and Levinson draw the process of choosing this decision in the following scheme :



**Figure 1. Possible Strategies for doing FTAs**

Figure 1 can be explained as the following :

As stated before, MP does FTAs or do not FTAs based on how big the risk of FTAs will interfere with his and interlocutor face. If the speaker thinks that H's and his face's impingement is not significant, he may decide to do FTAs. The next consideration is whether he will do it on the record or off the record. Off the record is the last strategy that S can do if he finds the risk to do FTAs is big on impinging his face or the H's face. Back to the decision that S will do FTAs on the record, he might want to think if he wants to do it, baldly, without any redressive action or with redressive action by deem which face is to be saved, negative face or positive face.

Apologizing is one of many strategies offered in Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. In doing the apologizing, the speaker might want to do some steps and considerations. Since the apologizing is potentially an FTA for H, S might attempt to fulfill H's demand negative face. It shows that S regards the H existence in a conversation

within a good the FTA or not to do it. Moreover, Brown and Levinson proposed some possibility that S will take when they attempt to apologize :

1. By communicating the apology Baldly on the record
2. Showing the reluctance to do FTA verbally by using some expression such as "I don't want to bother/ interrupt you but ...."
3. Giving remarkable reasons for doing the FTA to H and ensuring H that S does not intend to impinge H's negative face.
4. Begging apology from H (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987: 187)

## METHOD

The article used library research where the analysis was made based on two sources of data. The primary source of data was the original book of Politeness Theory written by Brown and Levinson and cultural description found in Suszcynska's article. The secondary data were the Gu's Chinese conversation example provided in

Mao's article; and the article of Ide and Matsumoto. The data were analyzed descriptively. It focused on the theory and the analysis strength, and the weaknesses found in the articles.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### *Criticisms of Brown and Levinson Theory*

Many criticisms have risen due to Brown and Levinson's claim of the universality of their politeness theory. In the paper, I would like to analyze the criticism proposed by Gu (1990), Matsumoto (1988), Ide (1989), Mao (1993), and Suszczynska (1999).

Matsumoto (1988 in Fukada & Asato 2004) argue that Brown and Levinson cannot be universal regarding that the concept of doing FTAs for saving face is not relevant to the concept of place in Japanese. In Brown and Levinson, a person does FTA to avoid the risk of their speech act interfering with their interlocutors' face. She argues the Japanese language has a set of linguistics to show the relationship between a speaker and his

interlocutors and to indicate the difference of status between them. Due to this linguistics feature's availability, she argues that when a Japanese person does politeness, the aims of this politeness are not for redressing an FTA. The following example, as is cited in Fukada and Asato (2004:1993), is used to draw her point:

1. Kyoo wa doyoobi da.  
 Today TOPIC Saturday  
 COPULA-PLAIN  
 "Today is Saturday"
2. Kyoo wa doy  
 Today TOPIC Saturday  
 COPULA-POLITE  
 "Today is Saturday"

In this example, Matsumoto argues that the content of the sentences does not involve FTA. However, she states that (1) cannot be used in the conversation by a person who has a lower position to whose the higher position, and he must use (2) instead.

Moreover, Matsumoto (in Nwoye, 1992: 311) underlines that "in a culture where an individual is more concerned with conforming to norms of expected behavior than with maximizing benefits to self,

face, in Brown and Levinson's sense, ceases to be important issues in interpersonal relationships."

Ide (1989 in Fukada & Asato, 2004) agrees with Matsumoto, develop the concept of politeness in Japanese based on two types of linguistic politeness, the volitional types and discernment type. She claims that Brown and Levinson do not consider these essential aspects of Japanese politeness in their theories.

In her explanation, however, Ide's idea of volition is evidence that can be used against her concept of discernment (Fukada & Asato, 2004). In her volition concept, the use of verbal strategies reflects the speaker's intention to choose the extent of politeness that they want to use in a particular situation. Here, the speaker is the one who decides how polite they want to be in a specific situation. On the other hand, she argues that one's discernment operates using the linguistics form of honorific in a situation. This honorific choice is based on the situation, the speakers' role in a situation, and the status difference

between the speaker and the referent. She emphasizes that using the appropriate linguistics form is decided based on the social convention, and this action involves the independence of the speaker's rational intention. (Fukada & Asato, 2004: 1995). In her example, however, Ide said that honorific use in some situations is obligatory since doing the opposite will regard inappropriate. Logically, it can be said that the obligation of the honorifics is used to the person whose higher involve the rating of an imposition to the speaker negative face in the term of Brown and Levinson theory.

