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Politeness and Face Work in German Forum Communication

1. Introduction: Communication in New Media

Technological change in mass media has always run parallel with social, cultural and anthropological change. The Media have even been described as “historical a priori of cultures and societies”¹ (Hörisch 2005: 186). This has become particularly evident in the last few decades since the broader diffusion of the internet and the development of the so-called Web 2.0. Many scientific and non-scientific observers agree on the fact that these forms of New Media are having an important impact on the ways in which we interact with others, conceptualise our identity and see the world. Ongoing debates regarding the damage caused to children by online games, the role and rights of authors, the difference between virtual and “real” reality, artificial intelligence or the limits between private and public life, are some examples that make clear that the internet has changed many things for every user – and that it makes necessary new reflections on old problems.

One effect of the new technical potentials is the quick evolution of new forms of communication like chat rooms, blogs, Social Media or forums. They can be interpreted as indicators of many of the new features of communication in the age of the internet. Looking

¹ Original: “[...] historische Apriori von Kulturen und Gesellschaften.” Translation: C.E.

at new forms of communication, it becomes possible to analyse precisely how internet-based interaction works, what is happening there, which are the differences to offline-communication and how individuals deal with the new possibilities, but also allows us to observe the characteristics which are also present in “traditional” communication. It becomes particularly interesting to see how the mutual relationship between people and the (technical and social) context of communication is designed, if and to what degree the setting of the communication determines the behaviour of the actors, in which ways and with which communicative means speakers try to get along between the pressure to behave according to the rules of the game on one hand, and the wish to appear as an individual person in order to constitute a personal identity on the other, and how participants create, manage and maintain relationships with others.

Those questions are the frame for the present paper. Obviously it does not aim to find an answer to them. It will deal with forum discussions in a German news-website and try to analyse some linguistic strategies applied for the management of interpersonal relationships. The central concepts of the analysis will be *face* and *politeness*. Focusing on these themes, it will be possible to understand a little bit better how forum users adapt to the specific context of communication, how they present themselves and how they conceptualise their relationships with fellow users.

In the first section the key concepts will be briefly presented and discussed. The second section will be dedicated to the application of face and politeness in forums. The general conditions for constructing face and managing relationships with others in this form of communication will be considered, and the problem that arises for the present linguistic analysis will be formulated in a more precise way. In the last part, finally, some examples will be presented and discussed. Most of them deal with situations in which

users themselves reflect on face work; in this way it should be possible to give some impressions of what is considered “normal” or problematic in this form of discussion by participants, what they expect from each other in terms of face work and how they organise the communicative exchange in terms of investment in the management of self or relationship with others.

2. Face and politeness

Face – like politeness – is a word and a concept used in everyday communication as well as in scientific contexts. This has an important advantage: scientific discussion on these topics will not be very distant from real-life-problems. However, there is also a risk in using the same word in both kinds of discussions: everyday-concepts can be ambiguous and often they are – scientific notions, on the contrary, should be clearly defined and fit into a theoretic model. For politeness Watts et al. (1992) have therefore made a distinction between “first order politeness” which refers to the way in which actors in conversations use the word “polite” or “politeness” in verbal exchange on the one hand and “second order politeness” on the other. The latter means a use of the terms to refer to scientific concepts. The distinction has been taken up and deeply discussed by Eelen (2001: 30ff.). He speaks about politeness₁ and politeness₂ and describes the latter as a theory of politeness₁:

By means of such a theory we should be able to understand how politeness₁ works, what its functionality is, what it “does” for people and for society in general. (Eelen 2001: 43)

The author (2001: 31) reminds us that scientists should carefully avoid confusing the two notions and always be aware of what they are speaking about: everyday reality or scientific analysis.

