

10.70711/rcha.v2i9.5599

# A Conversation Analysis of “*Blooming Flowers*” from the Perspective of Face Theory

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the TV drama *Blooming Flowers* through the lens of face theory, a key concept in social interaction that highlights efforts to maintain harmony in communication. By examining the dialogues, the study explores implicit face-saving strategies and interpersonal relationship construction. Using conversational analysis, it transcribes and annotates the dialogues, then applies face theory for deeper analysis. Findings reveal the dual dimensions of face: positive face, maintained through self-praise and compliments, and negative face, threatened by conflicts but mitigated with humor and friendly language. Additionally, the dialogues not only preserve face but also strengthen emotional bonds, reflecting care and support among characters. These insights enhance the understanding of face theory in TV drama dialogues and offer a fresh perspective on face-saving and relationship dynamics in social interaction.

**Keywords:** Face theory; Conversational analysis; Face-saving strategies; “*Blooming Flowers*”

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background of the study

"Face" culture is crucial in various cultures, notably in China. Foreigners interacting with Chinese people can deeply feel its influence. While not exclusive to China, "face" is particularly prominent there, affecting speech, behavior, and social interactions. Chinese expressions like "suffering for face" reflect its importance. Western face theories, like Brown and Levinson's, are diverse and systematic, offering insights into "face" in different contexts. Understanding and respecting face culture in cross-cultural communication is vital.

"Flower, " directed by Wong Kar-wai, premiered on CCTV-8, attracting a large audience. It depicts Shanghai before the 1990s reform and opening up, focusing on ordinary individuals seizing opportunities and facing challenges. The drama shows life aspects like clothing, food, housing, customs, and dialect, revealing Shanghai's cultural charm and struggle. Brown and Levinson's face-saving theory explains character conflicts and psychological characteristics in the dialogues, enhancing understanding of the work and pragmatic theories.

### 1.2 A brief review of the related studies home and abroad

Internationally, conversation analysis (CA) has been extensively applied to explore various aspects of social interaction, including the role of face and politeness (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1960). Researchers have used CA to examine interactions in diverse contexts, such as workplaces, medical consultations, and everyday conversations, focusing on how participants manage face-threatening acts, employ politeness strategies, and negotiate meaning. Brown and Levinson's face theory (1987) has been particularly influential in these studies, offering a framework to investigate politeness phenomena, speech acts, intercultural communication, and power dynamics in conversations. Their concept of face and face-saving strategies has been widely applied in sociolinguistic and pragmatic research globally.

In Chinese language and culture, scholars have explored face theory's application to interpersonal communication, analyzing practices like face-giving, face-saving, and face-threatening acts. Research has examined these dynamics in various settings, including family interactions, workplace communication, and online discourse. Regarding *Blooming Flowers*, research remains limited due to its recent release. Applying CA through the lens of face theory to this TV series is an emerging topic. It provides a fresh opportunity to explore how characters manage face-related concerns, employ politeness strategies, and navigate interpersonal relationships.

In summary, while CA and face theory have been extensively studied internationally and in Chinese contexts, further investigation is needed to analyze *Blooming Flowers* specifically from this perspective.

### 1.3 Research Questions

Under the guidance of Brown and Levinson's face theory, the present study attempts to explore the realization patterns of face theory

with the TV drama *"Blooming Flowers"*. Specifically, the study centers on answering the following two questions:

Question 1: How is face theory manifested in the dialogues and interactions of *"Blooming Flowers"*?

Question 2: What strategies do the characters employ to protect or enhance their face?

## 2. Theoretical Foundation

### 2.1 Face theory

This section provides a brief overview of face theory, its origins, and its key concepts. Face theory was proposed by sociologist Erving Goffman in 1967 to explain the concept of face management and social image maintenance in human social interaction. The theory focuses on how individuals maintain their social image and face through their words and actions. Key concepts of face theory include "face," "facework," "face-threatening acts," and "face-saving strategies." Face theory posits that individuals strive to maintain their face in social interactions, and use various strategies to manage situations that may threaten their face, in order to maintain good social image and relationships.

