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# Changing perspectives

## Politeness in cooperative multi-party interpreted talk

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The paper explores politeness dynamics through a qualitative analysis of three interpreted encounters in the fields of health care, primary education, and the social services. The overall framework involves a three-fold shift in perspective: contextually, cooperative conversations replace adversarial ones; theoretically, face-flattering is considered as a fundamental aspect of face-work alongside the more traditional face-threatening and face-saving ones; interactionally, different viewpoints are accounted for concerning the impact of politeness moves on the faces of interacting (and even absent) parties. The analysis shows how the interpreters' face-work correlates with their understanding of the institutional goals being pursued during the interactions, their identification of power relations among participants, and their personal and professional status. Such a complex interplay of factors reveals all the richness of newly discovered interpreting landscapes.

[...] what the person protects and defends and invests his feelings in is an idea about himself, and ideas are vulnerable not to facts and things but to communications. Communications belong to a less punitive scheme than do facts, for communications can be bypassed, withdrawn from, disbelieved, conveniently misunderstood, and tactfully conveyed. (Goffman 1967: 43)

### 1. Introduction: Changing context and focus

As a model of strategic message construction, politeness has proved a useful theoretical tool for scholars to explore the patterns of social relationships in the context of real-life conversations. Differently from monolingual talk, which is the original

field of application of politeness studies, interpreted communication functions on the premise that primary speakers' "faces" are "represented" by a third participant. Since, however, it is by now widely documented that interpreters act as fully fledged social agents, not only is their interactional behaviour bound to have significant repercussions on the dynamics of face-work, but an additional image of self is at stake during the communicative event.

Whereas to date the most significant studies of politeness in interpreted talk have focused on communicative contexts of an intrinsically adversarial nature, such as court and police interpreting (cf. Berk-Seligson 1988/2002, 1990; Hale 1997a, 1997b; and Mason and Stewart 2001), interactions in the settings of health care, education, and the social services have not been specific objects of this kind of investigation.<sup>1</sup> Drawing both on Brown and Levinson's (1978/1987) original model and Kerbrat-Orecchioni's (1992, 2005) revised version, this paper offers some initial insights into politeness conduct in the three above-mentioned fields.

The recorded encounters analysed in the following paragraphs are situationally, sociologically and interactionally very different from one another. They, however, have two features in common, which increase their attractiveness for the purposes of politeness research; the three of them are multi-party conversations breaking away from the stereotyped notion of a three-people framework; and, they are all instances of cooperative<sup>2</sup> talk, in the sense that institutional representatives and service users are frequently engaged in "supportive interchanges", whereby they provide signs of involvement in and connectedness to one another (Goffman 1971:62–69). Both traits, and the latter in particular, raise interesting questions as to what kinds of face threats may arise in such interactions, and whose faces they threaten.

Besides contextual dissimilarities, another major difference between the present study and the above-mentioned ones lies in the aim of the analysis. Unlike Hale's (1997a), this paper's concern is not with cross-cultural mismatches in the use of verbal politeness markers. Unlike Berk-Seligson's investigations, the focus is not on changes of illocutionary force in the interpreter's renditions, and their effect on primary speakers' mutual perceptions; nor is it, as in Mason and

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1. For an initial exploration of politeness strategies in interpreted medical consultations see Merlini and Falbo (2011).

2. The term "cooperative" is used here in its common sense acception as the opposite of "uncooperative", and not in the technical meaning of Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975) – i.e. the presumption that all instances of human communication, including apparently uncooperative verbal behaviour, are interpreted by interlocutors as cooperative at a deeper level. For a critical revision of the notion of cooperation, see among others Linell (1998) and Davies (2000). A brief discussion of the concept as applied to dialogue interpreting can be found in Merlini (2007).

Stewart, on finding a correlation between these changes and different interpreting styles. Though based on just three communicative events (making any attempt at generalizing impossible) the proposed analysis has a much less circumscribed scope. It intends to observe the interpreters' face-work with a view to identifying shared behavioural patterns (if any), as well as distinctive variations which may be accounted for by differing relational configurations, in terms of horizontal (*distance*) and vertical (*power*) factors.

## 2. Face-threatening vs. face-flattering: Changing theoretical angle

Assuming familiarity with Brown and Levinson's classical model, only the most basic notions will be recalled here as an introduction to Kerbrat-Orecchioni's (1992, 2005) innovative contribution, whose direct relevance to the present study will shortly become apparent.