The face concept can be treated in an analogous way: Here, also, one should distinguish between what we mean when we say that someone has “lost or saved his face”, or similar notions, in everyday contexts, and what we understand when we talk about face as a concept that helps us to describe and better analyse what happens when speakers communicate. So *face*₁ will be the everyday notion and *face*₂ a sociological, anthropological or linguistic concept. Clearly there should not be a broad gap between one and the other as Watts point out for the politeness-distinction: politeness₂ (and *face*₂) cannot be something completely different from the respective layer concepts used by actors in communication. Yet this, on the other hand, does not mean that theory has to abandon the field and leave it to everyday-understanding, as Watts seems to suggest when he makes his aims explicit. From his point of view a scientific work should

[...] help us find our way back to what we should be doing in the study of social interaction, that is, showing how our layer notions of social behaviour, as they are struggled over discursively by participants in social interaction, are constitutive of that behaviour [...]. (Watts 2003: 11)

However, in many cases everyday concepts are too few and not clear enough for scientific discussion. Philosophical debate cannot be based on layer notions about democracy, freedom or similar topics if it aims to analyse the themes in depth. The same thing may happen with politeness and face. Scientific debate should go beyond every-day-knowledge about the topics. First of all the concepts have to be seen in the context of a scientific model or a theory and they should guarantee the possibility of being one element of a terminology and a systematic approach (Ehrhardt 2011: 33f.). And it should, at least potentially, be general. As Watts (2003: 13ff.) recognises, however, politeness₁-terms are not: they are necessarily bound to specific languages and cultures. Considera-

tions about universal phenomena or comparisons between different cultural realities will be difficult on this ground.

What we need, therefore, when we wish to start an analysis (theoretical or empirical) about politeness and face, is a clear idea of what we are looking for. And in fact there is a scientific debate about face and the relationship between face and politeness that can be used to define the object of the investigation. It becomes relevant with Goffman who, in the context of his interactional approach to sociology and in the tradition of Durkheim, focussed on the interdependence of the individual and the social in interaction. He defines face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (Goffman 1967: 5). So face is a kind of image that actors in social encounters draw of themselves. There are five points in the definition that will be important in the following discussion:

- 1) Face is not a matter of a single person, it has to be negotiated with other actors. They can accept the speaker’s claim or force him to change something in his behaviour. For Goffman, face is “constructed discursively with other members of the group” (Locher/Watts 2005: 12), it is, in a certain way, borrowed from others. In other words: it is a role an individual decides to play in a certain situation which is accepted by partners as a kind of tacit mutual agreement on the characteristics of the ongoing interaction. Arundale (2006: 202) uses this feature to distinguish face from *identity*: The latter is individual, whereas face is a dyadic phenomenon. Obviously, there is some kind of dialectic relationship between identity and face, between individual and social aspects. The two concepts should be discussed more deeply (cf. also the contribution of Locher/Bolander in this volume). For the present context it must be enough to refer to common communication models and the fact that here it is

quite normal to say that a message contains informations about the speaker (to be related with identity) on the one hand and about the relationship between speaker and listener (face work) on the other. In terms of the model proposed in Keller (1995: 216) where the author discusses different possible aims and effects/benefits of communication, face work can be seen as communicative activities with effects on the relationship between the actors ("Beziehung") and identity as part of the self-presentation of speakers and writers ("Image"). In terms of Jakobson identity can be associated to the expressive aspect of meaning and face to the conative aspect.

- 2) Face exists only in relationship with lines or strategies in interaction; it is a result of communication. It heavily depends on what a speaker wants to achieve by his communicative moves, or what hearers think he wants to achieve. "Line is defined as 'a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he [the speaker, C.E.] expresses his view of the situation [...]" (Watts 2003: 124).
- 3) Face is not static. It can change from one encounter to another and from one situation to another. It will always be a feature of a particular contact with particular partners.
- 4) Face is extremely important for the success of interactions. Goffman puts it in relationship with the sacred self and points out that the acceptance of the face of all participants is not an objective of interaction, but a condition for its possibility.
- 5) Therefore face has to be maintained and protected. Actors have to avoid threatening the face of anyone else if they want interaction to go on.

A part of the activities in any interaction will be driven by face work. Goffman uses this term "to designate the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face" (Goffman 1967: 12).

Brown/Levinson (1987) introduced Goffman's ideas in the linguistic discussion, linking the face concept to politeness. They describe some speech acts as inherently face-threatening, and politeness as mitigation of those face-threatening acts. Politeness very much coincides with face work. Face, for these authors, consists of two opposing wants: the desire to be unimpeded by others, to have the freedom to do what one would like to do (negative face) and wanting to be respected and desirable (positive face).

