

## **Politeness as Avoidance of Face and Self-Face Threatening Acts: A Man Walks into a Motorcycle Club Bar**

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### **Abstract**

*In this observational study, an exchange of dialogue between a newcomer and a regular at a 1%er outlaw club bar is examined for some of the elements of Brown and Levinson's model of politeness as established in their book *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (1987). First, an outline and quick overview of B&L's assumptions will be established. Second, some aspects of "outlaw" motorcycle club subculture will be explained. Third, the significance of the motorcycle club bar as an interface between the club and the general public will be explained. Fourth, a communicative exchange at the bar between a new-comer and a regular of a 1%er biker club bar in the Inland Empire of Southern California to see how B&L's model might apply to a particular communicative exchange at the bar with analysis and implications drawn.*

*As Dulaney (2006) has noted, there is a significant lack of scholarly research addressing outlaw motorcycle clubs, and this lack remains in 2022 at the writing of this small study. Many new to motorcycle culture and the subcultures of motorcycle clubs, especially outlaw motorcycle clubs, don't understand some basic assumptions and skills of pragmatics, proxemics, and politeness necessary to safely negotiate these subcultures. A newcomer to the joy and freedom motorcycle riding entails often feels an instant kinship to/with other riders which can lead to unintended face and face-threatening acts. Safe negotiation of the sociocultural contexts and avoidance of self and self-face threatening acts inherent in the motorcycle world require skills well beyond the mechanics of proficient operation and maintenance of a motorcycle. Hence, the need for more studies such as this one.*

*The observations of this study were made at a motorcycle club bar in the Inland Empire of California in the summer of 2014. The club is worldwide and one of the "big three" 1%er outlaw clubs (Hayes, 2005; Dulaney, 2006). None of the names of patrons, participants, or club shall be named as this study was not sanctioned by the club itself. The bar has since closed pre-Covid 19 lockdown; therefore, the name of the bar is now irrelevant. The events and the dialogue are accurate representations of what actually took place.*

*Keywords:* politeness, proxemics, face and self-face threatening acts

### **Politeness as Avoidance of Face- and Self-Face Threatening Acts: A Man Walks into a Motorcycle Club Bar**

In this rather limited observational study, an exchange of dialogue between a newcomer and a regular at a 1%er outlaw motorcycle club bar is examined for some of the elements of Brown and Levinson's (B&L) model of politeness as established in their book *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (1987).

As William R. Dulaney (2006) has noted, there is significant lack of scholarly research addressing outlaw motorcycle clubs, and this lack remains in 2022 at the writing of this small study. Many new to motorcycle culture and the subcultures of motorcycle clubs, especially outlaw motorcycle clubs, don't understand some basic assumptions and skills of pragmatics, proxemics, and politeness necessary to safely negotiate these subcultures. A newcomer to the joy and freedom motorcycle riding entails often feels an instant kinship to/with other riders which can lead to unintended face and self-face-threatening acts. Safe negotiation of the sociocultural contexts and avoidance of self and self-face threatening acts inherent in the motorcycle world require skills well beyond the mechanics of proficient operation and maintenance of a motorcycle. Hence, the need for more studies such as this one.

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### **Background Assumptions**

Brown and Levinson (1987) assume H. P. Grice's Conversational Implicature and maxims (1975), the maxims of Geoffrey N. Leech (1983) (for summary of maxims, see Appendix) while adding their own assumptions about speakers and hearers (2004): rationality, face, and face threatening acts (FTAs). By *rationality* B&L mean that people make rational choices in speech acts to achieve their goals from "ends to the means that will achieve those ends" (58). For B&L, it is as if a speaker will calculate from ends backwards through the means to those ends before speaking to hearer.

By *face* B&L mean that their model speaker (MS) will have two particular face wants, negative and positive, freedom and approbation, i.e., "the want to be unimpeded and the want to be approved of in certain respects" (58). (I would call these wants desires in the Buddhist sense, but I will stick with the terms B&L use.) Therefore, a speaker (S) would calculate the wants of the hearer (H) before speaking to save H's face in regards H's freedom from imposition and want of approbation. By FTAs, B&L mean that in communication exchanges there is nearly always a negotiation between speakers to avoid FTAs. The wants of S in any communicative exchange may threaten the face of H; hence, theories of politeness.