Every adult member of society has a public self-image ("face") which they claim for themselves, and which can be "lost" in interaction. Given the mutual vulnerability of face, it is in the interlocutors' best interest to maintain each other's face. However, as threats to face are practically unavoidable if certain conversational aims are to be achieved, participants will tend to minimize such threats by adopting one of three strategies; they can perform the face-threatening act (FTA) indirectly ("off-record"), for instance through hints, understatements and irony; or they can perform it openly – and therefore less ambiguously and more effectively – but with redressive action, by resorting to either negative or positive politeness. Broadly speaking, negative politeness implies showing deference to your interlocutor, whilst positive politeness implies showing involvement, familiarity and commonality of purposes with them. The choice of one strategy over another depends on the speaker's estimate of risk to face; this assessment is based on the advantages and disadvantages of each strategy, as well as on such contextually and culturally defined variables as social distance, relative power and ranking of impositions. Going from most to least risk, one finds in succession off-record, negative politeness and positive politeness strategies.

Central to Brown and Levinson's theory is the conceptualization of politeness as conflict-avoidance. In introducing the 1987 reissue of their book, the two authors reaffirm this basic social function in unequivocal terms: "politeness, like formal diplomatic protocol (for which it must surely be the model) presupposes [a] potential for aggression as it seeks to disarm it, and makes possible communication between potentially aggressive parties" (1978/1987: 1). Considering the emphasis that the model places on the inherent face-threatening nature of most speech acts, in his comprehensive critique of politeness theories Eelen goes as

far as arguing that “their notion of politeness is not only about the avoidance of *potential* conflict, but about the defusing of conflict that is *intrinsic* to the very act of communicating” (2001: 21; emphasis in the original). This same criticism is addressed to Brown and Levinson’s work by Kerbrat-Orecchioni, when she observes that their “conception is exclusively – and excessively – *negative*, resting entirely on the FTA notion (as if social life consisted solely of potential threats, which may at best be avoided or defused)” (1992: 176; my translation).<sup>3</sup> While acknowledging the cogency, coherence and productiveness of the two authors’ theoretical system, the French linguist rejects the subordinate role they assign to positive politeness as a mere FTA redressive strategy, which is paradoxically ranked lower than negative politeness on the face risk scale (see above). Moving from a decidedly less pessimistic view of social relations, Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1992: 242) defines politeness as a set of procedures which the speaker implements to enhance the hearer’s self-image, or at least not to devalue it too much. She thus attributes an autonomous status to positive politeness, by emphasising its productive rather than redressive function, and posits, alongside FTAs, the opposed category of “face-flattering acts” (FFAs) (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2005).<sup>4</sup>

Among the many innovative elements of her elaborate system – including the differentiation of negative/positive face from negative/positive politeness; and the distinction between hearer-oriented and speaker-oriented politeness principles – the FFA notion represents a useful conceptual tool to examine institutional interactions whose trajectory is more open to local negotiation than, say, court hearings or police interviews. In encounters, such as the ones analysed here, between doctors and patients, teachers and parents, and social workers and immigrants, not only is face threatening potential rather than structural, but the seriousness of professionally-related FTAs is reduced, as service providers normally perform them in the interest of the service users. Even more significantly, the non-adversarial, cooperative nature of the transactions make the production of FFAs highly likely.

In interpreted talk, the presence of a second, albeit “anomalous”, hearer/speaker, with her/his own face wants, multiplies the values and effects of both FTAs and FFAs. Given that the literature on dialogue interpreting provides ample evidence of the interpreters’ autonomous agency, one can reasonably expect it to be meaningful also in terms of politeness dynamics. Leaving aside any judgement on the acceptability of such autonomy, it is indeed interesting to observe how,

3. See also Kasper (1990).

4. As noted by Kerbrat-Orecchioni herself (2011:96), other authors speak about “face-supportive act” (Holmes 1990), “face-enhancing act” (Taavitsainen and Jucker 2008) and “face-giving act” (Ting-Toomey 2005).

especially in multi-party encounters, interpreters deal with utterances that (may) affect the face of any one participant (including themselves).

