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Epilogue: Facing identity

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The day we began reading the articles included in this special issue, a gunman clad in full bulletproof clothing and wielding multiple weapons entered a Colorado movie theater and opened fire on an unsuspecting audience. As the incident unfolded in the media over the next several weeks, its details grew graver and more perverse in every telling. This gunman was special. Mass killings in the United States, which now occur with unprecedented frequency, tend to involve a gunman who takes his own life when confronted by law enforcement. But this man came dressed in a defensive package of body armor that included riot helmet, vest, gas mask, throat protector, groin protector, and black tactical gloves. So deeply villainous was his embodied performance that audience members assumed he was some sort of opening-night gimmick sponsored by the producers of the superhero film they had come to see: the Batman blockbuster *The Dark Knight Rises*.

Witnesses to the event reported watching the gunman walk slowly and calmly up the aisle, saying nothing as he threw baseball-sized canisters of tear gas into the audience and then fired the weapons that led to 59 injuries and 12 deaths. “It was so in sync we thought it was part of the movie,” recalled a stunned survivor. Indeed, when the police found the gunman minutes later outside a rear exit door standing next to his white Hyundai sedan, he identified himself only as “the Joker”. The name, of course, is that of Batman’s infamous archenemy, the red-lipped intellectual psychopath renowned for his sadistic sense of humor. Even though it is now known that this gunman’s legal identity is James Holmes, a possibly mentally disturbed former neuroscience graduate student at the University of Colorado, the most prominent image that continues to be displayed in the media at the time of writing is one that supports his delusion: a wide-eyed man with disheveled hair dyed a cartoon shade of red.

We were extremely hesitant to begin this epilogue with reference to such a horrifying violation not only of civility but of the most fundamental human

right. Certainly, this event leads us to questions much more pressing and profound than can be included in a short discussion of this issue's theme on face and identity. Yet even as we turned to these engaging articles to escape the barrage of troubling media images, we kept coming back to the figure of a gunman who grossly violated the interactive norms on which the concept of face is built. After all, Erving Goffman, who pioneered the theory of facework and who so elegantly spelled out the interactional strategies deployed to negotiate discursive insecurities, was himself keenly interested in the behaviors of the clinically insane. For Goffman, as Manning (2004: 333) puts it in a review of his life and work, "the study of everyday interaction and the study of mental illness [are] two sides of the same coin". The actions of James Holmes appear out of bounds for any theory of politeness, whether we subscribe to the individualistic rational choice model of Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) or the socio-psychological model of the early Goffman (1955; see Bargiela-Chiappini 2003). Yet we remain troubled by this question: Why did this gunman, who so blatantly preempted the ritualized give and take that undergirds human sociality, nevertheless feel compelled to frame his performance in a dramaturgical role? Far from rejecting the interactional order outright, as might be expected for a criminally insane individual, Holmes acted with remarkable social consistency, adopting the persona of a comic-book villain whose Goffmanian "line", across every interaction, is to upset the ritual equilibrium that assumes self-regulating participants. If *opting out of civility* is made more sensible by the assumption of an identity position, how might identity contribute to *opting in*?

The papers in the current issue investigate how speakers manage the relational anticipation of discursive disapproval – that is, how they do facework – through recourse to identity positions that emerge in local contexts. In her introductory review of research on face and identity, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (this issue) convincingly demonstrates that there is a pressing need for this undertaking. Scholars in the field of linguistic politeness have until quite recently ignored the concept of identity, apparently viewing it as a fixed and individualistic attribute that has little, if anything, to do with the real-time and relational materialization of face. Yet the understanding of identity that was brought to linguistics through the discursive turn in social theory suggests that this distinction can no longer be maintained, as a new line of research on politeness has asserted (e.g., Spencer-Oatey 2007; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2009; Haugh 2010). Our own work on identity in interaction (Bucholtz and Hall 2004a, b, 2005, 2008), informed by the feminist concept of performativity (Butler 1990), has sought to illustrate how identity does not precede interaction but emerges within it, as speakers jointly construct temporary identity positions to meet the socially contextualized demands of ongoing talk. These positions may often

link up to more durable identity categories that move across conversations, such as when the foreign-born linguist of Joseph's contribution to this issue is vested with the interactional position of "expert researcher" when interviewing a woman from Shetland about the Scots language. Yet even this professionally buttressed position is tempered when the scale of talk shifts from national to local, where the Shetland-born interviewee emerges as her own sort of expert, that of "native speaker" (and more to the point, native speaker of a local Shetland dialect that is, at least in her initial account, decisively not Scots). The intricate facework deployed by these two speakers to assert their viewpoints without treading on the expertise of the other is testimony to the postmodern claim that identity is performative, producing the social world as much as it reflects it. Certainly, the connection between temporary and enduring positionality is rarely as seamless or direct as that suggested by a gunman's midnight performance of a popular comic-book criminal.