It would be appropriate at this point to further define *face*, negative and positive, as they will both figure prominently in the biker-bar scenario to follow. According to B&L, *face* is the public self-image that every member of a culture or subculture wants to claim for him- or herself. *Face* consists of two related aspects: (a) negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction, i.e., to freedom of action and freedom from imposition; (b) positive face: "the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire [the word I was looking for] that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants" (61). Both (a) and (b) are central to the interactions between motorcycle club members, between members of differing clubs, and between a club and the general public in the interfacial proxemics of motorcycle club bars, as will become clear later in this study.

### **Background on Outlaw Biker Culture**

There are many myths about "outlaw" and "1%er" biker culture. Some find their origins in public reaction to particular historic events and the narratives they spawn. One such historical event was the Gypsy Tour hosted by the American Motorcyclist Association (AMA) held on July 4th weekend in Hollister, California in 1947.

The "outlaws" at that event were from clubs that were not sanctioned by the AMA such as the Boozefighters (still in existence), the Pissed Off Bastards Of Bloomington (now called the Pissed Off Bastards Of Berdoo or POBOBs), and the Market Street Commandos who later became the San Francisco chapter of the Hells Angels (Hayes, 2005; Dulaney, 2006). Newspaper headlines named the wild party at Hollister a riot and embellished their event narrative for dramatic effect with staged photos of a drunken biker reclining on a parked motorcycle surrounded by empty beer bottles. Six years later, the motorcycle film that many believe started the outlaw biker culture, *The Wild One* (1953) (LasloBenedek, director) starring Marlon Brando and Lee Marvin, attempted to portray the events of the Hollister "riot" and the character of outlaw bikers. Although Brando was the star of that film, Lee Marvin as Chino most clearly represented the true character of motorcycle club members of the time — disenfranchised post-war veterans blowing off steam (Hayes, 2005).

Often motorcycle clubs (MCs) played into this sensational press coverage and narrative mythmaking, pushing the outlaw image as a crude joke on societal norms. Law enforcement joined the mythmaking by embellishing the event narratives and the characters portrayed in effort to capitalize on the wild, outlaw reputations the press and the clubs were creating, thereby winning public support and money for their efforts at law enforcement. Wild drunken bikers living outside the norms of society project a scary image, and sensational press coverage of biker arrests showing carefully arraigned MC vests and insignia known as 'colors' or 'cut' along with commonly used firearms, such as .22 target rifles, shotguns used for bird hunting, and semiautomatic handguns for home defense take on a sinister air in photos staged for narrative effect.

As with all rhetorically constructed narratives, a kernel of truth lies at the core of outlaw biker mythology. Many, but not all, members engage in criminal activity. As with all sociocultural groups, more difference can be found within a group than between groups and more similarities can be found between groups (Hanel et al., 2019). Nevertheless, it is an imaginative stretch from the ninety-nine percent of motorcycle enthusiasts represented by groups such as the AMA to consider the free-spirited WWII vets who represented the "outlaw" bikers as all criminals and gang members.

### **The Motorcycle Club Bar**

Motorcycle clubs, especially outlaw clubs, cannot remain totally self-contained and totally independent from the society from which they rebel. As these clubs have grown up in and out of a particular sociocultural context, they are, like all subcultures, reliant on the organization and resources of surrounding society (Wolf, 1991). The motorcycle club bar, then, is an important part of the MC world, necessary to the healthy function of this subculture in two ways: first, as a way of maintaining organizational integrity, the boundary between the club and “straight society,” and second, organizational perpetuity, i.e., the recruitment of new members (Wolf, 1991). As to the first, the club bar allows members to interact with the public to learn how to negotiate the difference between themselves and straight society, to show the “straights” who and what they are. As to the second, the club bar gives this subculture the opportunity to observe and test prospective members. Here they can find out what the “prospect” is made of, how they interact with club members and the public. Without this cultural interface, the club would lose the ability to negotiate the difference between themselves and “citizens” as well as the ability to maintain sufficient numbers to protect claimed territory and remain a viable club.

### **Prolog to the Bar Scenario**

*Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything . . . let your words be few. . . . Many words mark the speech of a fool.*

(NIV Ec 5, 2-3)

In biker terms the epigraph above might read, *Don't write a check with your mouth that your ass can't cash* — a maxim one must be aware of and heed when in the presence of 1%er MC members, especially on their home ground.

