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Virtanen, Tuija; Lee, Carmen

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**Tuija Virtanen and Carmen Lee**

**Face-work in Online Discourse:  
Practices and Multiple Conceptualizations**

**Abstract**

Digital media are rapidly changing and so are their face-work practices. At the same time, the interaction is increasingly multilingual and/or transcultural in nature, reflecting 'glocal' practices and multiple conceptualizations of face. This article collection offers a much-needed overview of face-work in online discourse, in a series of detailed and original studies of the pragmatics of face and face-work in various modes of online contexts. The collection approaches face-work in the wide sense of identity construction, impression management, relational work, and (im)politeness. The six studies included showcase (re)negotiations of interactional norms through analyses of verbal and multimodal indices of face-work across platforms and languages, raising metapragmatic issues and explicitly scrutinizing face as a fundamental notion in pragmatics. Individual studies focus on the bidirectional relation of online and offline practices, consider social and power relations, as well as social norms and problems. Several articles approach face-work in relation to users' interpretations of (im)politeness and their sense of audiences. Methodological and research ethical issues are given due attention throughout the collection. The studies highlight the importance of understanding the workings of face in online discourse for insight into social media as a locus of phatic communion as well as of verbal aggression.

**Highlights**

- Norms of face-work in online interaction shape and are shaped by offline practices.
- Face-work online interacts with social and power relations, as well as social norms and problems.
- Face-work online is scrutinized explicitly and implicitly at the micro-, macro-, and meta-pragmatic levels.

**Keywords:** face, face-work, relational work, identity construction, pragmatics of online discourse, digital discourse, computer-mediated communication, social media

## 1. Introduction

This article collection approaches face-work in online discourse from the perspectives of local practices and multiple conceptualizations, as manifest in multilingual and/or transcultural online discourse. The goal is to showcase the workings of ‘face’ (Goffman, 1955, 1959), in the broad sense of a relational and identity-constructing notion, in a series of detailed, original, and in some cases first, studies of the pragmatics of face-work in particular modes of online discourse. In researching the pragmatics of online discourse, the notions of ‘face’ and ‘face-work’, notably Goffman’s theorization, are taken up in studies of identity construction and impression management in digital media (e.g. Locher, Bolander and Höhn, eds., 2015; West and Trester, 2013). While acknowledging the multilingual and transcultural nature of online discourse (Danet and Herring 2007; Lee, 2017), existing studies of pragmatic phenomena have subjected them to analyses informed by established pragmatic concepts and models, predominantly Western, and often from a contrastive perspective, Asian. Further, face-work practices in online discourse are still under-researched, despite considerations in new media studies of a sense of ‘context collapse’ (Marwick and boyd, 2010; Wesch, 2009) that users may experience to varying degrees. Understanding the workings of face-work is also crucial for researchers to come to grips with social media as a locus of phatic communion (Malinowski, 1923), ideally resulting in users developing a sense of ‘ambient affiliation’ (Zappavigna, 2011), ‘conviviality’ (Varis and Blommaert, 2015) and ‘relatability’ (Vásquez and Creel, 2017), as well as a locus of explicit or implicit verbal aggression, overwhelmingly present across platforms (see e.g. Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014; Haugh, 2010).

