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**Title:** Face and twarz in student's perception

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**Citation style:** Jakubowska Ewa. (2001). Face and twarz in student's perception. W: J. Arabski (red.), "Research on foreign language acquisition" (S. 11-18). Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.



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# ***Face and twarz in students' perception***

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## **1. Introduction: Philosophical and pragmatic aspects of the notion of *face***

In philosophical writings the perception of face changed over the centuries. As early as in the 4th century BC Aristotle wrote that *face* shows what someone is like. Later many philosophers contrasted face with *mask*. In different historical periods philosophers propagated either the regime of face or the regime of mask (e.g. Cyrenaics, Cynics, Machiavelli, La Rochefoucauld, Rousseau, Smith, Hegel, Foucault, Habermas). This dichotomy is still present in the twentieth-century philosophical writings. For Lévinas (1961), who made the notion of face so important in modern philosophy, descriptions of contacts with face are the basis for the most important philosophical analyses, and are concerned with the questions of self-expression in speech, the relation between speech and thought, etc. In philosophy face is the subjective self, the self-creation the need of which creates it. Face is contrasted with mask, which is the reflected self, a social role the man creates (in theatrical sense) and wants to be identified with.

In pragmatics face is one of the main concepts of the theory of politeness, related to the folk expression *to lose face*, meaning “to be embarrassed” (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In recent literature, however, its origins have been traced to Chinese culture (Mao, 1994; Ervin-Tripp, et al., 1995). Mao (ibid.) claims that the word *face* is a literal translation of the two Chinese words *mǎnzi* and *liàn*, which originally appeared in the phrase *to save one's face* which was used in the English community in China, and conveyed the meaning of “one's credit, good name, reputation” (ibid.: 45).

For Goffman, whose *Interaction Ritual* (1967) is “the Bible” of politeness theory researchers, face is “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself”, or “an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (ibid.: 5). To secure their image, people engage in what Goffman calls “face-work”, performing action “to make whatever [they are] doing consistent with face” (ibid.: 12). Goffman differentiates two kinds of face-work: “the avoidance process”, avoiding potentially face-threatening acts, and “the corrective process”, performing various redressive acts (ibid.: 15–23).

While for Goffman face is a public property, Brown and Levinson see it as an image intrinsically belonging to the individual (Mao, 1994). It consists of two related aspects (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 61):

- a) *negative face*: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction, i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition.
- b) *positive face*: the positive consistent self-image or "personality" (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants.

Further on they redefine face in terms of basic wants (ibid.: 62):

- *negative face*: the want of every "competent adult member" that his actions be unimpeded by others.
- *positive face*: the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others.

Face is not only a want, it is something that can be threatened, lost, or saved. It is a social norm and value everyone is afraid of losing.

Certain kinds of actions are intrinsically face-threatening. Such acts can threaten the Hearer's (H) negative face, i.e. indicate that the Speaker (S) wants to impede H's freedom of action (e.g. requests, suggestions). Other kinds of actions are acts threatening H's positive face wants, e.g. acts that indicate that S does not care about H's feelings and wants, or does not approve of some aspects of H's positive face (e.g. expressions of disapproval, mention of taboo topics, use of address terms and other status-marked indications in initial encounters in an offensive or embarrassing way). All these acts are called *face-threatening acts* (FTAs). They can threaten both H's face, as in the case of requests, and S's face, as in the case of promises, expressing thanks, and excuses. Thus, every rational user of a natural language will try to avoid FTAs, or at least will employ certain strategies to minimize the threat (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

## 2. Aims of the study

In recent years my research interest has focused on politeness and patterns of polite behavior. This has allowed me to evaluate the importance of the concept of face in the theory of politeness and to see that it is worth investigating. The notion of face is rarely mentioned in Polish linguistic literature, and there is no thorough study of the notion of face either in Polish or in English. Thus, an attempt to investigate the notion of face could prove valuable. This paper is only a pilot study, touching a minor aspect of the problem, namely the cultural variations of face-metaphors.

The notion of politeness is well-known in every culture, but the practical realization of the phrase "be polite" differs from one culture to another. The understanding of the concept of face also differs in different cultures, although some researchers postulate its universality

(e.g. Brown & Levinson, 1987). This and other claims for universality made by Brown and Levinson are widely criticized by other sociolinguists (e.g. Preston, 1989: 164). Their concept of positive and negative face is said to have "a strong anglocentric bias" (Wierzbicka, 1991: 67; cf. Kasper, 1990; Kalisz, 1993; Reynolds, 1995; Meier, 1995). Both politeness and the notion of face are thought to be perceived and manifested differently in different cultures (cf. Matsumoto, 1988; Ide, 1989; Gu, 1990; Nwoye, 1992).