This idea has been extremely productive, but also object of many critical approaches. Locher/Watts e.g. argue that "Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory is not in fact a theory of politeness, but rather a theory of facework [...]" (2005: 10). The risk is that one ambiguous concept (politeness) is being explained with the help of another one which is even more ambiguous. So much discussion has been dedicated to the better understanding of face (in the sense of face₂) and its relationship with politeness. Some researchers state that Brown and Levinson (B/L) interpreted the work of Goffman only in a selective way, misunderstanding it as individualistic and not considering the ritual aspects of face work. According to Werkhofer (1992: 180) this interpretation "introduces the remarkable premise that there must be, as a prerequisite for politeness to occur, a fundamental antagonism between the speaker's intentions, on the one hand, and social aspects, on the other." Also Bargiela-Chiappini (2003: 1460) tries to recover the original approach underlining the fact that Goffman was not so much interested in the individual and his psychology, but "rather in the syntactical relations among the acts of different persons". In the B/L-concept normal human beings are presumed to have some kind of paranoid features; they are described as always worrying about potential offences. Bargiela-Chiappini states: "It appears that in Brown and Levinson's treatment of 'face', Goffman's tendentially individualistic treatment of the 'sacred self' becomes an ob-

sessive attempt by an ideal rational actor to mark and protect personal territory from potentially harmful interpersonal contacts" (Bargiela-Chiappini 2003: 1461). In general among the critics of the B/L-approach there seems to be large agreement on the fact that the motivation for face work should not be understood so much as conscious individual strategy or the realisation of the speaker's wants, but rather as determined by the situation and by the cultures of the participants. O'Driscoll argues that "the concepts have to be extricated from B&L's construal of face as wants" (2007: 474). This point will be important for the analysis of face work in specific situations like forum discussions.

A more radical re-elaboration of the face concept has been proposed by Arundale (2006). The author not only criticises B/L, but also Goffman's conceptualisation. One of his reasons is theoretical: Face, in Goffman's sense, does not fit into a theoretical framework which Arundale defines as an interactional achievement model. The outlines of this model are drawn against the background of the concurring encoding/decoding model of communication which is – according to Arundale – not able to explain everything about communication and produces a reductive vision of face. The central concepts in this alternative framework for research on face are *interaction* and *relational*. Face is no longer defined as a matter of individual wants, but as a phenomenon that emerges in interaction, in relationships. The interactional dyad becomes the minimal unit of analysis (Arundale 2006: 196). For this author

[...] face is not a matter of the individual actor's public self-image. Instead, because social selves emerge in relationships with other social selves, face is an emergent property of relationships, and therefore a relational phenomenon, as opposed to a social psychological one. [...] face is a meaning or action, or more general an interpreting, that a participant forms in verbal and visible communication. (Arundale 2006: 201f.)

The reformulated concept of face differs from Goffman's model in two points that will be relevant for the discussion of communication in forums:

1. "For Goffman, social actors were individuals whose socialisation provided them with rules or scripts for ritual interaction [...]" (Arundale 2006: 198). Here the attention shifts to the construction of the normative framework in interaction. Individuals are not determined by socialisation instances, but produce themselves as social selves in communication. In the analysis of forum discussion we will focus on the construction of face in speaking and writing and in a dialectic relationship with the face work of other actors.

2. The setting of the interaction becomes much more important. From Arundale's point of view, Goffman is interested in "men and their moments" – in the impact of individual characteristics on the development of face. The revisited version of face aims to emphasise the contrary. In our discussion of communication forms that are partially determined by technical devices, analysis, in fact, will require a renewed approach that really puts more attention on "moments and their men". One of the questions will be which factors of the contextual conditions influence the specific strategies of face work.