#### 2.1.1 Definition of Face

"Face" in Chinese culture is vital, representing moral qualities and respect earned through effort. Definitions vary: Hu saw it as moral quality and reputation, Jin distinguished social and moral face, while Gu linked it to positive social value. Western researchers focus on individual aspects, like Goffman's positive social value and Brown and Levinson's public self-image. Locher and Spencer-Oatey viewed it as politeness and relational identity, while Tekulve saw it as a biological state. O'Driscoll considered it social cognition, and Arundale a continuum in interaction. Chinese scholars emphasize social value, Westerners individual attributes.

#### 2.1.2 Brown and Levinson's Face Theory

Based on Goffman, Brown and Levinson's (1978) Face Theory defines "face" as the public self-image individuals want recognized, including positive (desired appreciation) and negative face (freedom from imposition). Face-threatening acts, like commands, disagreements, expressing gratitude, or apologizing, can threaten either. To preserve face, they proposed five strategies: Bald on record (direct), positive politeness (care for positive face), negative politeness (preserve negative face), do the FTA off the record (hidden intention), and don't do the FTA (avoid damaging reputation).

## 3. Method

This paper is a pragmatic analysis of the TV drama *"Blooming Flowers"* under the framework of Brown and Levinson's face theory. The study collected the spoken dialogues from multiple episodes of *"Blooming Flowers"* and transcribed them for analysis. The data were analyzed using qualitative methods, focusing on identifying instances of face-saving or face-threatening acts, and examining the strategies employed by the characters.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The study presents statistical data on the types of face-related acts identified in the dialogues. The analysis and interpretation of the results delve into the strategies employed by the characters to protect or enhance their face, as well as how face theory impacts their interpersonal relationships. Therefore, this part is devoted to the elaboration of results and further analysis of them. It consists of the face-threatening acts and five strategies employed by the characters.

### 4.1 Face-threatening acts

"Face" is an important concept in interpersonal communication, involving individuals' image and dignity in social situations. According to Brown and Levinson's research, "face" can be divided into two types: positive face and negative face. Positive face is our need to be accepted and liked by others and our need to feel that our social group shares common goals. Negative face is our right to independence of action and our need not to be imposed on by others. Brown and Levinson argue that many speech acts are essentially face-threatening, which may damage the face of the hearer or the speaker, and the damaged face can be either positive or negative.

#### 4.1.1 Threatening the positive face of the hearer

Threatening the positive face of the hearer refers to actions or statements that may undermine or challenge the hearer's desire for social approval, respect, and self-worth. It involves situations where someone's need for positive self-image, inclusion, or appreciation is put at risk or diminished through communication. This can occur when someone criticizes, embarrasses, or disrespects the hearer in a way that threatens their positive social identity or sense of belonging.

In the 11th episode, Tao Tao's affair with Xiao A Sao was discovered by Fang Mei. Fang Mei kicked and hit Tao Tao in anger, leaving him with no choice but to hide at a friend's house. Tao Tao's friend, Hong Ling, angrily scolded Tao Tao for being indecisive. “我搞不懂你，

家里面嘛老婆有的, 婚嘛不肯离的, 这里小阿嫂跑掉了, 你在这里哭天哭地, 挖心挖肺, 你要干什么? 真的要人家帮你眉来眼去, 还要不离不弃? 你傻吧, 你看你这副样子, 真是拖泥带水的人!” Hong Ling's words to Tao Tao undoubtedly negate his personal image and threaten his positive face.

#### 4.1.2 Threatening the negative face of the hearer

Threatening the negative face of the hearer refers to actions or statements that may undermine or challenge the hearer's desire for autonomy, freedom of action, and independence. It involves situations where someone's need to be unimpeded, not imposed upon, or not obligated is put at risk or diminished through communication. This can occur when someone tries to control, restrict, or impose their will on the hearer in a way that threatens their sense of personal agency or freedom.

