# Disempowering the powerful: A critical pragmatic analysis of political discourse using Brown and Levinson's Face Theory

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# DISEMPOWERING THE POWERFUL: A CRITICAL PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE USING BROWN AND LEVINSON'S FACE THEORY

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*Power and dominance exist everywhere and occur at the macro and micro levels. Being powerful and domineering are factors that serve as emblems for the people in the realm of politics. Power relations are overtly exercised in such discourse. But what is interesting is how power and dominance exist between or among those people who are branded as "powerful;" thus, using the Face Theory of Brown and Levinson (1978), this discourse analysis paper analyzed the power relations that transpired in a senate hearing and its relationship with the Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) used by the people involved in the discourse. A Philippine Senate hearing excerpt served as the primary corpus for analysis. Results showed that the people in the discourse were all powerful, creating tension when they projected their dominance on one another. Each member threatened and challenged their positive and negative faces. The power play evolved into a "pass-the-ball" effect, and no one has absolute power because it weakens once the person wielding its face is threatened. Hence, to disempower the empowered, a person must learn how to play and use FTAs such as insulting, disagreeing, disapproving, provoking, commanding, and demanding against the powerful to strike a social balance.*

**Keywords:** Disempowering, Critical Pragmatic Analysis, Political Discourse, Face Theory.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Power and dominance exist everywhere, and its imposition over its recipient can happen both at the macro and micro levels. It may transpire in the government, school, offices, public places, or between the elite and the marginalized, employer to employee, teacher to student, and a family member to another. According to Foucault (1972), power can be enacted and felt regardless of a person's social status or group membership. Power relations are overtly exercised in the discourse of politics. Being assertive and domineering are two salient factors that serve as emblems for the people in the field of politics. The more powerful a person is, the more access he has to the organization in which he is a member and involved. This dictum is socially accepted because it has been socially constructed and ideologically defined to people for so long. Because of this, it is no doubt that political issues and pressing problems in the government have become so typical to most Filipinos. Mudslingings, grievances, and chaotic scenes during legal proceedings are some of the political dramas that seem to be usual and part of the political story for the Filipinos. But what is interesting is how power and dominance exist between or among those already powerful people. Moreover, how is power relation exercised to those who are considered empowered? What tensions might resurface if these people who exercise dominance over the marginalized were in one place and talking about a particular issue? What roles will these people be taking? Will they all be powerful, or are they going to trade places? With all these in mind, the researcher was ignited to conduct a study about power relations among powerful people, specifically the public servants in the government. The primary data source was the excerpt of the senate hearing that transpired on October 03, 2017. The hearing was about the complaint made by Asec Mocha Uson regarding the allegedly fake news made by the GMA News online portal about her. The excerpt runs for ten minutes. It was transcribed and analyzed to determine the existing power relations.

In the field of pragmatics, two of the most well-known analysts were Brown & Levinson (1978), who proposed the Face theory. They pointed out that face is something people want or desire from others; they want to be unimpeded and be approved of in certain respects. According to Sifianou (2011), face refers to the desire to present oneself with dignity and honor. It is the self-image people

present to others and the conception of self that each person displays in particular interactions with others (Zuroff, 2016). Brown and Levinson (1978) asserted that face has two kinds: the positive face and the negative face. A positive face talks about the desire of a member that their wants become acceptable to others. Examples are the desire to be liked, admired, and accepted. Meanwhile, negative face refers to the want of every competent adult member that their actions be unimpeded by others. Examples include the desire to be self-sufficient and not to be imposed upon.

In the excerpt of the senate meeting, clashes among the senators, Asec. Uson and the GMA news online representative were highly observable. Using the Face theory, this research paper aims to analyze the faces projected by the interlocutors involved in the discourse and how these faces show the subversion of "powerful," disempowering them as observed in the face they used in the discourse.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

Food ethics is an interdisciplinary area of food The point of discussion of the author laid on the analysis of the faces projected by the interlocutors involved in the senate hearing and how these faces showed the subversion of "powerful," making them disempowered, as observed in the faces that they used in the discourse. Specifically, it aimed to answer the following: 1) How does power play operate between or among those already powerful people? 2) How is power relation exercised by those who are considered empowered? 3) What tensions will resurface if all the empowered are in one place to argue on an issue? 4) What face-threatening acts will the powerful use once involved in an argumentation? and 5) How does using face-threatening acts help disempower the powerful?

## 3. LITERATURE

### 3.1 Face

Definitions that pertain to face emphasize interpersonal relationships, language, and social context. Amid variations, there are commonalities shared by its definitions. The face is socially or interactively based, according to Redmond (2015). A person uses a particular face when interacting with others. To Moore (2017), the face is the image people use to present themselves in a specific communicative situation., anchored in the desire to be seen depending on the communicative goal.

Moreover, Cutrone (2011) underscored that the face changes along with the situation's dynamics and is reflected through behaviors. Goffman's (1967) work laid the hallmark for most contemporary face theory. He focused on the interplay between people and the social environment, elucidating that the face is the positive social value portrayed by a person to be perceived by others during communications. Positive social worth pertains to how an individual wants to be seen as having value to others. A person adheres to that value in different ways. Meanwhile, Nodoushan (2012) emphasized the use of faces to the accepted standards of society and the consideration of individuals' perception of a given social situation.