To understand the relationship between these different levels of identity, we have made much use of the concept of stance in our own work, an idea that is productively employed throughout many of the articles that appear in this special issue. As Ochs (1992) suggests in her now-classic article "Indexing Gender", broad identity categories like that of gender are seldom linked to linguistic form in any direct or exclusive capacity; rather, they are more often constituted from the affective and evaluative stances that speakers take up in conversation. It strikes us as significant that Ochs, in this early theorization of how identity materializes in language, exemplifies her claims by turning to the field of pragmatics, and more specifically to research on im/politeness. Because pragmatic meanings readily become bound to larger ideological distinctions such as "female" and "male" through sociohistorical processes of discursive sedimentation, utterances may also "pragmatically presuppose genders of speakers, addressees, overhearers, and referents" (Ochs 1992: 339). For instance, the use of a linguistic form that directly indicates sensitivity to the face needs of others by showing support for the hearer's self-image, or positive politeness in Brown and Levinson's (1978) terms, may also indirectly index femininity, if produced in a context informed by this sedimentation. However, Ochs's argument that indexical relations are forged in specific sociocultural contexts also stands as an early critique of studies that attempt to universalize Brown and Levinson's model. To this end, she draws from her own fieldwork among the Malagasy in Madagascar where it is men, not women, who are ideologically associated with politeness, due to their nuanced control of the esteemed poetic and metaphorical forms associated with public oratory.

Importantly, the making of these associative links is productive as well as reflexive, a point we have each attempted to illustrate through longitudinal

ethnographic research on the relationship between stance-taking and the emergence of local identity categories in distinct field sites (Hall 2009; Bucholtz et al. 2011). As researchers working at the borderlands of sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, we have found ethnography to be a particularly illuminating methodology for thinking through the relationship between the punctual and the durative, as it compels us to examine each conversational excerpt as an event situated within a social historicity of talk. The varied methodologies employed in this special issue are likewise effectively put to the task of recognizing this relationship. As Joseph (this issue) remarks in his conclusion, “When we look for explanations of punctual actions and events, we always have recourse to durative characteristics of those who perform them; and when we look for evidence to support those durative characteristics, all that we can cite are the punctual actions and events that we interpret as embodying and indexing them”.

The authors in this issue locate identity at levels that range from broadly defined social categories to narrowly construed interactional stances, but each stands behind the idea that face concerns are navigated through the subject positions that are made relevant in conversation. Miller, for instance, examines how the interactional management of an interview between herself and a non-native speaker of English moves from “doing delicacy” to “doing collusion” after she positions herself as distinct from Americans who support English-only legislation. Anthropologists have long recognized that the identities that we as researchers forge or are perceived to possess may have important effects on the data we collect, an observation that in some profound sense lies at the heart of calls to diversify the canon through “native anthropology” (the study of sociocultural groups by insiders; see Abu-Lughod 1993; Narayan 1993). Miller details how the perception of these positions can alter the very structure of discourse. That is, the strategies that a speaker employs to navigate the potential of a face-threatening act – which in this case is a series of questions posed to a Vietnamese immigrant about a local English-only movement – are importantly dependent on the speaker’s interpretation of her interlocutor’s position on the topic under discussion. Once the interviewer abandons her position of neutrality and takes a stance as a “different kind of American”, the face-threatening strategies that dominated the Vietnamese woman’s speech in an earlier segment of the interview, among them pauses, hesitations, repairs, laughter, and repetitions, give way to more direct forms of speech suggestive of face collusion. The evaluative stances taken up in conversation thus shape the ways in which speakers navigate the potential of face-threatening acts (or for that matter, whether or not they even see these acts as face-threatening in the first place). As Miller emphasizes throughout this fine-grained analysis, face, like

the closely related concept of identity itself, cannot be analyzed independently of the relational contexts in which it arises (see also Locher and Watts 2005; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2009; Arundale 2010).