In order to prepare a more concrete observation of face in discussion forums, another specification has to be made. The tradition of positive and negative face work also has to be revisited. Many authors have seen this as a weak point in Goffman's work. Without going into details, one can say that Arundale's solution (2006: 203f.) is indication of the dialectic of relational separateness and connectedness. This opposition is not to be understood as individual wants or needs, but rather as "characteristics, conditions or states evinced in the relationship the partners achieve interactionally". Connectedness is defined as "a complex of meanings and actions that may be apparent as unity, interdependence, solidarity,

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association, congruence, and more, between the relational partners" whereas separateness "indexes meanings and actions that may be voiced as differentiation, independence, autonomy, dissociation, divergence, and so on."²

This kind of face2-concept, in fact, can be used to describe and explain communicative reality. It fits into a theory of communication and will be able to produce insights about face work and its relevance in the more general process of verbal interaction. It also becomes clear that face work cannot be identified with politeness; it is much more general than this.

Summarising and simplifying the detailed discussion of Arundale and trying to make it productive for the purpose of the present work, the questions about face in forum discussion will be: How do actors adapt to the requirements of the communication form? How do they interact in the process of face work? How does face appear? How much, and in which way, do the technical properties influence the strategies of face work? How are actors separated from and connected with others? Which communicative moves are made to get connected and/or separated? How do they reach a balance between both states? Is there a specific state of balance expected by participants of forums? This will be considered in more detail in the next section.

3. Face in forum discussions

Forums are virtual rooms in the internet in which registered people can join in and participate in discussions about themes proposed by other users or by an administrator. There are different


² For a detailed discussion of the distinction between separateness and connectedness and a slightly different approach see O'Driscoll 2007: 477ff.

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types of forums and a great variety of forms (Ehrhardt 2009a: 118ff.). This paper will treat only examples from “Spiegel online-forum”; this is a news forum opened in the webpages of a news-magazine. Users can discuss political, cultural, economic or social topics – in many cases the starting point of the discussions is an article in the magazine or the online-platform. This kind of forum can be understood as a new and more interactive form of letters to the editor. The Spiegel-online-forum is one of the most popular ones in Germany in terms of number of participants and number of posts. Yet, obviously, it cannot be considered as representative of all forums. The analysis of this reality can only have the status of exemplification.

A first, rather unspectacular example taken from a discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of e-books will be useful in outlining the characteristics of the situation and in making some hypotheses regarding ‘what the moment makes with men and women’ (cf. also Ehrhardt 2009b: 174ff.).

#20 06.05.2010 11:30 von Jakob Schwarz

Zitat von **rumsfallera** 

Ich vermute, dass bei einem Vielleser so ein Ebookreader ca. 3 Jahre hält, dann geht er auf den Müll. Für den mittleren Preis solch einen Readers kann man schon an die 25 aktuelle Taschenbücher kaufen. Also, wer ein ehrlicher Digitalkonsument ist, der brauch schon ein bisschen, bis er den Anschaffungspreis wieder raus hat.

Was ist ein Vielleser? Wenn ich als Pendler pro Woche zwei Bücher lese macht das bei 45 Arbeitswochen schon 90 Bücher im Jahr. In den von Ihnen veranschlagen drei Jahren wären das 270 Bücher. Da habe ich den Reader locker drin, wenn die E-Bücher auch nur ein oder zwei Euro billiger sind als die gedruckten Ausgaben.

[Antworten / Zitieren](#)

(1) SpOn 2010

- First of all, forum discussions are a dialogic form of communication. The text written by "Jakob Schwarz" is a reply to another one – written by "rumsfallera" and literally quoted in the new text. It has to be understood as a second move in a conversation. In the reply the author refers to the former text e.g. repeating the key word "Vielleser", to the partner ("Ihnen") and to the content, commenting on it and arguing another opinion. Kreß (this volume) points out that forum communication has to be analysed as a form of connected communication ("Anschlusskommunikation") that can be fully understood only in the context of the pre-texts. The texts are coherent on a textual and a personal level. All the texts published in a forum are at least a comment on the original question posted by the initiator of the discussion – in many cases they are also direct answers to other contributions. Sometimes the discussion goes on; there can be very long exchanges between two people. However, this can work only if the partner has the impression that they are being respected and treated with the necessary amount of politeness and face work. When communicating in a dialogical form, actors will most probably have to pay attention to relational work.

