

# THE CONCEPT OF FACE IN ALGERIAN EXPRESSIONS

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## Abstract

Face is a socio-cultural construct. It is created by the participation of others during social interaction. It is a complex entity shaped in terms of social values. In other words, face is a complex image of self which is socially constructed and determined by a system of cultural values. The study aims to examine the perceptions of the concept of 'face' in the Algerian culture. In particular, it focuses on how such perceptions are reflected in the Algerian interactions by using some idioms and proverbs. Thus, this paper analyses the interaction between speakers interacting with each other by using some expressions that include the body part of face in order to express their negative and positive emotions. The negative emotions 'face threatening expressions' include shame, anger, fear, and sadness, and the positive emotions 'upgrading expressions' include happiness and love.

**Key words:** face, face threatening acts, face upgrading acts, politeness, social norm.

## 1.1. Introduction

'Face' in communicative events is a universal concept, but it is used in culture specific ways. Oetzel et al. (2001: 237) argue that "Goffman (1955) was one of the first western writers to examine face and his definition of face was influenced by the Chinese concept of face". Goffman (1967) argues that all people within all cultures project face-image, a sense of positive identity and public self-esteem. He also emphasizes the fact that face is a public image and can be lost; maintained or withdrawn. All individuals do their best to present themselves, in public, as proficient, experienced, appealing and interesting. Therefore they do their utmost to negotiate face in order to save their faces and their interlocutor's faces. Since the appearance of Goffman's seminal work, the study of face has become an issue of great interest and many researchers have built on Goffman's original work.

The concept of 'face' has come to play an important role in politeness theory. Brown and Levinson (1987), for example, have chosen it as the central notion for their study of universals in language usage and politeness phenomena. They have paraphrased 'face' as the

public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself (1978), but obviously they prefer 'face' to 'public self image', for throughout their text they almost exclusively use the term 'face', only occasionally mentioning 'public self-image'.

## **1.2. Discussion on the Definition of the Term 'Face'**

'Face' is 'a metaphor we live by', as Lakoff and Johnson would say (1980). It allows us, to grasp some essentials of politeness phenomena. It evokes the danger inherent in social interaction, the possibility of threat and assault on one's social standing or personal integrity - and, above all, it reminds us of the fact that social vulnerability is mutual. 'Face' is a multi-faceted term, and its meaning is inextricably linked with culture and other terms such as honour and its opposite, humiliation. *Saving face* has different levels of importance, depending on the culture or society with which one is dealing. Perhaps the most familiar term to many is 'saving face', which we understand simply to mean not being disrespectful to others in public, or taking preventive actions so that we will not appear to *lose face* in the eyes of others.

Although face as a universal concept exists nearly in every culture, it has lacked a universal definition. Ho (1976: 867) maintains that "although everyone appears to have some notion of what face entails, a precise definition of it proves to be a most difficult task" in order to address this issue, various definitions of the term face will be discussed in the following pages.

Goffman (1967: 5) conceptualizes face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self – delineated in terms of approved social attributes- albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself". Hence, this concept of face requires that all parties involved in a communication transaction be obliged to save each other's face as the "positive social values" they will effectively claim for themselves.

'Face' is considered as a basic want that every member knows every other member desires and which is generally in the interest of every member to partially satisfy. For Brown and Levinson (1987), a face consists of a set of wants satisfied only by the actions of others, and it is thus socially and emotionally invested. It effects the emotions of participants in interaction. Based on this, it will be to the mutual interest of the two participants to maintain

each other's face. There are two facets of face wants: on the one hand, association, belonging, merging; on the other, disassociation, independence, individualism (O'Driscoll 1996:10)

Hence, the theory of face is a combination of two fundamental complementary claims: negative face and positive face. Negative face distances the individual from others. The individual wants to enjoy his right and personal autonomy; he wants some independence of movement and decision making irrespective of his social class, age, gender, status, etc. The positive face, on the other hand, is the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some other members of the society. It includes the desire to be ratified, understood, approved of, liked or admired. Positive face thus combines the individualistic and the societal aspect of a person.

