

Politeness strategies in conversation closings

Liz Coppock

March 12, 2005

1 Face

to save one's face: also *to save face*; *to lose face* [tr. Chinese *tiu lien*]: to be humiliated, lose one's credit, good name, or reputation; similarly, loss of face. Hence face = reputation, good name. (OED online)

Sociologist Erving Goffman appropriates the folk notion of *face* and re-characterizes it as follows: “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (*line* meaning something like *stance* or *attitude* here), “an image of self, delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (Goffman, 1967). Properties ascribed to a person that evaluate their persona diagnose their face. When someone is generally regarded as “nice”, for example, this person has this degree of positive face. Being generally regarded as “polite” also constitutes an aspect of positive face.

Following Brown and Levinson (1978), we assume that being regarded as polite is achieved in part by maintaining, and, in case of threat, saving desired or conventionally valued aspects of others' face. Brown and Levinson (1978) further define the following two notions, corresponding to two types of politeness:

negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e., to freedom of action and freedom from imposition

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.

If we take *face* to mean *persona*, *personality*, or *reputation*, as in the common sense given in the O.E.D. definition, then Brown and Levinson's “negative face” really has very little to do with face; the term is quite misleading. A better term might be, for example, *practical politeness*, but we will keep to *negative politeness* for the sake of conventionality. The term *positive face* does seem appropriate, as a way to delimit those aspects of one's persona that are desirable to others. Nonetheless, it is useful to distinguish two types of politeness: that which saves or maintains an interlocutor's self-image (what Brown and Levinson call *positive politeness*), and that which adheres to or “respects” an interlocutor's rights and privileges (what Brown and Levinson call *negative politeness*, because it saves ‘negative face’).

As Schegloff and Sacks (1973) point out, conversations do not just end, rather they must be closed, through an elaborate ritual. Schegloff and Sacks propose that the reason for this has to do with the turn-taking mechanics of conversation. While this may account for the fact that conversation endings tend to involve at least four lines of discourse, the fact that they actually tend to be longer, and the particular content of the utterances used in closings cannot be explained on these grounds alone. One must take into account the fact that conversation endings involve inherent face threats, as Cameron (2001) points out. By moving to end a conversation, one risks a chain of interpretations leading to a negative conclusion about the other. Moving to end a conversation may be interpreted to mean that one does not wish for the conversation to continue. This in turn risks the implication that the company of the other is not being enjoyed, which then could imply that the interlocutor is boring, for example, or annoying. Concomitantly, moving to end a conversation constitutes a risk to one's own (positive) face, because one might thereby become considered rude. Conversation ending strategies are designed to combat the positive face threat, and to save face.

Ending a conversation can also be rude in ways that do not damage the interlocutor's reputation or persona; it potentially constitutes an imposition, by preventing the interlocutor from continuing the conversation, thus constituting a negative face threat. If the other participant wants to end the conversation, then ending the conversation constitutes negative politeness, by giving them the freedom to concentrate on other things. (Depending on whether one wants the conversation to end or not, continuing or not constitutes an imposition on oneself, of course.) Negative politeness is operative in determining the form and content of conversation ending strategies, as well.

Ending a conversation also constitutes a threat to the relationship between interlocutors. The following quotation from Goffman (1967) articulates this point nicely (*italics mine*):

When a person begins a mediated or immediate encounter, he already stands in some kind of social relationship to the others concerned, and expect to stand in a given relationship to them after the particular encounter ends. This, of course, is one of the ways in which social contacts are geared into the wider society. Much of the activity occurring during an encounter can be understood as an effort on everyone's part to get through the occasion and all the unanticipated and unintentional events that can cast participants in an undesirable light, without disrupting the relationships of the participants. And if relationships are in the process of change, the object will be to bring the encounter to a satisfactory close without altering the expected course of development. *This perspective nicely accounts, for example, for the little ceremonies of greeting and farewell which occur when people begin a conversational encounter or depart from one.* Greetings provide a way of showing that a relationship is still what it was at the termination of the previous coparticipation... *Farewells sum up the effect of the encounter upon the relationship and show what the participants may expect of one another when they next meet.* The enthusiasm of greetings compensates for the weakening of the relationship caused by the absence just terminated, while the enthusiasm of farewells compensates the relationship for the harm that is about to be done to it by separation. Greetings, of course, serve to clarify and fix the roles that the participants will take during the occasion of talk and to commit participants to these roles, while farewells provide a way of unambiguously terminating the encounter. *Greetings and farewells may also be used to state, and apologize for, extenuating circumstances* – in the case of greetings for circumstances that have kept the participants from in-

teracting until now, and *in the case of farewells for circumstances that prevent the participants from continuing their display of solidarity.*

That the participants are prevented from continuing their display of solidarity can be seen as a threat to the participants' solidarity.

