

Exploring the applicability of face theory in a study of Namibian English pragmatics

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Universalist frameworks for describing and interpreting politeness phenomena, famously the one proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), have long been met with criticism. The central issue is whether their politeness concept is derived from the specific social structures and cultural values of industrialized Western countries. Specifically, the notion of positive and negative face has been criticized, sometimes seen as unfit for analyzing politeness phenomena in societies that are organized differently, e.g. in Asian or African countries (see e.g. De Kadt 1998, Kasanga 2011).

This is why, in the first stage of a larger project on the pragmatics of Namibian English (PraProNE), we have proactively addressed this issue. It is a central principle of our research to pay careful attention to cultural differences that might distort our view on the pragmalinguistic phenomena we are investigating in speakers of Namibian English. In a series of 15 explorative interviews conducted in November 2022 at the University of Namibia, we have investigated notions of politeness, successful and unsuccessful communication, intercultural differences and similar topics with lecturers and students. Drawing on these insights as well as field notes and discussions with our local colleagues, we want to defend the notion of face as a useful theoretical tool for analyzing interactions between speakers of Namibian English. Whereas communicative interaction is definitely complicated by the parallel existence and interaction between various cultural and ethnic groups with their specific pragmatic norms and expectations, the underlying mechanisms can still be sensibly described in terms of face management. Based on our findings, we will furthermore critically discuss the usefulness of adding a third type of face to the framework (e.g. the notion of *group face*, see Kasanga 2011).

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