### 3. Data analysis

While general details about the three recorded encounters are schematically presented in Table 1, more specific situational, sociological and interactional information will be provided for each one of them in their respective paragraphs prior to analysing the most salient excerpts. To increase readability, the orality traits of the original transcripts have been removed, except for overlapping talk, which is marked out in square brackets.<sup>5</sup> Idiomatic translations into English appear in italics. In the second encounter, lacking as yet an agreed transcription system for the Berber dialect spoken by the Moroccan participant, the corresponding turns appear in the English translation only. As for the third encounter, considering the brevity and relative simplicity of the exchanges, and, above all, the copious

Table 1. Summary information about the encounters

	Place	Date	Duration	Languages	Participants
Encounter 1 (healthcare)	Healthcare centre for mother and child, Paris	May 2004	30 min.	Italian French	physician (D)* child's grandfather (GF) child's grandmother (GM) interpreter (I)
Encounter 2 (education)	Primary school, small town in central Italy	April 2008	23 min.	Italian Berber dialect	intercultural coordinator (IC) teacher of Italian (TI) teacher of history/geography (THG) teacher of maths (TM) child's mother (M) interpreter (I)
Encounter 3 (social services)	Foreigners' Advice Bureau, city in northern Italy	April 2004	30 min.	Italian French	service provider (P1) service provider (P2) service user (U1) service user (U2) trainee interpreter (I1) senior interpreter (I2)

\* Letters in parentheses refer to the abbreviations used in the transcripts.

5. The following transcription conventions have also been preserved: empty parentheses for unrecoverable speech, and words in parentheses for the transcriber's guess.

presence of code-mixing, no translation into English has been provided. The meaning will be made sufficiently clear in the analysis.

### 3.1 Encounter 1: “they have mentioned to me that there’s a problem it’s about the diet”

#### *Situation*

The grandparents arrived in Paris a few months ago with their grandchild, and will soon be joined by the girl’s parents, who intend to start up a café in the city but are, as yet, still in Italy. To enrol in a nursery school, the child needs to be given the prescribed vaccinations; so the grandparents go to the healthcare centre to get the relevant information. During the encounter, the French physician also conducts a routine medical examination of the child.

#### *Sociological and interactional information*

In terms of distance, participants have never met before. There has, however, been a brief interaction between the interpreter and the grandparents prior to the beginning of the encounter. With reference to power relations, as in all medical interactions, the doctor is institutionally in a dominant position. At the time of the recording, the Italo-French interpreter, a qualified and experienced practitioner, was pursuing a PhD in History and Philosophy of Science (she has since been recruited by a French university for a post of Senior Lecturer, and no longer works as a community interpreter). Her high social status and her educational background naturally place her in a powerful position. The grandfather’s older age in comparison with both the physician and the interpreter, who are in their 30s, as well as his being the only male in the interaction may account for his assertive conversational behaviour. A submissive attitude is shown, on the other hand, by the grandmother, unlike the grandfather a non-native speaker of Italian, probably of Arab origins, who plays a marginal role in the interaction, intervening only to defend, rather feebly, the way she is feeding her grandchild.

#### *Excerpt analysis*

After discussing the issue of the compulsory vaccinations, as the physician starts examining the child, the interpreter autonomously introduces the child’s eating problem that the grandfather mentioned in the brief meeting they had outside the physician’s room.