In the 10th episode, Lu Meilin called her old lover Du Honggen to help drive away Li Li from Zhizhen Garden. However, Du Honggen advised Lu Meilin to peacefully coexist with Li Li and avoid further conflicts. Feeling betrayed, Lu Meilin angrily shouted at Du Honggen, “你跟我讲良心? 你要管我你早管我了, 那个时候你死哪里去了? 你给我滚! 给我滚!” Lu Meilin telling Du Honggen to “滚” undoubtedly puts pressure on the hearer, demanding their obedience and interfering with their freedom of action. It threatens the negative face of the hearer.

#### 4.1.3 Threatening the positive face of the speaker

Threatening the positive face of the speaker refers to actions or statements that undermine or challenge the speaker's desire for appreciation, recognition, and esteem from others. It occurs when someone says or does something that diminishes the speaker's self-worth, reputation, or social standing, thus posing a threat to their positive face. This can include criticism, rejection, humiliation, or any behavior that undermines the speaker's sense of competence or value in the eyes of others.

In the plot of the thirteenth episode, Miss Wang's purchase of earrings from Lingzi led to an investigation by the company. Miss Wang needed Lingzi to provide the purchase invoice to prove the true value of the pearl earrings. As a result, A bao went to confront Ling zi, leading to a dispute. Lingzi handed over the purchase invoice to A bao, admitting that she caused the trouble herself. She promised to accompany Miss Wang in the lawsuit, acknowledging that she failed to win the favor of others. She even suggested that A bao could give the Night Tokyo to someone he likes, and she degraded herself as a money-loving person. “我玲子就是一个眼睛里只有钞票的人, 你不是第一天晓得这个事情。” Lingzi realized that she had caused significant trouble for Miss Wang and admitted her mistake. However, due to feeling jealous of the intimacy between Miss Wang and A bao, she impulsively claimed to be a money-minded person. These words negate her own personal image and threaten her positive face.

#### 4.1.4 Threatening the negative face of the speaker

Threatening the negative face of the speaker refers to actions or statements that undermine or challenge the speaker's desire for autonomy, freedom of action, and independence. It occurs when someone says or does something that restricts the speaker's sense of personal freedom or imposes obligations or constraints on them, thus posing a threat to their negative self-image. This can include commands, demands, or intrusions that infringe upon the speaker's need for independence and control over their own choices and actions.

In episode seventeen, Miss Wang and Lu Meilin had a dispute over reserving a private room. The factory director accidentally injured Lu Meilin's husband during the altercation. Miss Wang apologized to Boss Jin, and at that moment, Abao arrived to mediate. Lu Meilin insisted on seeking retribution with a slap for her husband's injury. Miss Wang offered to take the slap on behalf of the factory director, but Abao voluntarily suggested taking the slap instead. “要么这样, 我给你打个耳光, 这件事就算了。” The words spoken by Abao and the act of taking the slap threatened his negative face.

### 4.2 Face-saving strategies

The TV drama "Blooming Flowers" has attracted a large audience with its rich character development and intricate plot. Within the show, the dialogues between characters not only reveal their emotional entanglements but also demonstrate the subtleties of interpersonal relationships in Chinese society. When faced with the threat of losing face during conversations, the characters use a variety of face-saving strategies to minimize or avoid damage to each other's face.

#### 4.2.1 Bald on record

Bald on record is to clearly and directly convey one's intentions to the listener. Without using remedial strategies, it openly implements face-threatening acts.

In the third episode, Wei's assistant led everyone to Red Egret and invited A bao to visit Zhizhen Garden. At this moment, A bao directly stated that Taotao was his friend and whatever Taotao said was what he himself wanted to say. Despite the other party's persistence, insulting Miss Wang, A bao had had enough and left directly after losing his temper. “你嘴巴放干净点!” A bao rebuked the other person, not allow-

ing any disrespect towards Miss Wang. This action shows that A Bao disregarded the other party's face completely and directly warned them. Seeing this, the other party dared not speak disrespectfully, and the situation was under control.