- The discussion is clearly not synchronic. The first text was published at 10:51 of the same day. There is more than half an hour between the publishing of one text and the other. There are many examples where the chronological distance is even longer. It is not difficult to find answers to contributions posted several months before. Authors have time to plan, structure and write their texts. In fact, "Jakob Schwarz" publishes a real, well-structured argument. If an author is able to be so clear on the level of the organisation of his messages, he can be expected to structure the relational management at the same level and avoid face-threatening acts.

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- There is also a potentially big spatial distance between the partners. They might even be in different parts of the world while they discuss. Even if they are not, they cannot see or hear each other. There is very little information on the non-verbal channel. Face work takes place almost exclusively in verbal communication.
- The communication on forums is written communication. In comparison to other web-based communication forms such as chat rooms or to SMS-communication, authors respect the language norms very much.
- Participants are anonymous, readers only know the nickname under which an author is registered. Sometimes (as in the example) the nickname appears to be a real name, but there is no certainty that this is true. So one of the fundamental rules of politeness is suspended: In real-life encounters authentic self-presentation is one of the most important prerequisites for a successful conversation. Face work becomes rather difficult if we don't know who we are speaking to. Liedtke (2011: 60) supposes that an effect of anonymity could be a kind of immunisation against face-threats in the sense that it could be more acceptable (compared with other forms of communication) for a participant to say honestly what he thinks without using indirect or polite forms.³
- However, participants are not only "nameless". Partners also lack other information about the people with whom they are engaged. The only details everyone can see in the browser is the user status (new or frequent user), the number of posts published so far and, sometimes, a geographical localisation which might be as true as the name. It is not possible to produce a message based on a reliable hypothesis about the reader and his characteristics. In this setting identity does not matter. As a participant of forum discus-

³ For further discussion on aspects of self-presentation in forums see the contribution of Schrader-Kniffki in this volume.

sion, a person has no identity. It is only face that is relevant here. It will be interesting to see if this is compensated by closer attention to the construction of face, and what it means for the realisation of the dialectics between separateness and connectedness.

- There are explicit rules for forum communication: Spiegel-online does not reproduce the guidelines, but "objectification" is largely accepted and quoted by users of all forums. It is, e.g., forbidden to be impolite or ambiguous, to offend others or to forget that readers are also human beings with their rights and interests (cf. <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netiquette>). If a user does not respect these rules, there will be sanctions: the administrator will cancel his contribution. Actors are not free to style their relationships with partners as they want. Also face work-activities will, in some way, be limited.

- In general, relationship management is not as important as argumentation. As with the example, many texts in forums are written in a rather sober style. Users are expected to be clear in the presentation of their opinions and always to stay within the thematic line of the discussion. The content of the message counts much more than the relational activities. The text written by "Jakob Schwarz" also seems to suggest the hypothesis that in face work, separateness can be much more important than connectedness: the writer expresses his personal meaning that distinguishes him from others and does very little to create solidarity. He does not seem to be interested in forming a group with the readers.

- The discussion is public. Every writer addresses at least three types of readers: the direct partner to whom he answers, the other active participants of the conversation that are supposed to give their comments, and the passive readers that form a kind of public audience. Face is negotiated in a public space and in different circles of audience. If a participant loses his face, he certainly loses only his virtual face as an anonymous user, but a great number of

people will witness this loss; reconstruction will be more difficult than in private space.

- The texts in forums are, in general, persuasive, they aim to present an idea, a point of view or an opinion and convince readers to share it or at least to reason on it. If there are face work and politeness activities, it could be strategic; actors use it to make their opinion more acceptable to others. In comparison with other forms of communication there is a clear preference for dissension: a forum discussion cannot go on if everybody has the same opinion. Agreement is not at all the preferred strategy within the forum-community as pointed out also by Angouri/Tseliga. The authors state that what is acceptable and allowed depends very much on the concrete context of a communication and on local practices. In their analysed data from Greek forums there is, as in the German examples, a clear tendency to disagreement:

“Disagreement is the norm in the two fora we study as the topics the participants bring to discussion are typically highly controversial.” (Angouri/Tseliga 2010: 60)

So the format stimulates the expression of different points of view and speech acts such as criticism, correction, disagreement, expression of doubt and other potentially face-threatening activities (Ehrhardt 2010: 177; cf. also the contribution of Thaler in this volume). It will be interesting to see in which ways these speech acts are realised and if face work is used to mitigate the impact.