2 Closing strategies

2.1 Positive face-saving strategies

Recall from the introduction that by moving to end a conversation, one risks a chain of interpretations leading to a negative conclusion about the other. Moving to end a conversation may be interpreted to mean that one does not wish for the conversation to continue. This in turn risks the implication that the company of the other is not being enjoyed, which then could imply that the interlocutor is boring, for example, or annoying.

The *Positive Comment* (e.g., "It was nice talking to you") is the most frequently used conversation ending strategy, and is almost a direct negation of the possible implication that the other is boring or annoying, that goes along with ending a conversation. It states or implies that the conversation was enjoyable, which removes the source of any such implication. It is thus a device for saving the positive face of the other.¹

The *Excuse* (e.g., "I better get back to work") gets to the root of the face-threatening chain of implications. It removes the implication that one wishes to end the conversation by providing an alternative motivation, an alternative explanation for one's potentially face-threatening behavior. A closely related strategy is what we call the *Imperative to End*, which in some way implies that the conversation must end, as in, e.g., "It looks like our time is up."

Many politeness strategies are combined with "dispreference markers", in the terms of Pomerantz (1984), which are used for "dispreferred responses", such as disagreements with statements (in non-argumentative discourse). The most common dispreference marker in English is "well", combined with silence. Schegloff and Sacks (1973) argue from a conversation-analytic perspective that the use of "well" functions as a "pass" in the turn-taking machinery of conversation endings, which it may, but its use as a dispreference marker also contributes to its function in conversation endings. By signalling a dispreference for ending the conversation, one removes the interpretation of one's actions that one wants to end the conversation; "well" thus functions almost exactly as the *Excuse* and *Imperative to End* strategies do with respect to face.

¹Button (1987) has a category of "Appreciations", which either "locate the call as the object of appreciation" or "refer back to an 'appreciable' – such as a favor – that is locatable somewhere in the prior talk" (p. 122). An example of the former subtype is "Thanks for calling." An example of the latter would be a statement of thanks for some particular favor offered by the other participant. Although *Positive Comment* as we intend it does "locate the call as the object of appreciation", we would not consider "Thanks for calling" a *Positive Comment*, but rather a type we call *Thanks for Conversation* (see directly below). This is one difference between "Appreciations" and *Positive Comments*. The other difference is that we distinguish thanking for the conversation as a whole from statements of thanks for some particular favor.

2.2 Combined positive and negative politeness strategies

Negative politeness also combines with positive face-saving politeness in the most interesting conversation ending strategy, the *Blame*, a form of the Excuse in which the need to leave is ascribed to the other: “I know you’re busy, so I’ll let you get back to what you were doing”. As Schegloff and Sacks (1973) put it, “they employ as their warrant for initiating the closing ... the interests of the other party” (p. 310).² The Blame presupposes that the other wants to end the conversation, construing ending as a polite action on one’s own part, sacrificing one’s own desires. It therefore saves one’s own positive face, making one seem “polite”. At the same time, by placing the impetus to leave on the other, one engenders a face-threat toward oneself, which is now the others’ responsibility to assuage, so that he or she can also seem polite.

Also presupposing that the other wants to end the conversation is a statement that the *Goal* of the conversation has been reached, e.g. “I think we’ve talked long enough”. It implies that the conversations *need* not continue. This construes ending as a desirable outcome for the other, and is therefore a negative politeness strategy. It is also a positive politeness strategy in that it positively evaluates the conversation, which in turn implies that the interlocutor is a worthwhile conversation partner.

Related is the *Summary*, which summarizes the preceding discussion, usually in such a way as to indicate that the conversation has been successful and is therefore complete. If the other participant wants to end, he is now therefore free to leave. Button (1991) also lists “Formulating summaries” (p. 254) under the category of activities that are “closing-implicative” (p. 252), and includes aphoristic formulations of conventional wisdom such as “Yeah well, things uh always work out for the best” under the heading of “Formulating summaries”. Schegloff and Sacks (1973) also mention ‘topic-bounding’ techniques (which they suggest precede pre-closings such as “We-ell”), including the “offering of a proverbial or aphoristic formulation of conventional wisdom which can be heard as the ‘moral’ or ‘lesson’ of the topic being thereby possibly closed.” Schegloff and Sacks explain the function of these strategies on the basis that “such formulations are ‘agreeable with’. When such a formulation is offered by one party and agreed to by another, a topic may be seen (by them) to have been brought to a close.” It may be added that these are negative politeness strategies in that they appear to release the participant from further conversational duty, and that they are positive politeness strategies in that they positively evaluate the conversation as complete and resolved.