[1] lines: 389–422<sup>6</sup>

- 389 I: alors **ils** m'ont signalé par contre un problème donc c'est l'alimentation **il semble** que la  
 now **they** have mentioned to me that there's a problem it's about the diet **it seems** that the
- 390 petite fille s'alimente de façon très épisodique elle elle ne prend pas de repas véritable  
 girl eats in a very erratic way she she does not take proper meals
- 391 et par contre elle demande ponctuellement des choses beaucoup beaucoup de lait des  
 and on the other hand she keeps asking for certain things a lot a lot of milk
- 392 laitages et très peu de d'autres choses elle boit beaucoup de coca **semble-t-il** et de- et par  
 dairy products and very few other things she drinks a lot of coke **so it seems** and on the
- 393 contre elle est assez assez grosse même si donc elle ne prend pas de [ repas le ho detto quel- ]  
 other hand she is quite quite big even though she takes no [ meals I've told her what ]
- 394 GF: [ si mangia latte ] patate  
 [ yes she eats milk ] potato
- 395 fritte [ patate fritte ]  
 chips [ potato chips ]
- 396 I: [ ho trasmesso quello che mi ha detto ] prima sul [ problema de- ]  
 [ I've relayed what you said ] earlier on about the [ problem of ]
- 397 GF: [ si patate fritte ] col ketchup quelle  
 [ yes potato chips ] with ketchup those
- 398 le mangia se ne mette [ una tonnellata ]  
 she eats she takes [ tonnes of them ]
- 399 I: [ ah beh ] des frites au ketchup des tonnes  
 [ of course ] tonnes of chips with ketchup
- 400 GF: cioè tutte le porcherie mangia [ quando deve mangiare non mangia però ]=  
 in other words she eats every sort of junk food [ but when she must eat she doesn't eat ]
- 401 I: [ ah des oui des ]=  
 [ any yes any ]
- 402 D: =(in a laughing tone) alors **on** n'a pas de médicaments pour faire manger **les enfants**  
 well **one** has no medicines which can make **children** eat
- 403 I: ((in a laughing tone)) **no non ci sono** médecine per farla man[giare be ]ne  
 no **there are no** medicines which can make **her** [ eat ] well
- 404 GF: [ eh lo so ]  
 [ I know ]
- 405 D: donc c'est à vous de donner ce qu'il faut et d'essayer de mettre des limites après que les  
 so it's up to you to give her what she needs and to try and set limits once
- 406 habitudes sont prises c'est difficile hein [ mais **petit à petit** vous **devriez** y arriver ]  
 habits have been formed it's difficult [ but **little by little** you should get there ]
- 407 I: [ eh voi avete ] è vos-vostra responsabilità  
 [ you have ] you are responsible for
- 408 **diciamo** di mettere dei limiti a questi a questi cibi [ ah ça c'est le problème ]  
**so to say** setting the limits to this kind of food [ now this is the problem ]
- 409 GF: [ alla signora lì e alle due ragazze fuori ]  
 [ to the lady there and the two girls outside ]
- 410 perché io sono quello che litiga sempre in casa perché dico non dategli coca non dategli  
 because I'm the one who is always quarrelling at home because I tell them not to give her
- 411 patate fritte [ non dategli caramelle non dategli cicche ]  
 potato chips [ not to give her sweets not to give her chewing gum ]
- 412 I: [ en fait c'est monsieur qui se plaint tout le temps ] parce que donc eh mais il il arrive pas à  
 [ actually the gentleman here is complaining all the time ] because well he does not succeed in
- 413 convaincre madame et ses [ deux au ]tres filles à modifier les habitudes [ alimentaires ]  
 convincing the lady and the [ other two ] daughters to change the eating [ habits ]
- 414 D: [ mhm ] [ parce que ] c'est vrai  
 [ because ] it's true

6. Line numbers refer to their place in the original transcripts. Features of interest in the excerpts are shown in bold.

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- 415        que c'est important eh: du fait que de des maladies **qu'on peut avoir** après hein et l'enfant  
             *that it's important for the diseases that **one can have** later on and the child*
- 416        comme ça elle est hein elle se porte bien mais elle est même **un peu trop enrobée** hein mais  
             *as she is now she is fine but she is even **a little bit too plump** but*
- 417        elle n'a pas tout ce qu'il faut pour bien grandir par contre **il y a des risques** après de diabète et  
             *she hasn't got everything she needs to grow well and **there are risks** later on of diabetes and*
- 418        de maladies comme ça  
             *other such diseases*
- 419    I:        è molto importante per i rischi di    [ malattie: più        ] più tardi adesso la bambina sta  
                   *it's very important for the risks of    [ diseases later        ] later on now the child is*
- 420    GF:    ((coughs))                            [ sì no                ]  
   [ yes no                ]
- 421    I:        bene [ anche se è **un po' un po' ciccietta** ]  
                   *fine [ even though she **a little a little plump** ]*
- 422    GF:        [ no ma anche adesso perché quella bambina lì ] intanto che cammina ogni tanto inciampa perché sì non lo so  
                                   *[ no even now because that child                ] as she walks she trips over now and then for I don't know*