#### 4.2.2 Positive politeness

The positive politeness strategy refers to the approach taken by a speaker to fulfill a person's positive face needs, aiming to uphold the individual's positive self-image in social interactions. It involves offering as much praise as possible while minimizing criticism.

In the fifteenth episode, Miss Wang was demoted to the factory due to the pearl earrings incident. Wei, who had always admired Miss Wang, visited the factory to see her. He directly introduced her as the Oriental Pearl and firmly believed in her innocence. When nobody else believed in Miss Wang, Wei stood firmly by her side, offering her maximum support. “汪小姐，我相信你是清白的。”Wei's praise for Miss Wang follows the politeness principle of positive politeness, aiming to provide as much praise as possible and fulfill Miss Wang's positive face needs.

#### 4.2.3 Negative politeness

The negative politeness strategy primarily aims to address the listener's negative face needs, making them feel that their response is not coerced and allowing them the right to choose.

Lu Meilin's restaurant faced the possibility of being sold off due to her husband's failed stock trading. So, Lu Meilin went to find Li Li specifically. She expressed her strong hatred for stock trading as her husband had died because of it. She hoped that Li Li could lend her a hand, stating that one's life is not always smooth sailing. Even if Li Li refused to help, her restaurant would continue to operate, albeit under different ownership. Lu Meilin said that if her restaurant reopened, Zhenzhen Garden would decline. Lu Meilin told Li Li “你现在嘛在走上坡路，让我把难关过掉，钞票我一定会还给你的，就算你将来要是出了什么事情，我也一定会帮你的。”Lu Meilin adopted a negative politeness strategy, satisfying Li Li's negative face needs by not interfering with their freedom of action and seeking their agreement. She promised to assist Li Li wholeheartedly in the future, begging for their sympathy and help.

#### 4.2.4 Do the FTA off the record

Do the FTA off the record involves not explicitly stating demands, employing face-threatening acts in a discreet manner, and preserving face through indirect verbal behavior.

After Miss Wang left on the 27th, Mei Ping took over Miss Wang's previous clients. In order to win over client A Bao, Mei Ping frequently brought gifts to please A Bao's uncle. Later, Mei Ping also left the 27th, but she continued to bring snacks to uncle. When uncle learned that she had started her own company, he reproached her for not staying at the 27th and felt that she had lost her value. He said to Mei Ping, 我现在不吃甜的了，谢谢你，新年快乐，等一下我也要回去了，有什么事下次再来吧。”A Bao didn't directly ask her to leave but rather hinted indirectly through his speech that Mei Ping should not come anymore.

#### 4.2.5 Don't do the FTA

Don't do the FTA entails refraining from verbalizing demands and instead implying them through actions.

Miss Wang is preparing to partner with General Wei to start a company, so General Wei arranged an 88-table banquet at Zhi Zhen Garden to celebrate the company's opening. General Wei has always liked Miss Wang but was afraid of being rejected, so he took it upon himself to organize the opening ceremony celebration as if it were a wedding ceremony. Li Li felt it was too extravagant for her to intervene, but General Wei put their photos together on a red background and even dressed in a red suit like a groom. The guests below teased, wishing them to have children soon. General Wei didn't say anything, but organizing the banquet like a wedding ceremony was his way of hinting for Miss Wang to respond.

### 5. Conclusion

The TV drama "Blooming Flowers" is filled with a large number of meaningful dialogues that showcase the complex psychological processes of the characters. The conversations between the characters heavily reflect face-threatening acts and face-saving strategies for maintaining face. Brown and Levinson's face theory can effectively explain the conflicts and character psychology in "Blooming Flowers". By using pragmatic theory to analyze this film and television work, we can better understand the character's personality psychology and the communication strategies they adopt when facing face-threatening situations. At the same time, this analytical approach will also help us better understand pragmatic theory and apply these theories in daily life to deal with interpersonal relationships and solve communication problems. However, only analyzing a few examples in this paper to study face theory is limited. A better study still requires further consideration and research from different perspectives.

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