Watts's (2003) definition of face is strongly influenced by Goffman's (1967) definition, in particular that face is gained "on loan" from society during the whole conversation between a speaker and a hearer. He argues that "face, then, is a socially attributed aspect of self that is temporarily on loan for the duration of the interaction in accordance with the line or lines that the individual has adopted. It is not our personal construction of the self, although the different faces we are required to adopt in different interactions do contribute towards that construction" (ibid. 125)

Spencer-Oatey (2005) distinguishes between two face types: 'respectability face' and 'identity face'. She defines 'respectability face' as the 'prestige, honour or good name that a person or social group holds and claims within a community'. Identity face, on the other hand, is defined as a "situation-specific face sensitivity, that is highly vulnerable" (ibid.102) she argued that 'respectability face' can be quantitatively measured. There are certain variables that play a crucial role in determining the relative weight of one's face such as age, sex, education, wealth, and status. Such variables are not invariable and can be differently assessed in different cultures. For example, in the Algerian culture, age is a very important variable. The face of an old man takes precedence over the face of a young man.

Nwoye (1992) distinguishes between what he calls 'individual face' versus 'group face'. He uses 'individual face' to refer to the individual's needs to satisfy his face wants and desires and to project a good self-image for himself in public. 'Group face', on the other hand, refers to the individual's "desire to behave in conformity with culturally expected norms of behaviour that are institutionalised and sanctioned by society" (ibid. 313). Put it another way, in cultures that embrace 'individual face' the individual places his desires and needs over the group's, whereas in cultures that adopt the 'group face' the individual sacrifices his desires for the sake of the group he belongs to. Thus, in collective cultures, the face of the group is more

important than the individual's face. In individualistic cultures, on the other hand, the face of the individual is more important than the face of the group.

The definitions of face have generated a great deal of discussion. Building on the definitions above, it seems important to draw attention to some basic principles related to the definition. First, face may be defined in terms of the projection of one's social self in the public domain, i.e., the aspects of one's self that a person's reveals to others. Second, it could be argued that the majority of the definitions discussed earlier conceptualise face as more than the mere possession of the individual. The person cannot assign a value to his own face. It is the social group that one belongs to which gives an evaluative judgment regarding the person's face.

### **1.2.1. The Concept of Face across Cultures**

Face is also used metaphorically across cultures to stand for notions such as “respect, honour, status, reputation, credibility, competence, family/network connection, loyalty, trust, relational indebtedness and obligation issues” (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi 1998: 190). For example, in Thai culture, face-related idioms reveal that face metaphorically represents four aspects of a person: “one's personality, one's countenance, one's emotions and the concept of honour”. These aspects of the Thai face are similar to the concepts held by other cultures such as Chinese, Japanese and other Asian cultures who associate face with concepts such as dignity, self esteem, prestige, reputation and pride (Ukosakul, 2005:119)

In his discussion of the concept of face among the Igbo, Nwoye (1992: 314) states that group face is of paramount importance in that society. A person's anti-social act brings shame, dishonour, or embarrassment not only to himself, but also, perhaps more importantly, to the group to which he belongs or with which he is connected, with children's unacceptable behaviour reflecting badly on parents.

Koutlaki (2002) states that Iranian face consists of two components, namely, pride and honour. Pride means “personality, character, honour, self-respect, social standing”, and honour can be rendered as “honour, respect, esteem, dignity” (ibid 1742). The latter establishes the positions and statuses of participants with respect to one another and is shown through the adherence to the established norms of behaviour according to the address's position, age, status and interlocutors' relationship.

Ruhi and Isik-Guler (2007: 690) distinguish three aspects related to face in Turkey: “face as self-representation’, face maintained’ and face as relational work”. They argue in connection to the first aspect that face is “linked to attributes of a person or a group that are claimed as the public image by the person/group or presented as the image perceived by others”. Face maintained involves the “evaluation of the person’s (or group’s) attributes, achievements, expectations that the person or the group have of themselves, or expectations that others have of the person/group” (Ruhi and Isik-Guler, 2007: 690). Face as relational work “concerns the quality of interpersonal attention directed to a person/group” (ibid.693).