Excerpt [1] is a clear example of a face-threatening sequence in an interaction where the healthcare professional and her lay interlocutors are engaged in a relatively smooth transaction of an informative nature. Its interest lies precisely in the fact that the contrast is between the face wants of the interpreter's two lay clients, rather than between theirs and the doctor's. The grandfather openly takes the distance from the grandmother's behaviour, which he sharply criticises (lines 409–411), thus saving his face from the gently formulated admonishment of the physician, who agrees that the child's eating habits are potentially dangerous for her future health. An even more significant feature, for the purposes of the present study, is that, within the interpreted interaction proper, the initial FTA is performed neither by the service provider nor by the service users, but by the interpreter herself, who clearly feels that the grandfather's concern needs conveying more than the grandmother's face needs protecting. The interpreter's independent decision is most likely the result of her assessment of the medical relevance and seriousness of such information. It is however also worth considering, as a concurrent reason, the grandfather's assertiveness. A quick glimpse at the transcript immediately reveals the large number of overlaps; they are mainly interruptions<sup>7</sup> of current speaker's turn effected by the grandfather and, to a minor albeit significant extent, by the interpreter. Evidence of their powerful interactional roles is abundantly forthcoming throughout the encounter.

7. Following Nofsinger (1991: 102), "interruption" is used here to refer to overlapping talk that does not occur at or near a transition relevance point – the latter being, in conversation analytical terms, the spot that participants recognize as the potential end of the current speaker's turn. On overlapping talk and the controversial distinction between overlaps and interruptions, see among others Bennett (1981), Jefferson (1986), Drummond (1989), and Schegloff (1997).

Focusing more specifically on face-work strategies and their linguistic realizations, as the interpreter is fully aware of the face-threatening nature of her conversational move, she takes the following redressive actions: firstly, in relaying the information to the physician, she uses the plural pronoun “they” (line 389), a generalising device through which she avoids raising the issue of the grandparents’ opposing views, in an attempt to save the grandmother’s face; secondly, she uses the hedge “it seems” twice, in lines 389 and 392, this time to save her own face by avoiding responsibility for believing in the truth of the relayed information. Since the physician does not as yet know about the grandparents’ disagreement – and is consequently slightly baffled as to the reason why she is being told about all the junk food fed to the child – she thinks of attending to both their faces by mitigating her FTAs of advice and admonishment. Her first utterance (line 402) shows an interesting mixture of devices: off-record (irony), negative politeness, (the impersonal subject *on*, and the generic reference to *les enfants*), and positive politeness (the laughing tone of voice). In her subsequent turn (lines 405–406), she again attenuates the illocutionary force of her utterances, especially through the encouragement of the last sentence (note the hedge *petit à petit*, and the use of the conditional mood in *devriez*).

The physician’s face-saving intention is largely conveyed in the interpreter’s renderings – see in particular, in line 403, the laughing tone of voice and the translation *non ci sono medicine* for the French impersonal pronoun, as well as the hedge *diciamo* in line 408; the only exception is the specific reference to the child in question (*farla mangiare bene*, line 403). Interestingly, I’s non translation of the doctor’s reassuring words and her abrupt shift to French (line 408) can most likely be accounted for by the grandfather’s non-verbal language; this hypothesis<sup>8</sup> is supported by the elliptical construction of GP’s utterance (consider the missing imperative verb “say it” in line 409), with which I’s explanation perfectly overlaps. As the grandfather indicates the grandmother (possibly by raising his chin or pointing his forefinger while shifting his gaze onto her) and then openly blames her, the interpreter feels now free to expose the contrast between them (lines 412–413). In the remaining turns (414–422), I is seen to maintain the physician’s mitigating strategies for a threat which is now exclusively to the grandmother’s face.

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8. These observations are necessarily hypothetical given that the encounter was audio-recorded in the absence of the researcher.

### 3.2 Encounter 2: “she told her mother thanks to the gym I make other friends she is like this”

#### *Situation*

The encounter is a routine meeting between teachers and parents. The pupil is 8 years old and joined the school a few months before, when her family arrived in Italy from Morocco. Since she is an immigrant child, teachers report not only on her learning achievements but also on her integration progress. The supervision of the latter aspect is entrusted by the school to the intercultural coordinator, an Italian woman, who acts as chair of the encounter.

#### *Sociological and interactional information*

All participants have interacted before with one another. The interpreter,<sup>9</sup> a female qualified practitioner of Moroccan origin, was appointed at the beginning of the school year by the local educational authorities to assist foreign pupils from North-African countries enrolling in the school. Working together with the teaching staff on a daily basis, she has developed a close relationship both with them and with the child. In light of the formal nature of the encounter, the teachers and the intercultural coordinator are institutionally in a dominant position. The interpreter and the child's mother, who share the same ethnic origins and immigration experience, are theoretically the weaker parties. However, the role of the former is fully recognised, and the latter is an educated woman, whose open-mindedness is appreciated by the teachers.