The characteristics of forum communication mentioned above seem to suggest that there is a well-defined line for the discussions and that the context sets a frame for the possible face work of the participants. The anonymous online-discussion might be polemic, but it always has to be theme-orientated, cooperative, responsible, serious and ethically and politically correct. Every user is expected to present himself as a person interested in the opinions of others, as polite, critical, well-informed about the facts in discussion,

willing to say something new etc. Forum discussions therefore pre-structure face, there is a kind of default-face which every writer has to accept in order to be admitted as a participant.

Obviously, however, this is not enough to create an interesting discussion. Forum-authors will do more than simply be the ideal average user. What they can do, and in fact do, will be the object of the following section. Some examples will be discussed in order to see what is possible and acceptable. According to the relational notion of face presented in the second section, the examples will all be texts in which the face of one actor is for some reason mentioned or discussed by another. In many cases this denotes that there is some conflict regarding face, or that there is something wrong with the face of one author. The hypothesis is that "it is the participants' interpretations, not the analyst's, that comprise the evidence in studying facework" (Arundale 2006: 209).

4. Examples

Even at a quick glance on forum discussions it becomes evident that there really is a great amount of face work taking place. Engaging in this kind of discussion has much in common with the moment of the initiation of a conversation with an unknown person: it is important for a speaker to show that they are aware of the goal of the interaction and is willing to do everything to reach it; but it is also important to establish contact on a personal level, to present oneself as a respectable actor, to show the necessary respect to others and to demonstrate that one's engagement is not only formal, but sustained by a certain, also personal, interest. The following examples have been chosen in order to demonstrate which communicative acts speakers perform so as to personalise the discussion, to develop individual features and to demonstrate

how other actors react to this, and how, with their reaction, they constitute face. A second group of examples shows moments in which there is something wrong on the level of relational work: a speech act stimulates reactions which give evidence that face has been threatened or violated.

In a discussion thread about the foreign policy of the German chancellor Merkel in the moment of the crisis of the Euro and the EU-institutions (SpOn 2012a), for instance, there is a rather long exchange between two participants about their personal situation and the coherence between this and their positions held in the discussions. One speaker (his nickname is “Finnegan”) presents himself as a “basic socialist” (post no. 18) because he is owner of company shares and therefore wants to make sure that normal citizens are in possession of capital. Other users answer that it was exactly this kind of financial speculation that caused the crisis. Someone describes the way he acts as “getting rich without working”. To one of them, named “krassopoteri”, “Finnegan” answers:

- (2) Ich frage mich, wovon Sie wohl leben wollen, wenn Sie nicht mehr arbeiten können, weil Sie zu alt sind. Von der Rente?? Da werden Sie später aber mal eine böse Überraschung erleben. (no. 29)

I ask myself what you are going to live on when you are unable to work because you are too old. On the pension?? You will have a bad surprise later.

These two people now become the main actors of the conversation. One reason for the intense discussion which ensues is the fact that “krassopoteri” also touches a personal level. His answer is:

- (3) Gemach Bruder, ich lebe bereits seit 2003 von meiner Rente. Weil ich auch schon seit ich 50 Jahre alt war, lang ist es her, immer ziemlich genau wusste, was ich zu erwarten hatte, wurde ich auch nicht enttäuscht. Ich sag es noch einmal, schönen Gruss von der Insel, Sie haben sich den absolut Falschen ausgesucht. (no. 32)

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Slowly, brother, I have been living on my pension since 2003. Because since I was 50, a long time ago, I have known rather well what I had to expect, I have not been disappointed. I say it again, many greetings from the island, you have chosen the wrong person.