Freedom and territory are aspects of negative face that figure prominently in the 1%er motorcycle club subculture — 1%er meaning the one percent of motorcycle enthusiasts that the American Motorcycle Association (AMA) deemed *outlaws* and don't live by society's conventions. MCs carve out territory by force or influence and freedom is their life choice (Dulaney, 2006). *Don't tread on me* might be considered a motto of the MC culture. Positive face wants for MC members are satisfied by approbation of the brotherhood, of fellow members, rather than from society at large. For them, what is of utmost importance is club then family — society takes the hindmost if thought of at all, hence the term *outlaw* in Outlaw Motorcycle Club (OMC). So, in dealing with MC members, one gives respect, is polite, and avoids FTAs whenever possible, especially when entering their territory, such as a favorite club bar: the interface between the MCs and the general public.

### **A Man Walks into a Motorcycle Club Bar**

Actually, our man, our MS, rides up to the bar on his Harley-Davidson motorcycle, the only authorized motorcycle of 1%er MC subculture, and is immediately aware of a possible FTA — that of parking etiquette. He finds a row of Harleys by the side of the bar. As per B&L, it might be considered an FTA to park in the wrong spot — too close and he may offend by presuming the right to park ahead of others, he doesn't know. To park too far away may seem as if he is weak, the FTA may be his own — a self-face-threatening act (SFTA), (for SFTA see Chen, 2001). In gauging the proxemics of mounting, dismounting, and the average lean of a parked motorcycle he decides to slip his bike between two others, making sure to leave plenty of space on each side. As he dismounts and begins the walk up to the doors of the establishment, he notices club support stickers on some of the bikes — conformation of authoritative power structure — eggshell walking is in order.

Once inside the bar a series of possible FTAs and SFTAs present themselves along with a wave of dread. First, a Sunday afternoon gaggle of 1%ers watching football on widescreen, all tall and tough military types, no fat hairy bikers as per stereotype. These men are tattooed warriors. There is no turning back now; that SFTA must be avoided. Our MS picks a vacant stool and sits at the bar. His first concern, that of what to drink. Our MS has quit drinking alcohol months prior and would never drink and drive anyway, and as he doesn't know how long he will want to stay in this bar, given the numerous FTAs and SFTA gaffs that are likely to happen, our MS decides to have a soda-pop rather than a vodka rocks as per old habit or a Budweiser as he sees others drinking. Besides, the former president and patriarch of this club rarely drank alcohol and would drink Coke in bars instead. So, to save face, our MS bellies up to the bar and orders a Coke, and to possibly achieve a modicum of approbation, a can of Red Bull.

Our MS takes a sip of Coke on ice, glances around. No women in the place but for a petite and very attractive twenty-something Asian woman behind the bar. A couple of men sit at the bar eating lunch. Others stand around talking and joking and watching the game. No one seems to have noticed our MS come in but for the young woman behind the bar. Oh, they have, and are taking stock, but none acknowledges his presence. All are engaged in conversation over the game playing out on widescreen or other business that is none of his.

It's hot outside, cool inside, and sweating from more than the temperature outside, our MS wipes the sweat from his brow expecting a test to see who and what he is and why he would come to this particular place. One doesn't just pull off the highway and walk into this bar. One comes here on purpose.

Our MS pops the top of his Red Bull and drinks half of it in one long draught and looks around the room — several widescreen TVs, all with the same game. He then drinks the rest of his energy drink, rinses his mouth with the last of the watered-down Coke on the rocks, and sets the glass down in the rings of wet on the bar top. He stands and shoves off the bar with both hands and walks casually to the restroom before the ride home. No one seems to notice.

In front of the urinal, in the vulnerable position such an activity requires, he hears the door swing open behind him. Over his shoulder, he feels a huge 1%er hovering a menacing moment behind him. Is our MS paranoid? No evidence has led to his believing these guys mean any threat, but he is in a subculture-with-a-reputation's territory. That makes him a possible threat to them — more than a mere face threat if he represents law enforcement. The huge biker then goes over to the commode. Kidney-shy, our MS is having a difficult time of it. A torrent loudly splashes in the stall next to him. The tension loosens, and our MS sighs in flowing relief.

Back in the barroom, our MS finds a man with a crazed look and wild, intense eyes sitting, back to the bar, on his former stool, staring directly at him as our MS approaches. The glass he had used is still there. Suddenly our MS feels that it would be a major SFTA to leave the bar with this man sitting on his former stool with his former drink still setting in the wet rings he had made. Contra rational thought process, our MS feels the need to risk a serious FTA to the wide-eyed and overly intense look and potentially dangerous man now occupying his stool and retrieve his glass for one last pull at the ice it contains — his ice, in his glass, at his place at the bar, however former the place, the glass, and the ice may be.