#### *Excerpt analysis*

The selected sequence follows upon the initial exchanges of the encounter, in which the teachers reported on the child's educational progress, concerning in particular her acquisition of the Italian language. Their unanimous assessment is that she is a highly motivated pupil, eager to learn (note in the first three turns of the excerpt the intensifying linguistic devices which are typical of face-enhancing communication).

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9. In encounters 2 and 3, the interpretation is carried out by linguistic and cultural mediators. Given that, for the purposes of this study, the differences between this figure and that of the interpreter have not been considered relevant, the latter term has been used throughout. A discussion of the two profiles in the Italian context can be found in Merlini (2007).

**[2] lines: 46–51**

- 46 TI: è molto [motivata]  
*she's very [motivated]*
- 47 IC: [è mol- ] è motivata è motivata  
*[she's ve- ] she's motivated she's motivated*
- 48 THG: lavora molto [ sì ] lavora  
*she works hard [ yes ] she works*
- 49 I: [infatti ]  
*[ indeed ]*
- 50 TI: ieri anche in palestra c'è stata un'insegnante nuova e all'inizio l'insegnante non  
*yesterday in the gym there was a new teacher and initially the teacher didn't*
- 51 sapeva di Fatima quindi ha detto due parole quella bimba lì perché non si muove?  
*know about Fatima so she said a few words that girl over there why doesn't she move?*
- 52 lei ha capito ha guardato non si è sbagliata più eh con i comandi  
*she understood she observed and no longer got the instructions wrong*
- 53 I: *she said that a new gym teacher has arrived who didn't know about Fatima and that she*  
 54 *could not speak Italian and asked why she didn't move and Fatima gave her a certain*  
*look*
- 55 M: *yes I know when she started going to the gym she met many children and told me that*  
 56 *she didn't want to be with them and speak to them but I made her go nonetheless*
- 57 I: ha detto adesso ha cominciato a fare palestra perché ha detto alla madre con la palestra  
*she said now she has started going to the gym because she told her mother thanks to the gym*
- 58 faccio altre amicizie conosco altre persone è un tipo  
*I make other friends I get to know other people she is like this*
- 59 IC: ma proprio il suo cioè la sua voglia di [integrarsi ]  
*it's so like her I mean her desire to [ integrate ]*
- 60 I: [di infatti sì ]  
*[ to yes precisely ]*
- 61 IC: di avere nuove amicizie  
*to have new friends*

At this point of the interaction, the focus is still on the pupil's learning achievements and skills. The anecdote of the gym (lines 50–52) is told by the teacher of Italian to give evidence of the child's quick-witted mind. The interpreter's translation (lines 53–54), which probably derived from a non-comprehension of the last part of the original utterance, brings about a crucial shift in topic. The expression “gave her a certain look” is read by the mother as criticism addressed to the child, and indirectly also to her as her mother, i.e. the person who should teach her to behave. Confronted with this FTA, the mother reacts by saving her own face (“but I made her go nonetheless”, line 56). Later on in the interaction, she will complain several times about her daughter's strong and even wilful character. So far, two aspects have thus emerged as worthy of attention; firstly, the FTA is generated here by the interpreter's mistranslation of a primary speaker's turn intended as an FFA; secondly, whereas politeness is usually studied in relation to the face wants of interactants, most of the FFAs and FTAs performed in the encounter are addressed primarily to an absent party, and only indirectly – given the bond of kinship – to one of the participants.

But the most interesting feature of excerpt [2] is the interpreter's subsequent rendition into Italian of the mother's face-preserving move (lines 57–58) – a rendition which, in this case, cannot evidently be put down to miscomprehension. As the topic has been shifted by the mother to the child's integration process, the interpreter's concern is not with saving the mother's face but with enhancing the pupil's one. She is thus seen to convey exactly the opposite message, presumably in an attempt to construe what she knows to be a desirable image for the immigrant school-child, in line with institutionally determined goals. Such image is supported by the intercultural coordinator, who steps in as the competent figure to talk about this aspect of the child's school experience and confirms her desire to integrate. The power exercised by the latter participant, not only at an institutional but also at an interactional level as chair of the meeting, may have played a part in the interpreter's decision.