The aims of the study are:

- to investigate the perception of the notion of face among Polish students of English,
- to show and investigate their understanding of the Polish word *twarz* and the English word *face* and other related expressions.

### 3. Methodology

The procedure which the author used while gathering the data for the research is introspection. This involves the subjects reflecting on the kinds of decisions they make and the kinds of strategies they use while carrying out a task, and reporting them as they occur.

In February 1999 the author carried out a test called FACE Test. The respondents of the test were 42 advanced learners of English as a second language, all of them students of English at the University of Silesia in Katowice. They were asked to use their intuitions both as native speakers and as second language learners while answering the questions concerning the Polish and English expressions connected with the concept of face.

The data concerning the concept of face and face metaphors come also from the vast pragmatic literature in English dealing with the problem.

### 4. The concept of *face* in different cultures

The face is a very important part of the human body. And as such "it is part of a universal analogical repertoire which can be used for metaphorical productions in all cultures" (Strec ker, 1993: 121). After this statement Strec ker posits the following questions: "How is this repertoire actualized? Do all cultures use 'face' as a metaphor, or is 'face' not universal? What are the cultural variations of face metaphors? Which features of the face are stressed when people think and speak of 'face', and what do the varieties of 'face' tell us about the cultures and societies in which they occur?" (ibid.: 121–122). These are very significant questions and they should be part of any cross-cultural study of politeness.

In this paper, however, only some of them can be answered. The universality of face is taken for granted. Only two languages are being considered, namely Polish and English, in which there exists evidence for the wide use of face metaphors.

In the beginning let us consider the dictionary definitions of the words *twarz* and *face*. *Twarz*, in the sense relevant here, can be found mainly in the two phrases: *stracić twarz* ("to lose face"), meaning "to lose respect in other people's eyes", and *zachować twarz* ("to save face") meaning "to stick to one's principles and opinions in a difficult situation which requires assuming a certain attitude towards something" (S z y m c z a k, 1981: 558). *Face* is defined as "a state of being respected by others" (*Longman Dictionary...*, 1987: 361). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) gives the collocations involving losing or saving face. As can be seen, the definitions do not differ much, both involve respect. Both the Polish word *twarz* and the English word *face* can mean "a person" as in Example (1).

(1)

*Spotkał tam wiele znajomych twarzy.*

("He met many familiar faces there".)

*I see many new faces.*

This proves, at least in the case of Polish and English, the S t r e c k e r ' s hypothesis that "the concept of face derives from the metaphorical equation of face with persona" (ibid.: 313). S t r e c k e r suggests also that it might be "possible to generalize and formulate an as yet untested (but testable) hypothesis which says that societies with long inequalities and arguments of power (for example, feudal and monarchic societies) tend to develop concepts of 'face' which focus on the inner self, on a person's feelings of guilt, sin and shame, and conversely, on a person's sense of honor.(...) In egalitarian societies one would, on the other hand, expect a tendency towards concepts of 'face' which do not have an inward but an outward direction and are less concerned with the self than with the other" (ibid.: 138). The results of N w o y e (1992) study of the Igbo of Nigeria fit Strecker's categorization. Nwoye claims also that the difference between the Western society and the non-Western society is that while the former can be said to be individual-oriented, the latter is group-oriented. B r o w n and L e v i n s o n ' s theory of politeness (1987) represents a private face view that implicitly elevates the individual over the group, the view typical for the Western society, although they claim the universality of face (cf. M a o, 1994). The studies of face in Chinese culture by G u (1990) and in Japanese culture by M a t s u m o t o (1988) represent a public face view that emphasizes group rather than the individual, typical for the non-Western society. These two views can be opposed to the relative face orientation proposed by M a o (1994). According to him "face is a *public* image that every individual member wishes to claim for him- or herself, and it suggests that such an image embodies an underlying direction that either emulates an ideal social identity or aspires toward an ideal individual autonomy" (ibid.: 484).

S t r e c k e r describes the English society as stratified, the society in which "'face' motivates negatively as fear of loss of social standing and a constant reminder of the power of the

opinion of others" (ibid.: 139). This can also be said about the Polish society. Both societies, Polish and English belong to the European culture, in which people define themselves as individuals, with certain rights and a certain domain of independence (M a t s u m o t o , 1988). This is exactly what B r o w n and L e v i n s o n (1987) mean by the private face view, which cannot be called universal, but which is true at least in the case of the two societies. The fact that the understanding of the notion of face does not differ in the two cultures, Polish and English, can be explained by the small cultural distance between them.

## 5. Results of the study

As has been mentioned before 42 advanced learners of English as a second language were asked some questions concerning the notion of face, and Polish and English expressions connected with the concept.

Generally, the understanding of the notion of face by the students does not differ from what has been presented before as the private face view. The students define it as the self-image which is constantly threatened by the opinion of other members of the society.