Another typical component of a conversation closing is an expression of *Thanks for the conversation*, e.g. “Thanks for calling.” This presupposes that the conversation is an imposition on the other and serves to minimize that imposition in a deferent manner, and is therefore a negative politeness strategy. It also functions as a positive politeness strategy, however, in that it implies that the conversation was worthwhile and perhaps enjoyable, which means that the conversation partner was as well.³

²According to Schegloff and Sacks (1973), some Blames are appropriate for callers, while some are appropriate for “calleds”. For example, “Well, I’ll letchu go. I don’t wanna tie up your phone” is a caller’s technique, while “This is costing you a lot of money” is a “called’s” technique (p. 310).

³Schegloff and Sacks (1973) mentioned thanks for the conversation in their short list of possible things that may be contained in the closing section, in the category of “components that seem to give a ‘signature’ of sorts to the type of conversation, using the closing section as a place where recognition of the type of conversation can be displayed (e.g. ‘Thank you.’).” I am not sure how to evaluate this idea.

2.3 Solidarity strategies

Schegloff and Sacks (1973) point out that “closings may include ‘making arrangements’[and] reinvocation of certain sorts of materials talked of earlier in the conversation, in particular, reinvocations of earlier-made arrangements (e.g., ‘See you Wednesday’)” (p. 317). We gloss this type as the *Plan*.⁴ Button (1987) offers the following two rationales for setting up arrangements at the ends of conversations:

First, arrangements orient to conversation-in-a-series (Button, 1985) and arrangements may be used to provide an orderly relationship between ‘this’ encounter and a ‘future’ encounter – as opposed to ‘next’ encounters being by chance, for example. Second, by providing for a ‘future’ encounter, they may propose that a current encounter could be appropriately concluded and may, thus, also propose that further topics may be ‘reserved’ for ‘the next time’, or are, at least, unnecessary now (p. 105).

(This observation is reiterated in Button (1991), where the category of “Projecting future activities” is mentioned under the set of things that are “closing-implicative”.) While these somewhat practical considerations may constitute additional motivations for the *Plan*, this type also addresses the fact that the “continued display of solidarity” is ending, by ensuring that it will continue in the future. The *Plan* also constitutes an indirect strategy for saving the positive face of the other, in that it implies that the other’s company is desired.

The *General Wish* (“Have a nice day”) is aimed at repairing the solidarity threat posed by ending a conversation. By showing that one wishes good things for the other, one shows solidarity. It does not imply anything positive about the other individual, unlike the Positive Comment and even the *Plan*, but it does relate to Brown and Levinson’s second definition of positive face, as “the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others” (p. 62). It also constitutes a negative politeness strategy, insofar as it is oriented to the practical aims of the other.

When one’s linguistic behavior is too conventionalized at the end of a conversation, one risks being characterized as “insincere”, itself a face threat and also a threat to the solidarity between the participants, involving the potential implication that the participants are strangers. A general strategy for assuaging this particular threat involves various types of “personalization”, which show that the speaker was listening, and to illustrate closeness between the speakers. Button (1991), for example, mentions a distinction between “arrangement tokens” and “arrangement components”. The former are short, conventionalized, and somewhat bleached versions of the latter, e.g., “see ya”. We do not make this distinction, although it might be interesting. A “token” vs. “component” distinction would be relevant in other domains, e.g. “Good day” vs. “Good luck pursuing your nursing degree.”

Another of these techniques involve simply mentioning the name of the other speaker. The end of the conversation seems to be the only time in which participants in the Switchboard corpus use one another’s names, for example, “Thanks Sherry”, and it seems to occur with a fair amount of regularity (in 10/134 of the endings in Switchboard). The use of the first name only, as opposed to a title combined with the last name, e.g. “Mrs. Rogers”, expresses solidarity (Foley, 1997, pp. 316–318).

⁴Unlike Button (1987, 1991) and Schegloff & Sacks, we do not distinguish between new arrangements and arrangements that were discussed earlier in the conversation, in principle; we have no examples of the latter in the Switchboard corpus in any case.