### 3.3 Encounter 3: “we need to have a course on negation”

#### *Situation*

The Foreigners' Advice Bureau (*Ufficio Stranieri*) is a public service run by the municipal authorities. Its employees help immigrants apply for residence and work permits and, in the case of asylum seekers, for refugee status, make arrangements for emergency accommodation, provide information on healthcare services, and liaise between employers and regular immigrants looking for jobs. The service users are, in this case, two asylum seekers from Congo. Having previously received assistance with their asylum application, they are now back at the Bureau because they have accommodation and health problems.

#### *Sociological and interactional information*

Service providers, service users and the senior interpreter have interacted before. P1, the male employee, is a practical person, with extremely informal manners, and exhibits a very sympathetic attitude towards immigrants. He has a rudimentary knowledge of French. The female employee (P2) intervenes only briefly in the encounter to provide information on some healthcare facilities. I1 is a young Moroccan woman who has just finished attending a training course and is on work placement in the Bureau. She has already assisted the Bureau's employees, but has never met the two asylum seekers before. I2, himself of Moroccan origin, is her senior colleague with a long experience in the job. As already mentioned, the Bureau's staff are there to help immigrants; they are, so to say, on their side. They also tend to treat interpreters on a par. The only noticeable power differential is therefore between the senior interpreter and the trainee.

*Excerpt analysis*

The encounter is characterised by a very collaborative and friendly atmosphere, in which no FTAs are produced by primary speakers towards one another. On the contrary, P1 is seen to perform a series of FFAs which are clearly meant as solidarity-building strategies to establish common ground and reduce social distance. In the selected sequences, one such positive politeness strategy is his attempt to speak the language of his interlocutors. The result is an amusing code-mixing which the two service users seem to appreciate and even enjoy, to the extent that they take an active part in a number of ways: they reciprocate using a broken Italian (see [4] line 160), correct his mistakes in French, and even use themselves the non-existent words coined by the employee. This, however, leads to the frequent by-passing of I1, and therefore to the production of an indirect and unintended FTA to her face as language expert. Being a trainee, she is on the other hand eager to demonstrate her professional competence.

The opening exchanges of the encounter see I1 establish her role in the interaction. Being familiar with P1's attempts at speaking French, she asks him, somewhat provocatively, "do you translate him yourself?" (line 4), when she knows perfectly well that his knowledge of the language does not enable him to hold the conversation on his own (witness P1's subsequent question "what did he say?", line 20).

**[3] lines: 3–5; 20–21**

- 3 U1: euh moi moi euh j'ai mal aux dents ( ) à l'hôpital mais personne qui (s'occupe de moi)  
 4 I1: **lo traduci te?**  
 5 P1: no  
 [...]
   
20 P1: cos'ha detto?  
 21 I1: che ha mal di denti

Later on in the interaction, as the pattern of speaking each other's language is in full swing (see lines 160–161), I1 questions P1 on verb conjugation (line 162), but mitigates the threat to his face by jokingly reproducing the intonation of a school-teacher asking a pupil, and by giving him the favourable assessment "we are making progress!" (line 164).

**[4] lines: 160–164**

- 160 U1: no hai dormito  
 161 P1: ho capito aujourd'hui ehm n'ai pas dormi je n'ai pas dormi  
 162 I1: **tu?**  
 163 P1: tu n'as [pas dormi]  
 164 I1: [n'as pas dormi] **stiamo facendo progressi**

Half-way through the encounter, the senior interpreter arrives and starts talking with P1 about U1's health problem. Because of his presence and his interventions, the professional face wants of the trainee are now even more significantly at risk. Following I2's correction of a mistake in P1's use of a French negative structure (lines 294–295), I1 steps in to re-establish her interactional role with the joking remark “we need to have a course on negation” (note also the use of the inclusive “we” to further soften the FTA of criticism).