## 2. The Notions of Face and Face-work

The notion of ‘face’ has a long history. The English concept of ‘face’, widely adopted in pragmatics since the 1970s, is thought to be a figurative usage borrowed from Chinese concepts of face. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, face was often portrayed in Chinese literary works as the core of Chinese national character and spirit. It is well documented in academic literature that in Chinese, face is multifaceted and cannot be captured by just one single word, but a complex array of related expressions (Hinze, 2005). Notably, at least in Mandarin Chinese, there are two main concepts of face, *mianzi* and *lian*: *mianzi* 面子 is concerned with one’s self-image and reputation preserved within their social circle and it is something to be achieved through success and personal growth. *Mianzi* is given by others, as revealed in the expression 多謝賞面, literally ‘thanks for awarding (somebody) face’, often heard from a business owner to customers to mean ‘thanks for choosing us (over other companies)’. *Lian* 臉, on the other hand, has much to do with one’s moral character in relation to their personal actions. External orientation and evaluation are crucial to the operation of face in Chinese, resulting in the evaluator thinking more or less highly of the evaluated. Face-work in Chinese is sometimes seen as an ‘outward show’ (St. André, 2013) to mask one’s negative attributes to save face and preserve one’s (or a nation’s) reputation and dignity. Expressions derived from *lian* and *mianzi* (at least 45 of them, according to Hinze 2005) such as *bu yao lian* 不要臉 (literally ‘not wanting one’s face’, meaning ‘shameless’), *diu lian* 丟臉 (‘lose face’), and *hen you mianzi* 很有面子 (literally, ‘have lots of face’, meaning ‘honorable’) all indicate that both *lian* and *mianzi* are to be gained, given, saved and lost. For more detailed discussions of the Chinese ‘face’, see Mao (1994), Hinze (2005), Kadar and Pan (2012), and St. André (2013).

In the Western tradition, the notions of ‘face’ and ‘face-work’ are commonly traced back to Erving Goffman’s theorizing of the sociology of interaction. Goffman (1955) defined face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself (sic) by the line others assume he (sic) has taken during a particular contact” (p. 213), and face-work as “the actions taken by a person to make whatever he (sic) is doing consistent with face” (p. 216). Pointing out that there is no faceless communication, Scollon and Scollon (1995: 35) drew attention to the intersubjective nature of face as “the negotiated public image mutually granted to each other by participants in a communicative event.” Face is thus a public image rather than one’s ‘true’ self, and it is negotiated and mutually granted. Face-work has traditionally been conceptualized as practices and acts of saving and protecting interlocutors’ faces from face-threats. But face-work also consists of face-enhancing and face-flattering acts, such as compliments and various affective actions.

The Goffmanian notion of face has been constitutive of theories of (im)politeness, crystallized in the influential work by Brown and Levinson (1987). Along with the early etic approaches, face has been increasingly treated as an emic notion, one that is constructed and appropriated by interlocutors. Face-work is situated, and it can be conventional(izing) or institutionalized as it is performed across face-to-face and mediated contexts. While face-work is still commonly tied to matters of (im)politeness, there is a growing number of studies that go beyond (im)politeness, broadening the notion to cover identity construction, relational work and interaction management. Face is thus interpreted as the essence of interaction in a wide sense of the term, turning it into a fundamental notion in pragmatics (for discussions of face, interaction and (im)politeness, see e.g. Haugh and Bargiela-Chiappini, 2010; Holmes, 1988; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2005; Spencer-Oatey, 2007; Terkourafi, 2015).

### **3. Face-work in Online Discourse**

In this article collection, we adopt the umbrella term ‘online discourse’ for the partly overlapping notions of digital discourse (Barton and Lee, 2013), computer-mediated communication (CMC; Herring, Stein and Virtanen, 2013) and social media platforms (Hoffmann and Bublitz, 2017). This communication is interactive, explicitly or implicitly, serving multiple functions including interpersonal, social, professional, and educational ones, as demonstrated by contributors in this collection. Online discourse may be situated in or related to other online or offline environments, in parallel or sequentially, through intertextual or interdiscursive processes.