However, these theories of Matsumoto and Ide have also raised some rebuttal from Fukada and Asato (2004) and Mao (1993). Fukada and Asato argue that Ide's argument seems to support Brown and Levinson's concept of face.

The reason, according to Ide, is that the choice between the use of honorific form or non-honorific forms is obligatory when saying anything in Japanese, and the social rules

of Japanese society require one use of an honorifics when one mentions a higher status person (such as the professor) (Fukada & Asato, 2004: 1995)

Another criticism comes from Gu (1990 in Mao, 1993). He investigated the face's concept by linking it to Chinese cultures, such as inviting, offering, and promising speech acts. He argues while it is declined, insisting on inviting someone to come to dinner, for example, is part of politeness in Chinese culture. Unfortunately, in his explanation, while he refuses the universality of Brown and Levinson's theory in Chinese culture, he does not offer his version of the concept of face (Mao, 1993). Moreover, this is, according to Mao, as the failure of the argument of Gu which confuse:

What underlies Gu's confusion, I think, is his failure to properly examine Chinese face (that is, *Mianzi* and *lian*) and to call Brown and Levinson's Conceptualization of face into question-even though he rightly observes that Brown

and Levinson's face does not adequately account for his Chinese data (Mao, 1993: 645)

Mao's argument (cf. Gu, 1990) is centered on his challenge to Brown and Levinson's Theory on the togetherness value in a collectivistic culture. Instead, Mao proposes his concept of the face based on Gu's (1994) concept of face. According to Hu (1994), a person has both *mianzi* and *lian* concept. The concept of *mianzi* has been used in many English dictionaries. Where *mianzi* may be meant dignity or prestige; or value or standing in others' eyes; and a state of respected by others, it is different from the concept of *lian*. Mao argues that if a person lost his *lian* can be automatically lost his *mianzi*. Losing *lian* is regarded as more severe than losing *mianzi* since it depends on the extent of social distasteful and judgment (Hu, 1944 in Mao, 1993)

Mao (1993) attempts to challenge the Brown and Levinson theory by exploring the intrinsic link between the face and politeness in Chinese (cf. Gu, 1990)- one that



further attests to the interaction dynamics of Chinese face. He argues that the theory of universal politeness failed to identify the concept of face in their theory (Mao, 1993). In Chinese concept, doing politeness is not merely a matter of saving face, but also an effort to come into some *mianzi*. It means that when a person does politeness, he considers prestige and reputation, and respect of the groups. It does not a matter of personal wants but rather a social judgment of the society where the person interact within as it stated by Mao (1993: 460), "Chinese face emphasizes not the accommodation of individual wants or desire but the harmony of individual conduct with the views and judgment of the community."

### ***Analyzing the strength and weaknesses of Brown and Levinson Theory***

From the explanation, it can be concluded the challenge toward Brown and Levinson is centered on the weaknesses that they fail to explain the cultural concept that is attached to politeness. It argues that

the concept of the face in eastern culture is to claim individual territory and freedom where the main point of the theory of face is attached to an individual 'wants' or 'desire.' In this case, it is regarded as a valid point because it does not represent the critical point of some culture where society interprets the concept of face differently. Mao (cf Matsumoto, 1988 and Ide 1989) argues that Chinese and Japanese politeness people do not do FTAs merely for the reason of saving face, but instead they intend to consider the bound of cultural enchantment. In addition, Mao gives an explanation based on his research on the invitation. In Brown and Levinson term, if a person does an invitation, it put them in the risky situation where the inviter will endanger his positive face and the invitee's negative face one at the time. However, from the Chinese point of view, this invitation does not threaten the inviter's positive face (when the invitee refuses the invitation) and the invitee's negative face (when the inviter offers the invitation). Instead, this action increases the inviter's

*mianzi*. The rejection of that invitation right away is regarded as appropriate.

However, Mao adds "adds" even if the invitee intends to accept the invitation, it still has to be declined." It indicates that Chinese people should complete the ritual to invite, refuse, insist, and accept in their invitation activity, since accepting the invitation right away is inappropriate. From the example, it can be seen that the norm of social rule plays a vital role in doing politeness.