Both actors here go much beyond their anonymous status as forum users, they reveal information about their personal situation. This is not absolutely necessary in order to motivate their positions – on the contrary: it is not easy to see how it relates to foreign policy. The self-presentation is a surplus of personal involvement which is productive for the maintenance of controversial discussion, because it offers positions which can be challenged and it demonstrates personal engagement and authority in the discussion.

In terms of face work, the communicative actions are understood by partners in the sense of separateness, a move towards the constitution of a subject as unique, special and different from others: from now on “krassopoteri” is treated by all users as the person that lives abroad and discusses German politics from this point of view. Yet that is not all: the reaction shows that it is accepted also as an effort to do something in order for the discussion to go on and to be animated, to make it appear as an exchange between people that know each other and feel close, not as a discussion about abstract positions but about abstract positions held by concrete people. Otherwise the partner would not accept the topic and even continue it by saying that he is living on an island (later it turns out to be a British island). So the self-presentation is also interpreted as a signal of connectedness, of constitution of a group.

The quoted exchange of messages shows that this works, but other quotations give the impression that it is not accepted by all readers. Some participants criticise the two actors for their personal information and for losing contact with the argument of the discussion:

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- (4) Die letzten 12 Beiträge befassen sich nur noch mit privaten oder sonstigen Finanzproblemen. (no. 70)

The last 12 postings only speak about private and other financial problems.

- (5) Und solchen privaten Schmarren breiten Sie hier aus? (no. 71)

And you lay out that private stuff here?

Obviously those two writers would like everyone to accept the theme-oriented, sober and impersonal style of a forum-discussion and limit face work to what is necessary in order to maintain and ascribe default-face. Debates regarding the right type and amount of face work give evidence of what is considered to be adequate in the given context.

Another type of debate regards violations or threats to face. It has already been noted that in a controversial debate there will be many risks of bothering the face of others. The discussion is sometimes rather polemic and some contributions would most probably be seen as offensive in other settings. In the forum discussion they pass without being noted. However, it is also easy to find examples in which a participant reacts and makes understood to a speaker that he has gone too far. This will be discussed with two concluding examples in which writers try to correct something stated by others. In a discussion about the best main candidate of the opposition party for the next German elections (SpOn 2012b) a user complains about errors in a text published in a newspaper; those errors give a completely wrong idea of the author's ideas. The user especially complains about the ignorance of translators or printers that – from his point of view – are responsible for the final version of a text. "matthes schwalbe" answers him:

- (6) Forumist Berg, nur der Ordnung halber: ein Drucker ist nicht für evtl. Fehler im Inhalt einer Drucksache verantwortlich- dafür gibt es bei uns im Westen Lektoren. [...] Und schwups, schon haben Sie wieder was gelernt lieber [...]. (no. 40)

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Forum-writer Berg, just to be correct: a printer is not responsible for errors in a manuscript – for this, we in the west have proof-readers. [...] So you have learnt something new, dear [...].

The author here establishes himself as a person that knows better, he says that “berg” has directed his criticism towards the wrong people. He states that the partner is not competent in this occasion, threatening his status as a well-prepared participant in the discussion who argues on the basis of solid knowledge. And “berg” replies on the same personal level, he does not say anything about the topic of the discussion but comments on the face-threatening act of his interlocutor:

(7) “Oberlehrer” kann man eigentlich nicht falsch schreiben.:-) (no. 42)
“oberlehrer” can’t be written in the wrong way.:-)

The term “Oberlehrer” is usually used to refer to people who lack intellectual modesty; they believe they know everything better than all the others and leave others to feel ignorant. What is interesting here is the fact that on a superficial level “berg” does not react to the threat to his own face; he comments on the image of “matthes schwalbe” trying to make the correction appear as a threat to the author’s face. Probably the criticism formulated in (6) was too direct, strong and personal to be accepted. “matthes schwalbe” did not do enough to protect the partner’s face, to underline that he still feels part of the group and maintains solidarity with the others. Whatever he wanted to communicate here – in the eyes of his readers he appears to be arrogant, pedantic, uncooperative, at least at this moment. With his apparent lack of tact, sensibility and empathy he produces only separation and no connectedness. Where the face of other actors might really be threatened, a writer has to use more polite speech acts to avoid communicative incidents like the one in the example. If he is not polite enough, he risks undermining his own face or his reputation as a cooperative participant.