The application of the notion of ‘face’ in online interaction started as early as the 1990s, when researchers began to notice the need to understand how new affordances of online media impact face-work and politeness norms (established in face-to-face contexts) in online communication. One of the earliest studies is Thomas L. Simmons’ (1994) unpublished MA dissertation (also discussed in West and Trester, 2013), in which he employs Brown and Levinson’s politeness framework to examine various face-threatening acts (FTAs) in an online bulletin board. Simmons explains FTAs in light of the affordances of CMC such as the absence of prosody and of kinesics. Some of the earliest published research that explicitly engages with face-work and (im)politeness in online discourse include the extensive work by Miriam Locher and colleagues (Locher, 2010; Locher and Bolander, 2014; Locher, Bolander and Höhn, 2015). The special issue titled *Politeness and Impoliteness in Computer-Mediated Communication* in the *Journal of Politeness Research* is the first comprehensive collection of studies that place (im)politeness at the centre of attention in CMC contexts. One of the reasons to foreground pragmatic

(im)politeness in CMC, as Locher (2010) spells out in her introduction to the special issue, is to “establish in what ways forms of computer-mediated communication differ from face-to-face interaction with respect to the restrictions that the medium imposes on relational work/facework and the consequences of these restrictions on linguistic choices” (Locher, 2010: 3-4). The collection, drawing data mostly from asynchronous forms of CMC such as email and forums, is also the first to foreground how norms of appropriateness are negotiated in online contexts, pathing the way for subsequent research on the topic. In another special issue, Locher, Bolander, and Höhn (2015) build on their earlier work and further consolidate the relationship between face, politeness and identity on Facebook and discussion boards from a *relational* perspective. Focusing specifically on *interpersonal* pragmatics, the studies in the collection contribute to better understanding of interpersonal identity as a result of relational work and acts of positioning in online contexts. The studies also call for more attention to multilingual interaction in internet pragmatics research.

With the advent of social media, scholars have turned their attention to how face-work unfolds on a range of social media platforms. Laura West and Anna Marie Trester (2013) are the first to look at how face and politeness shape intertextual Facebook practices such as friending, liking, and tagging. Their ethnographic exploration found that connecting the concept of face with intertextuality is fruitful in understanding social practices such as wishing someone happy birthday on Facebook. In this investigation, they note that most posts are driven by the poster’s need to be acknowledged by their potential audience. Another notable line of social media-based research deals with the face-threatening acts of online conflicts and aggression, such as conflicts on YouTube (Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014) and face attacks and impoliteness on Twitter (Vladimirou and House, 2018). This growing body of work explicitly or implicitly addresses the topic of face-work in light of *identity* construction and performance, a theme to which this article collection also contributes. Recent studies in the field have probed into emerging forms of mediated discourse practices such as hashtags and emoji-based interaction that were not present in face-to-face communication. Matley (2018) investigates how the inclusion of the hashtags #brag and #humblebrag serves to mitigate and/or aggravate the FTAs of self-praise in Instagram posts. He concludes that these hashtags are important tools in constructing a positive self-image. As graphicons such as emoji have become part and parcel of online discourse, scholars have also turned their attention to the role emoji play in performing face-work online. Dainas and Herring (2021) report on their results from the Understanding Emoji Survey, which examines how social media users interpret the pragmatic functions of emoji. The survey findings show that emoji are not only semantically but also pragmatically ambiguous. While respondents overwhelmingly prefer the function of *tone modification*, i.e. emoji that modify the text to clarify how the message is to be interpreted, their interpretations of emoji functions are largely dependent on the immediate discourse context. The study is one of the first systematic and relatively large-scale surveys of emoji functions, and validates the value of pragmatics in emoji research. In their study of emoji in a game-based learning environment where students post feedback on one another’s writing, Beißwenger and Pappert (2019) found that the student participants systematically use emoji as a redressive action to either mitigate a potential FTA or as a booster to enhance one’s face.

Digital media are rapidly changing and so are their face-work practices. This article collection sees the necessity to continue to contribute to the existing research effort described above. Concepts of face and face-work are thus revisited in this collection by drawing on a plethora of research contexts, taking into account the dynamics of new media where interactional norms online increasingly shape and are shaped by offline practices. The articles in this collection also consider a wide range of social and power relations (e.g. student-teacher, customers-service

providers), as well as social norms and problems (gender stereotypes and racism). In the present article collection, negotiation of norms appropriate in light of (im)politeness and a sense of audience is a central area of concern in several articles.