### **1.3. Setting the Scene: Algerian Society**

The nuclear family is an all-important unit of social organisation in Arab society and Algerian society in particular; thus, people are seen as belonging to a family rather than standing as individuals, although this does not by any means entail any loss of their individuality: they are known both as members of a family and as individuals in their own right. In the family setting, duties and obligations are shared by everyone: to help other family members emotionally, financially and otherwise in times of need and to maintain the family’s (good) reputation is a priority for everyone.

The traditional Algerian extended family structure is patrilineal in terms of lineal descent, in which kin of both sexes were related through the men only. The Algerian family can also be described as patriarchal in that the father or the grandfather had the legal power and the social norms, which supported his authority. Boutafnouchat (1984) asserted that the Algerian family characteristics might be summarized as follows:

- The Algerian family is an extended family which contains several small families under what is called “the large house” (*Al-Dar Al-Kabirah*) in rural areas and “large tent” (*Al- khiama Al- Kabirah*) among the Bedouins tribes. Usually, about 20-60 persons live collectively in one large family. Each extended family may include between 3 to 4 generations
- The Algerian family is patriarchal and extended. The extended family includes three to four generations but sooner or later it divides to several families, which go through the same cycle again. Nevertheless, the extended family type, as Boutafnouchat (1984) asserts, is founded on two bases: (1) Blood relationships (*Asabiyah*), which implies economic, social and ethical integration among the members of the extended family,

clans and tribes. (2) Relationship with land, which implies developing strong relationships with and love of the land of the ancestors.

Nowadays, the great majority of Algerian people still identify themselves with their individual families, as the role and influence of the family/tribe in supporting an individual morally, and in some cases financially, is still the norm. Therefore, it can be said that the traditional family loyalty remains an influential force in the Algerian society.

### **1.3.1. The Concept of Face in the Algerian Culture**

According to the Algerian culture, [wʒah], meaning 'face', is used to describe the front part of the head from the forehead to the lower jaw. However, it is also used metaphorically to stand for expressions such as 'respect' 'shame' 'honour', and 'dignity'. It has been argued that the Brown and Levinson model of face is an exponent of western culture, which focuses too much on individualistic needs (Kasper 1990: 379). Goffman's view of face is considered more compatible with non-western face and this position seems to fit the Arab culture and more particularly the Algerian one. Goffman's notion of face sees a person's face as a public rather than personal property, 'on loan' from society. [wʒah] in the Algerian culture functions as a deterrent, making people abide by the institutionalized code of politeness. At the same time, the meaning of face in this society prevents people from violating social rules and engaging in actions that might be considered as antithetical of the interests of the group.

It can be said also that the Algerian concept of face is embodied in what Watts, Ide and Ehlich (1992:3) refer to as "first order politeness". Here, politeness is considered as a folk notion. It answers the question, how do members of the community perceive and classify actions in terms of politeness. Fraser (1990) refers to "first order politeness" as a social norm view of politeness. These norms belong to the set of core-cultural concepts and folk beliefs, which provide the basic framework to explain the practices of linguistic actions in communicative encounters. Thus, politeness is seen as a social contract among individual members of the group, in that they behave in the way expected of them and in turn expect similar behaviour from others.

Consequently, Brown and Levinson's notion of negative face does not seem to apply to the Algerian society. In the Algerian society a very important socially sanctioned behaviour is every member's concern for group interests rather than individualism. Thus, exchange of

hospitality, help, food, loan of tools and other services are part of everyday life, with neither participant experiencing requests for any of the above as impositions.

The data used in the present study are personal observations collected from native speakers of Oran Arabic interacting with each other in their own local circle of family and friends. Metaphorical expressions are analysed and discussed in relation with the universal concept analysed by Face theory. The Algerian culture distinguishes between two types of face related expressions. Echoing Agykum's (2004: 77) classification, the key concepts can be referred to as "face upgrading/honouring" and "face demeaning/threatening" expressions.