In her research Suszcynska (1999) show that English, Hungarian and Polish have different behavior and step in apologizing in their language. People tend to use ways such as self-dispraise, non-intentionality, or self deficiency. The statistical data in this research shows that people from English culture take less commitment to take responsibility as the strategy in apologizing. This is contrasting to Hungarian and Poland culture where the distance between one to another is not too far and relies on public availability; people tend to take

responsibility and offer 'pay' for their mistakes. Moreover, she (as it is cited from Wierzbicka's (1991: 92) said that in Anglo-American culture, "direct confrontation is avoided in the interest of social harmony between independent individuals," and it is different from the case in Poland or Hungary where people is not deterred to the confrontational or 'direct' behavior; and people can express their opinions and emotions baldly even if it is painful to another party (Wierzbicka (1985b in Suszcynska, 1999). Her example shows that in apologizing, the FTA of apology does not threaten the speakers' negative face, but it can be a threat to the hearer's positive face. It is contrary to the Brown and Levinson's where in apologizing, the speakers' positive faces are in a threat if the hearer refuses their apologies.

Let us see these arguments in the Power, Distance, and Rating of imposition perspective in Brown and Levinson Context. In a culture where the language has provided sets of linguistic politeness, people are usually used the language without

any further conscious thinking that they use the language for politeness reasons. In other words, they have the language as their behavior or culture. Nevertheless, when they transgress this behavior, they will soon understand and realized that what they have done is inappropriate. It can be seen from the phenomena of honorific use in Japanese above. While people do not intend to or may use the non-honorific language independently based on their volition, still it will potentially hurt the hearer's positive face if the speaker misuses it, for example, to the people who have a higher rank. In this sense, it can be said before people use a language in their interaction and communication, they will first consider the distance between themselves and the hearer. If the speakers' distances are far below the hearer, a possible way to use it is the language's honorifics form. It is said that the situation impinges on their volition.

In invitation behavior in Chinese politeness, it can be seen that people do the invitation purely because they mean to be polite. This

kind of politeness is not done to avoid conflict with other people or save someone's face. Nevertheless, in accepting the invitation, consciously or unconsciously, there is a potential change to threaten each other's face, while it is the positive or negative face. It is realized by many steps that should be through between the inviter or the invitee before the invitee accepts the invitation since it is inappropriate to accept an invitation without any refusal first. In this situation, we might need to consider that ritual availability in culture is one of many aspects of the imposition rating. It seems that the ritual provides chances for the invitee to communicate their reasons to refuse the invitation. In Brown and Levinson's context, rating of imposition means relatively based on culture and situation (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987: 77).

The people's consciousness of cultural understanding becomes very high since the culture has given place or value to the individual and group interest, wherein in a collectivistic culture, the group interest is more valuable than

individual interest. It means that the interference of the individual face becomes very small. For example, people's acknowledgment of insisting on invitation ritual is no longer an impolite action. People do this kind of FTA quickly because their society's cultural imposition is not as high as it should be anymore. This phenomenon can also be seen in the example which is given by Suszcynska (1999) in Hungarian and Polish culture. Direct confrontation is not discouraged and necessarily avoided using reprimand as the strategy of apologizing is regarded as appropriate in these cultures.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the explanation above, to not give strong emphasis on the explanation about the role of culture in the face is the weaknesses of Brown and Levinson's theory. However, in this theory, it is undeniable that the role of group and culture has been mentioned as one of many considerations to look at closely in doing politeness action.

Moreover, while one group of cultures' politeness concept has been

managed in the linguistic features of their language, the face of the people involved within an interaction in that cultural setting is not free from the possibility of impingement all. Whether in individual or group action, a single person considers taking care of their responsibilities. Taking care of responsibilities is a must for every individual in a group. Flawing the responsibility means threat their face in front of their group and the harmony of their relationship to the interlocutors and the group in which they or their interlocutors are involved. In this sense, we can say that group and culture's role is as one aspect in weighting the imposition over the person who will do the politeness action.

Due to that, it can be said that while it is not explained in detail and explicitly but the computing of the weightiness of FTAs formula has covered the role of culture and group situational interaction. It makes this concept can be applied to any cross-cultural boundary universally.

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