This article collection approaches face as a relational and identity-constructing notion, from the perspectives of social media users' 'glocal' face-work practices and the multiple conceptualizations that are manifest in the wide array of data investigated in the individual contributions. The focus is on verbal and multimodal indices of face-work in online discourse. The studies included in this article collection are concerned with micro-pragmatic and macro-pragmatic issues, and address questions such as the following. How are implicit or explicit conceptualizations of face-work manifest in online discourse? How do users strike a balance between their local contexts and the degree of context collapse that they may be experiencing? How do they benefit from multilingual resources in their digital face-work practices? What kinds of playful actions, and projections of affect and emotions do users engage in? The studies also raise metapragmatic issues, or re-visit and question traditional pragmatic theories of face when applied to digital contexts. Methodological issues are especially challenging in the rapidly changing field of online discourse which consists of transient language practices and emergent or reconfigured pragmatic phenomena (see e.g. Lee, 2017; Scott, 2022; Vásquez, 2022). The studies included in this collection employ a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods as well as discourse-analytic approaches, and each article discusses ethical aspects of the research design.

#### 4. Contributions in this Article Collection

This article collection is of strong relevance to multiple strands of existing research especially within pragmatics, sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. To contribute to the current discussion of digital face-work, along with other notions employed in the study of online discourse (such as identity construction, impression management, relational work, politeness/impoliteness and many more), this article collection gathers together scholarship of the pragmatics of online media by exploring it through the lens of the fundamental concept of face. The contributions use Goffman's classic conceptualization as a starting point, applying it to verbal and non-verbal texts in a wide range of digital media contexts (Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, TripAdvisor, and Instagram). In response to calls for cross-cultural and cross-linguistic analyses of face-work in online discourse, the contributions also cover multiple languages (Cantonese, Dutch, English, Italian, Hindi).

Theoretically, both explicit and implicit (re-)conceptualizations of the notion of face-work can be identified throughout the article collection. For example, **Tuija Virtanen's** (2022) contribution, "Virtual performatives as face-work practices on Twitter: Relying on self-reference and humour", explicitly scrutinizes face-work as a theoretical concept. The study examines the performances of face-work through micro-texts on Twitter. Specifically, virtual performatives, a type of self-referential third-person predications, serve to perform face-work that is normally attributed to first-person referents only. Several contributions investigate the (re-)negotiation of norms and identities in multilingual contexts. **Irene Cenni's** and **Patrick Goethals'** (2021) article, "Business responses to positive reviews online: Face-work on TripAdvisor", discovers a wide range of face-work practices in positive responses on TripAdvisor. From a multilingual perspective, they note differences in the strategies employed across English, Dutch and Italian. Also working with multilingual data, **Dennis Chau's** and **Carmen Lee's** (2021) article, "*See you soon! ADD OIL AR!*: Code-switching for face-work in

edu-social Facebook groups”, explores how university teachers and students use Cantonese-English code-switching to negotiate identities and norms of appropriateness to achieve informality and solidarity in academic Facebook interaction. Their insider exploration of course-based Facebook groups shows that norms of appropriateness vary from member to member due to their sense of self, as well as a number of contextual and temporal factors. Code-switching is also a salient face-work practice in **Shrutika Kapoor’s** (2022) study, “*Don't act like a Sati-Savitri!: Hinglish and other impoliteness strategies in Indian YouTube comments*”. Kapoor offers an intercultural dimension to online impoliteness, in that code-switching from Indian English to Hindi is used as an impoliteness strategy in YouTube comments. The preference for off-record strategies in the study also reflects norms in Indian society to maintain one’s own and save others’ faces while being impolite in conflicts and controversies. Two other contributions offer new insights and empirical evidence into face-work strategies in oppositional and antagonistic online interaction. In her article, “*I appreciate u not being a total prick...: Oppositional stancetaking, impoliteness and relational work in adversarial Twitter interactions*”, **Camilla Vásquez** (2021) looks at how two Twitter interactions about racism that begin with face-attacks can end up being aggressive or turned into more ‘civil’ discourse through manipulation of first and second person pronouns. Also on discourses of racism, **Pilar Garcés-Conejos Blitvich** (2022) explores the interplay between face-threat and an under-researched identity called *Karen*, in her article “*Karen: Stigmatized social identity and face-threat in the on/offline nexus*”. Using a mixed methods design, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich discusses the non-verbal resources that project Karen identity, a phenomenon that first emerged offline and recontextualized to an online Instagram group about Karens.