The expressions connected with the notion of face, enumerated by the students, can be divided into two groups: group 1 – expressions meaning "to lose face", and group 2 – expressions meaning "to save face" (see Examples 2 and 3, respectively).

### (2) Polish expressions meaning "to lose face"

- |  |                                      |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| a) <i>stracić twarz</i>                  | ("to lose face")                     |
| b) <i>stracić szacunek/respekt</i>       | ("to lose respect")                  |
| c) <i>stracić dobrą reputację/renomę</i> | ("to lose a good reputation/renown") |
| d) <i>stracić dobre imię</i>             | ("to lose one's good name")          |
| e) <i>stracić godność</i>                | ("to lose dignity")                  |
| f) <i>stracić dobrą opinię</i>           | ("to lose a good opinion")           |
| g) <i>skompromitować się</i>             | ("to disgrace oneself")              |
| h) <i>ośmieszyć się</i>                  | ("to make a fool of oneself")        |
| i) <i>zblaźnić się</i> (inf)             | ("to make a fool of oneself")        |

### (3) Polish expressions meaning "to save face"

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| a) <i>zachować/ocalić twarz</i>                 | ("to save face")  |
| b) <i>wyjść z twarzą z trudnej sytuacji</i>     | ("to extricate oneself from a difficult situation with face")               |
| c) <i>obronić swój honor</i>                    | ("to defend one's own honor")   |
| d) <i>zachować dobre imię</i>                   | ("to save one's good name")   |
| e) <i>wyjść obronną ręką z trudnej sytuacji</i> | ("to extricate oneself from a difficult situation with the defensive hand") |

- f) *wyjąć z opresji z podniesioną głową/  
podniesionym czołem* (“to extricate oneself from a difficult situation  
with one’s head/forehead high”)
- g) *cieszyć się dobrą  
opinią/renomą/szacunkiem* (“to enjoy a good opinion/renown/respect”)

Besides the expressions *stracić twarz* and *zachować twarz* the students mentioned several equivalent expressions used in similar contexts. The values which can be lost or saved are the following: *szacunek/respekt* (“respect”), *dobra reputacja/renoma* (“a good reputation/renown”), *dobre imię* (“a good name”), *godność* (“dignity”), *dobra opinia* (“a good opinion”) and *honor* (“honor”). There are some idiomatic expressions which do not refer directly to face, such as Examples (3e) and (3f), which involve other parts of the body. In (3e) it is *obronna ręka* (“a defensive hand”), which presumably has defended one’s honor or dignity which could be threatened. In (3f) these are *podniesiona głowa* and *podniesione czoło* (“head/forehead kept high”), the former can be said to include face, the latter to be part of it. Both *podniesiona głowa* and *podniesione czoło* are associated in Polish with pride and dignity.

Examples (2g, h, i) do not refer directly to face, either, but they are used in the situations when S threatens his own face by a certain act, verbal or non-verbal which is for some reason unacceptable to other members of the society.

Example (3g) stresses the fact that the values so important to the self-image of every member of the society do not have to be associated with “fear of loss of social standing”, but they can also be enjoyed.

The informants mentioned also some words related to the concept of face (see Example 4).

- (4)
- |                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| <i>oblicze</i>    | (“face”, “someone’s character”)                              |
| <i>policzek</i>   | (“cheek”, “a slap in the face”, “effrontery”, “humiliation”) |
| <i>wizerunek</i>  | (“image”)  |
| <i>image</i> (Fr) | (“image”)  |

*Oblicze* is related to face both in its literal and its metaphorical meaning. *Policzek*, literally being part of face, in its metaphorical meaning is a threat to someone’s face. The word *wizerunek* and its equivalent of the French origin – *image*, like the word *face* in its metaphorical sense, are connected with “the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of”.

As could be expected, the English expressions connected with the concept of face mentioned by the students are not so numerous as the Polish ones. They are limited to the phrases *to lose face* and *to save face*. Some of the informants mentioned also the words related to face: *dignity*, *prestige*, *a good opinion*, *a good reputation*, and *a positive self-image*.

If compared with the dictionary definitions and the words found in linguistic literature, the list of English expressions mentioned by the informants is not so limited.

## 6. Conclusions

Studying the understanding of the notion of face is not easy. As an abstract concept it can be investigated only indirectly, through the observation and analysis of natural conversations. Even face metaphors are not easy to study, either. Even educated speakers do not use them very often. Face metaphors can be found in social science and linguistic writings (cf. Ervin-Tripp, et al., 1995). Other related expressions more colloquial in character are more often used in everyday conversations both in Polish and English.

Face as one of the main concepts of the theory of politeness has been widely discussed in pragmatic literature recently, however, there are still some aspects of the concept left to be discussed and some hypotheses to be verified or re-examined.

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