The dynamics of the situation are completely different in another section of the discussion on the politics of the German chancellor. At a certain point a user (“allana”) speaks about financial speculation and quotes a poem by Tucholsky in which the author blames capitalism. The speaker states that the poem was published in 1930, but can be applied perfectly to the present situation. The user “ray 4912” answers:

- (8) interessant aber leider nicht von T. (hätte man leicht daran erkennen können, wenn man gewisse moderne" Fachausdrücke sieht. [...] Deshalb ist Ihre Trouvaille doch wertvoll, danke! (no. 88)

Interesting, but not by Tucholsky (one could easily have noticed if one sees certain “modern” technical terms) [...] Anyway your trouvaille is precious, thanks!

Here too a writer reacts to an error of another – he has immediately noticed that Tucholsky cannot be the author of this poem and also makes clear that the reader should easily understand this. This also seems to allude to a lack of intelligence and preparation regarding the argument. However, the addressee (she turns out to be female) is not at all offended, she manages to create a polite exchange out of this unpleasant situation. Her answer is:

- (9) aber ein “Danke” auch von mir für die Aufklärung. Jetzt weiß ich sogar was eine “Trouvaille” ist, und ich habe mal ein bißchen “recherchiert”: [...] Jetzt wüsste ich zu gern, was es mit der Sprache von 1930 so auf sich hat. Sprachen die Menschen denn damals so vollkommen anders als heute? Ich glaube, dass ich meine Muttersprache “deutsch” einigermaßen beherrsche; allerdings bin ich keine Spezialistin auf diesem Gebiet. (no. 89)

Anyway a “thank you” from me for the illumination. Now I even know what a “Trouvaille” is and I have done some “research”. [...] Now I would really like to know what it is about the language of 1930. Did people really speak in a completely different way than today? I believe I speak my mother tongue “German” rather well; but I’m not an expert in this field.

It is also worth quoting the next message of “ray4912”:

Claus Ehrhardt

(10) Danke für den Dank und auch nochmals zurück;-) Die Herkunft der Termini haben Sie ja bereits geklärt! Ich hätte präzisieren sollen, dass ich den Slang der heutigen Börsenmafia, meinte, [...] Sicher bin ich nicht, auch kein Experte in Linguistik und zudem konservativer Anleger in eigener bescheidener Immobilie [...] ;-)

Thanks for the thank you and thank you back ;-) You have already explained the origins of the technical terms. I should have said that I was talking about the slang of the modern stock exchange mafia [...] I'm not sure, I'm not an expert in linguistics and furthermore a conservative investor in modest terrain property [...]

A potentially highly face-threatening act does not bother the discussion – on the contrary, it develops into an exchange of polite messages and a friendly atmosphere; the writers involved even use greeting forms (“mfg” and “sympathisierender gruss”) to end their messages which is rather unusual in this forum. This face-threatening act, in the end, also produces connectedness. “Ray4912” not only introduces himself as a more critical and competent reader of the poem, he also recognises the relevance of the quotation and demonstrates his gratefulness for it. “Allana” seems to be slightly sarcastic when she mentions that she has also learnt a new French word, but she immediately recognises that she was wrong and accepts that her own face is in danger. She simply turns her lack of knowledge into virtue and asks other questions. In this way she accepts the partner’s signals aiming at a confidential atmosphere and in this moment creates a positive face for herself and for “ray”.

5. Conclusions

The discussion of the examples should certainly go into further detail and should include more texts. This is not possible here.

Despite this, the discussion produces initial evidence that there really is a kind of default face that all participants in forum discussions are expected to respect. It also shows that often actors are not satisfied with having only this basic face. They want to appear more individual. However, this is risky, it may be criticised by others and it may damage the communicative balance. Forum users are probably more tolerant to face-threats than are speakers in “normal” conversations. However, incidents happen – especially when the separateness-orientation becomes much more important than the effort to maintain connectedness.

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