While addressing the topic of face-work, contributors also connect pragmatics with other concepts and theories in linguistics such as stancetaking (Vásquez) and code-switching (Chau & Lee, Kapoor), and with broader social issues such as self-disclosure (Chau & Lee, Virtanen), gender (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, Kapoor) and online/offline aggression (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, Vásquez). The concluding commentary by **Jannis Androutopoulos** identifies crosscutting themes across the collection of studies and opens new vistas for future work in the field.

Taken together, the six studies not only offer linguistic analyses of face in their immediate research contexts, but also locate their findings in broader social practices and other online /offline contexts. Future research is likely to incorporate more multimodal data into such investigations and fully engage in polymedia environments (Androutopoulos, 2022). Finally, it is worth noting that the studies by and large still draw on the Goffmanian conceptualization of ‘face’ in English. Future studies of glocal practices would do well in addressing intercultural conceptualizations of face more explicitly. Of particular interest might be the complexity of Chinese concepts of face, grounded in a bundle of interrelated factors such as modesty, external evaluation, and respectfulness. To demonstrate this, we close this editorial essay with the Cantonese expression **多謝賞面** (*do ze soeng min*), literally ‘Thanks for awarding/giving us face’. The use of this specific expression signals our awareness of you the reader who takes the time to read this work that is probably not worthy of your time and attention, thus connecting face-work with the speech act of thanking, Chinese modesty, and negative politeness. This complex conceptualization of face-work deserves to be further addressed in future work by drawing on Chinese practices and data from other Asian languages.

## 5. List of Contributions

Virtanen, Tuija, 2022. Virtual performatives as face-work practices on Twitter: relying on self-reference and humour. *Journal of Pragmatics* 189, 134-146.

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Chau, Dennis, Lee, Carmen, 2021. *See you soon! ADD OIL AR!*: code-switching for face-work in edu-social Facebook groups. *Journal of Pragmatics* 184, 18-28.

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## **Bionotes**

**Tuija Virtanen** is Professor of English Linguistics at Åbo Akademi University, Finland. Her publications deal with discourse strategies and types, genre dynamics, the interface between grammar and text, corpus studies of textual phenomena, and the pragmatics of computer-mediated communication. She (co-)edited and contributed to *Pragmatics of Computer-Mediated Communication* (de Gruyter, 2013) and *Adaptability in New Media* (Special Issue, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 2017). She serves as a member of the IPrA (International Pragmatics Association) Consultation Board, as well as of the editorial board of *Language@Internet*, and is an affiliate of the Center for Computer-Mediated Communication Research, Indiana University at Bloomington.

**Carmen Lee** is Associate Professor in the Department of English at Chinese University of Hong Kong. She is Associate Editor of the journal *Discourse, Context & Media* and co-editor of the Routledge Language and Digital Media book series. Her research interests include social media discourse, internet multilingualism, and digital literacies. Currently, she is conducting research projects on aggressive discourses such as hate speech and doxxing online. Her major publications include *Language Online* (2013, Routledge, with D. Barton) and *Multilingualism Online* (2017, Routledge).