#### ***The communicative exchange at the bar***

**MS: *Excuse me. That's my drink.*** (Says MS to the biker, B, who now occupies MS's former stool with his back to the bar)

**B: *Oh, sorry, man, I thought you left.*** (With exaggerated and threatening deference (kinesics), leaning forward, thus closing proximal distance)

**MS: *No, no problem, man.*** (MS says, trying hard to sound non-confrontational yet in control) ***One last pull on the ice. It's hot out.*** (Note that MS avoids using the familiar term *Bro* here as that term is reserved for fellow club members and could be taken as an insult when uttered by nonmembers and would be a major SFTA gaff if he were to use that term. He tips the rim of the glass towards B as in a toast.)

**B: *No, really, I'm sorry. I just wanted a better shot at the game.*** (By "shot at the game" B means "a better view of the widescreen"; however, the screen is in full view from any position at the bar. B gets off the stool and faces MS, directly, squaring up, and further closing proximal distance in a challenging manner.)

**MS: *It's okay. Not a problem.*** (MS turns and leaves the bar and does not look to either side or back.)

Notice our MS did not challenge B's right to sit at MS's former place at the bar, thus avoiding a negative FTA towards B, i.e., B's right to territory. Also, by not challenging B's claim to MS's vacated territory, MS avoids the positive FTA against B in that if MS had challenged B, B would have to respond to MS's threat in order to save face in front of his club brothers. After all, our MS is in B's territory in the first place: the interface of this particular 1%er MC and the general public. Our MS also risks but saves both negative and positive face by standing up for what he still sees as his: ice bought and paid for (property and territory) and possible approbation (reputation and manhood). The relative (symmetric) distance (D) that B&L list as a factor in the FTA weightiness equation is both long and short — long in that there is a huge difference between a biker of one year (our MS) and a 1%-er, but also short (proxemics as within arm's reach).

The relative (asymmetric) power (P) difference is equally huge as the 1%er is on his turf, in his territory, soldier-muscled, and backed up by his brothers in the bar — one is reminded of another 1%er motto (FWOFWA): *Fuck With One, Fuck With All*. If our MS had *jumped bad* and tried to reclaim his stool (for no good reason) he would have been seen as an *asshole* and perhaps would have made his way home via the nearest hospital. Who knows where his bike would have wound up, or in how many pieces. Our MS unconsciously considered the absolute ranking (R) of FTAs associated with this communicative exchange and opted for the correct one. Our MS, succeeded in saving both positive

and negative face (and perhaps his actual face and ribs as well) while preserving the positive and negative face of B (and B's knuckles and the boots of his club brothers).

Now, our MS could have taken another tack: he could have offered to buy a round of drinks for all club members present at the bar. This option might have worked well, gained MS approbation from the entire group. He could have gone very wrong in that now he would have many more communicative exchanges with club members, causing more opportunities for verbal slips and gaffs and possible FTAs.

### Conclusion

In the foregoing example, I have focused on our MS and not so much on the character B. Of course B has many FTA and SFTA issues as well. Perhaps his taking the stool while our MS was in the restroom was at the request of someone, a club officer, say, and he had to save face and make the tacit challenge to our MS, i.e., to indirectly call him out, see what he is made of, see if our MS would perform a severe SFTA and put himself in danger of a beating. By ranking distance and power, B could possibly have chosen to be overly polite and deferential as self-face-threatening bait to lure our MS into impolite, even *asshole-ish* behavior. Or, he may have just been polite, which most 1%er bikers are unless his face or the face of his club is directly or indirectly challenged.

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### Appendix

Grice's Maxims summarized:

1. Quantity: Make your contribution to the conversation as informative as is required.
2. Quality: Make your contribution true.
3. Relation: Make your contribution relevant to the current exchange. Say nothing for which you lack evidence.
4. Manner: Be perspicuous.

Leech's Maxims summarized:

1. Tact: Minimize expressions which imply cost to the other. Maximize expressions which imply benefit to the other.
2. Generosity: Minimize expressions which imply benefit to self. Maximize expressions that imply cost to self.
3. Approbation: Minimize expressions which dispraise the other. Maximize expressions which express approval of the other.
4. Modesty: Minimize expression of praise of self. Maximize expression of dispraise of self.
5. Agreement: Minimize expression of disagreement between self and other. Maximize the expression of agreement.
6. Sympathy: Minimize antipathy between self and other. Maximize sympathy between self and other.