This observation should come as no surprise to those whose reference point for the concept of face is Goffman (1967), but as Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, Bou-Franch and Lorenzo-Dus (this issue) point out, Goffman's foundational understanding of face as relational has been obscured by Brown and Levinson's (1978) revision of the concept as "a cognitive and individualist construct [...] possessed by a rational, rather than emotional, model person". Their analysis of the "impoliteness" associated with television personality Simon Cowell of the popular UK and US reality show *Idol* brings us back to Goffman's original formulation of face by reminding us of its dependency on the idea of "line". In Goffman's well cited definition, "The term *face* may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (1955: 213). The terminology that Goffman uses to describe interactive phenomena shifts broadly across publications, as commentators intimately familiar with his oeuvre have pointed out (e.g., Treviño 2003). But in every case he is interested in how speakers present themselves through patterns of evaluative behavior that they perceive their interlocutors to associate with them, whether he calls these patterns "line", "role", or even, as seen in *Stigma* (1963), "virtual social identity". The analysis of social life Goffman provides is thus intensely intersubjective: *I act like this to keep you from thinking I am something other than what you think I am*.

What, then, do we do with a mean-guy television personality like Cowell who appears to have no concern for attending to the face needs and expectations of his interlocutors? To answer this question, the authors illustrate how Cowell's performance, although received by audiences as impolite, is entirely consistent with the line assumed for him as expert judge in this genre of reality television, where ordinary citizens put their own face in jeopardy as they compete for the chance to earn star status. By adopting a constellation of local identity positions sanctioned by the genre – specifically, "the authoritative judge", "the cruel but honest judge", and "the witty executioner" – Cowell is able to perform a kind of mediated verbal aggression that would surely cause trouble in other interactive domains. Impoliteness is thus importantly linked to identity, and both are jointly constructed within, as well as constrained by, culturally recognized genres of talk.

This prompts us to return to a question brought up at the outset of Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, Bou-Franch, and Lorenzo-Dus's article and one that has gained some traction in the field. If impoliteness is genre-sanctioned, can we still consider it to be impolite? Certainly, avid watchers of the American or UK

versions of *Idol* now anticipate Simon Cowell's dismissive behavior, so much so that his bald evaluations of contestants' performances as "pathetic", "absolutely terrible", or even "[sounding] like Lassie" is completely normative in the context of the show. The authors suggest that Cowell's meanness is still considered impolite by the show's viewers, who are apparently titillated by the disconnect between the discursive strategies associated with the show and those they employ in their own interactions. This disconnect is, after all, the "attention-grabbing" mechanism of much of reality television, as the authors suggest. At the same time, it seems to us that there is a bigger question lurking here regarding the relationship between politeness, identity and new media. Is the distinction between politeness and impoliteness even relevant when we are talking about mediated forms of talk whose distribution far exceeds the original context? These forms of media are not only altering the discursive contours of politeness as we know it, they are also distributing these contours to audiences who may be entirely unfamiliar with the genre conventions on which they depend.

Georgakopoulou (this issue) indirectly offers a response to this question in her analysis of how speakers manage im/politeness norms in new media sites through the "small stories" they tell in interaction. As she explains in her introduction, she is interested in examining politeness from an emic (lay insider), not etic (analytic outsider), perspective. Her work therefore differs from the other articles in this special issue by approaching politeness not through a first order of interaction, but through a second order of metapragmatic reflection on interaction. Her data come from conversations among girls in years nine and ten at a London comprehensive school, who regularly narrate "breaking news stories" about their experiences on social networking sites as part and parcel of being youth in a highly mediated world. More specifically, the girls construct themselves as savvy new media users by telling stories about how they have managed instances of impropriety, most of which involve male peers who failed to follow the interactional norms they see as appropriate to these sites. When Nadia, over the course of at least four tellings, angrily relates the story of a social media transgression in which Robert "stole" what she saw to be an unattractive photograph of herself and texted it to David (who texted it to Jo, who distributed it to unnamed others, who posted it to Facebook and Hi5), she projects herself as a particular type of person: a sensitive person, a competent user of new media, a popular girl, a consumer. Thus, by giving value to certain types of mediated behaviors over others, these experiential narratives also produce specific sorts of tellers. While behavioral norms are strongly associated with particular genres, among them social networking genres like SMS and Facebook, the interpretation of those norms as polite or impolite is ultimately emic,

as speakers, hearers and users strive to make sense of the rapidly shifting expectations of rapport precipitated by new media.