### 1.3.1.1. Face Honouring Expressions

In Algerian culture, there are some expressions that maintain face and describe the positive image of the person. For example, the expressions [weʒhu mnewwer] (**his face is enlightened**), [weʒhu weʒʒ xi:r] (**his face is a good face**) are used to indicate that the person is good, polite, well behaved and considerate. It is often connected with the description of the face as certifying the beauty of the person being described. The above expressions also indicate that the person has good and sincere faith in God. Other related expressions connected with the concept of politeness are [insa:n rzi:n], [Insa:n haʃʃæ:m], [Insa:n tqi:l] which literally mean (**shy person**), (**heavy person**) and (**serious person**) respectively. The person is described as a serious, heavy and shy man or woman only if he or she is polite and well respected in the society.

Additionally, expressions such as [hammert wʒu:hna] and [wʒhek hlu ŋli:na], meaning literally (**he reddens our faces**) and (**your face is sweet on us**) respectively. The first expression means 'he uplifts our faces' and it is used when a person has achieved a good action that reflects well on his family or friends. Whereas, the second expression means that the person brings good luck and good news.

In the Algerian culture, as in many Arab cultures paying respect to people is mentioned frequently. Respect can be carried out by paying a visit; thus, visiting someone is a way of enhancing face because it indicates that the person is highly respected among his people. One way of showing respect to old people is by demonstrating obedience. Disobeying them is taken as a rude and disrespectful behaviour. Young people, from their early age are socialised to pay respect, listen to older people. Moreover young people are taught to seek the advice of older people and consult them because of their experience, before engaging in social

activities. The proverb [qa:der lekbi:r, jqa:drek esxi:r], meaning (respect those who are older than you, and you will be respected by those who are younger than you), summarizes the basic assumptions on which the concept of respect works.

### 1.3.1.2. Face Threatening Expressions

Face threatening/demeaning expressions are used to describe the negative side of face. The expressions [wazh eššar] or [kəmmaret eššar], [weʒh bli:s], [weʒh eššita:n], meaning **(he has an evil face)** is used as an exact opposite for the expression [weʒh elxi:r] **(he has a good face)**. The expressions above are used to describe people who are not friendly and who behave badly, thus, describing a person as having an evil or a devil face is considered as an insult. There are other expressions used to attack face. They can be used in face-to-face interaction to describe a person's face. One expression is [jsaffer weʒhek] **(may your face be yellow)** which the opposite is [jhammar weʒhek] **(may your face be red)**, yellow and red are used metaphorically to make judgments about one's social behaviour. While yellow is associated to disgrace, red is connected with having good health, embarrassment and shame.

Other offensive expressions are [weʒhek Shi:h] (your face is strong) [xasel weʒhek, ma tehšamš] (you wash your face, shame on you) [derreg weʒhek ũlijja] (hide your face from me) [ma tehšamš ũla weʒhek] (you are not ashamed of your face). The two first expressions mean that the person has a rude and cheek behaviour. In short, using these expressions to attack a person's face is immediately connected with certain speech situations. People use such offensive expressions when they feel irritated and cannot control their behaviour.

The expression [malgi:tš wi:n ndarreg weʒhi] (I could not find where to hide my face), describes how much damage one does to his face or to the face of the family.

The following proverbs use the organ of face to indicate the disapproval of bad person's character [ũandeh sbeũ wʒu:h] (he has seven faces), [fel wʒeh mraja w fel dhar mgaS] (in front of you, he is a mirror and behind you he is a pair of scissors) meaning that the person is insincere and double-faced . Another proverb is [elũi:b elli fel weʒeh ma jetxatta ma janddes] (the blemish in the face is impossible to cover and hide) meaning when you try hard to hide your faults and they are very obvious for all people.



## **1.4. Conclusion**

'Face' plays an important role in communication. Unlike other articulatory organs, it is not used as an organ of speech production but rather as a communicative reference point. The concept of face is a universal one; however, the way this concept is used through the choice of particular expressions may differ considerably from culture to culture. In the Algerian culture, proverbs and expressions related to face are prevalent in everyday interaction. Algerians face-related-expressions were classified into two groups: "face upgrading/honouring" and "face threatening/ demeaning". Generally speaking, face upgrading expressions are connected with honourable actions and used to uphold face, while face threatening expressions are associated with disrespectful actions and used to dishonour face. The social aspect of face is very important in societies like Algeria where premium is attached to communal rather than individual tendencies.

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