3 Sequential organization of closings

Conversation ending strategies are consistently organized according to function in the Switchboard corpus. Nearly every conversation in Switchboard (113/134) involves a Positive Comment, and many of the ones that do not involve some type of positive-face saving strategy, such as an expression of thanks for the conversation (as in 9 of the cases) or a plan or an excuse. We can therefore use the Positive Comment as a “pivot”, and study how often the various strategies occur before or after the Positive Comment when they do occur. The four strategies that tend to occur before the Positive Comment are positive politeness strategies:

Goal “I think we’ve done our 5 minutes” (occurs before PC 19 times; after PC twice)

Excuse “My daughter is begging me to get off the phone” (before 8 times; after twice)

Imperative to End “I think our time is up” (7;1)

Summary “This is all very interesting.” (11;2)

The strategies that tend to occur after the Positive Comment are solidarity strategies:

Plan “Talk to you later” (occurs after PC 11 times; before 3 times)

General Wish “Have a nice day” (occurs after PC 60 times; before 6 times)

The expression of Thanks for the Conversation (“Thanks for calling”), which is both a positive and a negative politeness strategy, usually occurs after the Positive Comment (in 24/35 of the cases), but the trend is not as pronounced. Thanks occurs roughly equally many times before (11) and after (8) the General Wish, so if we assume a kind of transitivity of the sequencing relation between the strategies, Thanks for the Conversation occurs in roughly the same “slot” as the General Wish, which comes after the Positive Comment.

Why do solidarity and negative face strategies follow positive face strategies in English conversation endings between strangers? One reason is perhaps that this organization is iconic to the temporal organization of events; whereas the positive face strategies involved in conversation endings relate to the past, the solidarity and negative face strategies used in conversation endings relate to the future. This would not explain why the Excuse occurs so early, however, despite describing what must happen in the future. This may not be a damning counterexample, but it is reason to consider alternative explanations. Another potential explanation would be that people prioritize positive face over solidarity and negative face, and therefore strive to maintain it first. Because people are not always known to execute tasks in order of priority (!), it would remain to be explained why they would do so in this particular situation. However, this would make the interesting prediction that in socio- rather than ego-centric societies, solidarity strategies would precede face-saving strategies when they co-occur.

Yet another potential explanation might lie in the idea that positive face-saving strategies incur a slight solidarity threat in addition to the inherent threat posed by the move to end the conversation, which then needs to be repaired. Indeed, compliments can be considered negative face threats because they imply that one wants something that the other has. Perhaps they similarly threaten solidarity, so the solidarity-maintaining strategies are used to “clean up” the effects of the initial face-saving strategy, if you will.

4 Conclusion

There are inherent threats to face and solidarity at the end of a conversation, which are dealt with through ritualized strategies of redressment. The content and sequential organization of closings in English conversation endings between strangers was shown to have to do not only with the turn-taking machinery, as discussed by Schegloff and Sacks (1973), but also with these issues concerning the relationship between the participants and their societal roles.

One could view the relationships that a person has as part of their face, if one takes “face” to refer to one’s role in society; in that case, one could view a solidarity threat as a face threat. Indeed, according to Foley (1997), “Positive politeness strategies include statements of *friendship, solidarity, compliments*” (p. 271, italics mine). Matsumoto (1988) points to politeness phenomena in Japanese showing that “what is most important to a Japanese person is not her right to act freely, but her position in a group in relationship to all others, her acceptance by these others and the duties it entails” (Foley, 1997). Matsumoto uses this fact to argue against Brown and Levinson’s conception of face, but as Foley (1997) points out, “Face as positive self-esteem (positive face) is indeed operative in Japanese culture, but again must be understood in sociocentric, rather than the individualistic terms in which Brown and Levinson frame it” (p. 274). The importance of maintaining solidarity at the end of conversation as evidence that solidarity is an important part of one’s role in American society as well, so this criticism of a purely individualistic conception of face is valid even for our prototypically individualistic society.

References

- Brown, P. and Levinson, S. C. (1978). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*, volume 4 of *Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Button, G. (1985). End of award report: The social organisation of topic closure in naturally occurring conversation. g00230092. London: Economic and Social Research Council.
- Button, G. (1987). Moving out of closings. In Button, G. and Lee, J. R. E., editors, *Talk and Social Organization*, pages 101–151. Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Button, G. (1991). Conversation-in-a-series. In *Talk and Social Structure*, pages 251–277. University of California Press.
- Cameron, D. (2001). *Working With Spoken Discourse*. Sage, London.
- Foley, W. A. (1997). *Anthropological Linguistics: An Introduction*. Blackwell.
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: essays on face to face behavior*. Anchor Books, New York.
- Matsumoto, Y. (1988). Reexamination of the universality of face: politeness phenomena in Japanese. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 11:721–36.
- Pomerantz, A. (1984). Agreeing and disagreeing with assessments: Some features of preferred/dispreferred turn shapes. In Atkinson, J. and Heritage, J., editors, *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis*, pages 57–101. Cambridge University Press.

Schegloff, E. A. and Sacks, H. (1973). Opening up closings. *Semiotica*, VIII(4):290–327.