This brings us to the final point we would like to make in this brief commentary, which has to do with what we perceive to be the highly affective nature of so many of the face-navigating interactions discussed in this special issue. Nadia's narrative abruptly brings this issue to the fore, as she navigates the embarrassment of having her photograph go viral and be appropriated by strangers as a visual backdrop for sexually promiscuous (or in her characterization, "sket") internet personas. Georgakopoulou's analysis is focused on the identity-affirming aspects of Nadia's experiential stories, but the intensity and persistence with which she delivers them suggests that she is also deeply humiliated by the thought of how other social media users might view her. When Goffman proposed the term *facework* to reference the relationally produced interactional strategies that create rapport, he situated it within the intimately embodied domain of face-to-face conversation. The arrival of new media forms that involve broad and anonymous distribution, however, requires that we adjust our understanding of the concept to include wider scales of exchange.

The interactions that take place in these articles at the face-to-face level are similarly invested with affective risk: the father who shamelessly pleads with Cowell to give his daughter one last chance after being told, on national television, that he is "partly to blame for [his] daughter's delusion" (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, Bou-Franch and Lorenzo-Dus); the Shetland woman who struggles to justify to a linguistic expert why she cannot translate even the most basic phrases in her national language Scots (Joseph); the Vietnamese speaker who brashly asserts that she is better at learning English than other minorities to counter a local ideology that denigrates non-native speakers (Miller). This is the discursive stuff of face, and it is much more than rational. Scheff (2003: 54) depicts it this way: "Goffman's Everyperson was constantly aware of her own standing in the eyes of others, implying almost continuous states of self-conscious emotions: embarrassment, shame, humiliation, and in rare instances, pride, or anticipation of these states. Their sensitivity to the eyes of others makes Goffman's actors seem three-dimensional, since they embody not only thought and behavior, but also feeling".

On September 20, 2012, exactly two months after opening fire in a Colorado movie theater, James Holmes appeared in court with his attorneys to begin the process of pursuing a mentally ill defense. He had appeared in court many times since the shooting, but this time he no longer sported the cartoon-red hair that the media had initially taken as evidence for his delusion. It seems that even his lawyers felt that there was something too rational about Holmes's choice of costume, something that did not sit easily with a plea of criminal

insanity. As the father of one of the victims put it in a frequently quoted media statement: “He’s just putting on a show. I don’t think he’s crazy. He’s just evil”. Chatter on the internet over the interim weeks had also challenged the possibility of an insanity defense, albeit from a different direction, as thousands of self-appointed journalists, many of them fans of the Batman cartoon series, outlined the inconsistencies in his performance: *he never revealed his red hair to his audience; he didn’t say he was the Joker until after the shooting; the real Joker’s hair is green, not red*. If the gunman was motivated by true delusion, wouldn’t his line be more consistent with the character he believed himself to be?

Even though the courts and the public may argue over the nature of Holmes’s rationality and behavior, one point remains incontrovertible: the gunman lacked the three-dimensional emotionality that is so fundamental to Goffman’s writings on social life. As we revisit, revise, and extend Goffman’s relational model of face, we should also remember the emotional bedrock on which it is built. For Goffman, face-saving strategies are the discursive proof of deeper sociopsychological processes; they are evidence of the other-directed sensitivity that is at the heart of human sociality. We have titled this epilogue “Facing identity” as a bidirectional call for a deeper consideration of the relationship between face and identity: to scholars of politeness to consider the place of identity in facework; and to scholars of identity to consider the place of face in identity work. Although we did not explicitly build politeness into our model of identity and interaction, we are now freshly reminded, after familiarizing ourselves with the excellent research featured in this special issue, that facework, at once rational and emotional, is fundamental to the workings of identity, as human positioning is always sensitive to the reflection of one’s image in the eyes of another.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the contributors in this special issue, and especially to the editor, Pilar G. Blitvich, for giving us the opportunity to read such a provocative set of papers. We are also indebted to the many people who have helped us formulate our ideas for this review, most significantly Donna Goldstein.

Bionotes

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