[5] lines: 294–296

294 P1: non risponde nessuno ne répond pas [ rien personne ]  
 295 I2: [ personne ] personne ne répond  
 296 I1: **no sulla negazione dobbiamo fare un corso**

I1's humorously conveyed affirmation of her professional face – which, though contributing to the relaxed and playful atmosphere, is indicative of her perception of a face threat – continues in the remaining exchanges, until towards the end of the interaction she openly asks P1 to speak in Italian (line 489). He obliges, but only to go back immediately to the invented word *scontrin* – i.e. the Italian *scontrino* (“receipt”) uttered with a French pronunciation in line 490 – and to the funny code-mixing of the last line, where the newly learnt French word *ticket* is used together with two Italian verbs *prendi e porti* (“take and bring”) and the French adverb *ici* (“here”).

[6] lines: 488–492

488 P1: prendre le  
 489 I1: **in italiano?**  
 490 P1: prendi il la ricevuta lo scontrino le scontrin le scontrin  
 491 I1: tu achètes les médicaments et tu ramènes le ticket  
 492 P1: le ticket prendi e porti ici

#### 4. Conclusions: Threatening whose face?

In Goffman's writings, face is described as one of the last precincts of sacredness in our secularised world. As such it is a precious but also delicate object, requiring constant and careful attendance in the context of interpersonal relations. Face-work rituals, through which such attendance is practically implemented, are thus bound to characterise each and every kind of social interaction, all the more so interpreted interaction where, as this analysis has shown, the presence of an atypical interlocutor adds to the complexity of face-work dynamics. This is especially true in multi-party encounters, where contrasting face wants may emerge between the interpreter's lay clients (as in encounter 1), or the specific competences

of different institutional representatives may project different expectations (as in encounter 2), or the presence of a colleague may exert additional pressure on the interpreter (as in encounter 3).

More specifically, the kind of face-work performed by the three interpreters was found to correlate with a number of factors. First among them was their understanding of the institutional goals being pursued during the interactions. Excerpts [1] and [2] provide immediate evidence of this. In the former, the interpreter assesses the medical relevance of information supplied by one of the lay-clients outside the boundaries of the medical encounter, and decides to relay it to the healthcare professional, despite the potential threat it creates for the other lay-client's face. In the latter, the interpreter conveys the opposite message to the primary speaker's one probably to consolidate a desirable institutional image, which she knows will benefit the immigrant schoolgirl. In so doing, she disregards the mother's move to save her own face, and adds instead to the enhancement of the daughter's face, whom she seems to consider as her real, though absent, client.

A second noteworthy correlation may be established with the interpreters' identification of power relations among participants. Most likely, in encounter 1, the grandfather's assertiveness vs. the grandmother's submissiveness played a far from negligible part in the interpreter's decision to convey the FTA. Equally relevant was, in encounter 2, the powerful institutional role of the intercultural coordinator, whose assessment of the child may have reasonably induced the interpreter's substitution of a face-saving act with an FFA. In encounter 3, politeness dynamics were undoubtedly affected by the power differential between the interpreter and her senior colleague.

This second point closely connects with a third and final factor, i.e. the interpreter's status within each encounter. Whereas a high social status, as in encounter 1, or familiarity with the institutional staff, as in encounter 2, are likely to account for the two interpreters' marginal – albeit not totally absent – preoccupation with their own faces, in encounter 3, I1's principal concern with safeguarding her professional image was an obvious consequence of her trainee status. Significantly, in the latter encounter, which is the most extensively cooperative of the three, the very construction of common ground by primary speakers through the reiterated performance of FFAs resulted in a threat to the interpreter's face. While contributing to the cheerfulness of the interaction, her interventions as an autonomous speaker, though humorously conveyed, were no doubt a reaction to a face threat perception.

Since the early 1990s, when dialogue interpreting came decidedly to the fore as an object of scholarly investigation, the field of interpreting studies has experienced a rejuvenating transformation of theoretical and methodological approaches. With the opening up of new interactional landscapes, researchers have



increasingly looked for new perspectives. The present study can be seen as a small contribution to these exploratory efforts. Here, politeness conduct has been observed in the somewhat unusual environment of supportive rather than adversarial talk, and from a theoretical angle which exposes the face-enhancing nature of many conversational acts rather than exclusively their face-threatening potential. These changes of context and focus are coupled with a variety of interactional configurations which add to the complexity of perspectives. The different institutional settings and above all the presence of a high number of participants make the question “Threatening whose face?” a difficult one to answer, especially if the faces of absent parties are perceived as deserving the same kind of attendance as those of the interlocutors. In these cases, the same move may be considered alternatively as a face threat, a face-saving attempt, or a face-flattering one by a simple shift in perspective.

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