Blitvich (2013) explained that physical faces served as metaphors for conceptual face explanations, which reflect specific identities to others. Kinnison (2017) emphasized the values reflected in the face as a desire for self-presentation, showing dignity and honor. Such values are part of politeness theory because people honor others by being courteous and respectful.

Brown and Levinson (1987) explained that the desire of a person how to be seen by others is the basis of using a particular face. Likewise, the desire to be unhindered and be approved in certain respects triggers face uses. Brown and Levinson argue that in communication, one can observe the desire of interlocutors to have their faces supported, and these can be validated based on the responses shown through respect and honor by others.

### 3.2 Positive and Negative Faces

Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed the two components of the face: positive and negative faces. A positive face is an aspiration of a speaker to be desirable to others and the concepts that an individual maintains (like good education, status in life, and good relationship). These things are associated with their daily routines and interactions with others. Meanwhile, the negative face pertains to the desire of a speaker to be unhindered by others.

To Lim and Bowers (1991), the face has three types. First is the Fellowship face, which pertains to the desire for involvement and acceptance by others. Second is the Competence face, which refers to the desire to validate one's abilities through the respect of others. The Fellowship and Competence faces are positive faces because they represent the desire to be positively perceived by

others. On the other hand, the third face, autonomy, refers to the desire not to be imposed on and adheres to the idea that people who want their status remains unchanged.

### 3.3 Face-Threatening Act

During communicative interactions, Goffman (1955) explained that there would be times when people are troubled in their attempts to use a particular face. He termed such experience as being out of the face, shamefaced, and in threats to face. It happens when external forces challenge or undermine an individual's current face (Sifianou, 2012). There are three ways an individual's face can be threatened: unintentional, maliciously, and incidental (Goffman, 1955). Each type of threat differs regarding how dangerous it is perceived and the strategies people employ to restore their face.

One can look into their emotional reactions to identify how people's faces have been threatened. Embarrassment, shame, agitation, confusion, and defensiveness are the common results of a threatened face (Wieser and Brosch, 2012). However, Konakahara (2017) said that those who can maintain their face amid threatening acts maintain their poise and composure. People who can keep their stature amidst their faces being challenged can conceal the tendency to become shamefaced in any heated encounters.

Politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1987) explored the face-threatening acts, which they define as actions contrary to the faces projected by the addressee and speaker. FTAs can challenge a person's positive and negative faces and may occur during interactions. Salman and Betti (2020) emphasized that external forces may influence the degree of threat. These forces include how the interlocutors face challenges and how people connect with others who threaten their faces. These forces have power differences, level of attraction, role descriptions, and degree of dependence. Pramesti et al. (2019) emphasized that in dealing with FTAs, the age, background, culture, demands, and expectations associated with the situation are crucial factors that must be put into consideration.

## 4  METHODOLOGY

### 4.1  Research Design

The researcher used discourse analysis in analyzing the content of the data. The primary data source was the excerpt of the senate hearing that transpired on October 03, 2017. The hearing was about the complaint made by PCOO Asst. Sec. Mocha Uson regarding the allegedly fake news made by the GMA News online portal about her. The excerpt runs for ten minutes. It was transcribed and analyzed to determine the existing power relations. The framing analysis style and the primary approach of coding, comprehending, synthesizing, theorizing, and re-contextualizing were used to identify the recurring face-threatening acts in the discourse. The data were treated using the framework of Brown and Levinson's Face Theory (1978).

### 4.2 Analytical Framework

To analyze the faces projected by the interlocutors involved in the senate hearing and how these faces showed the subversion of "powerful," Brown and Levinson's Face Theory (1978) was used. The face theory was used to explain communicative interactions involving politeness. Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory argues that people have two faces; the positive face is the aspiration of a speaker to be desirable to others and the concepts that an individual maintains, while the negative face pertains to the desire of a speaker to be unhindered by others. Upon identifying the different faces used by the interlocutors in the discourse, face-threatening acts were determined by the researchers based on the exchanges of conversation and the use of positive and negative faces. According to Yule (1996), FTAs happens when a speaker says or does something that threatens another person's expectations regarding self-portrayal. Analyzing the flow of conversation, determining the positive and negative faces, and underscoring the face-threatening acts that resurfaced in the senate hearing unveiled the process of disempowering the powerful.
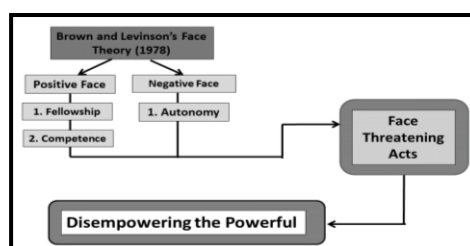


Figure 1. Analytical Framework of Disempowering the Powerful using Brown and Levinson's Face Theory

### 4.3 Research Procedure

The procedure followed in conducting this research has two phases. Phase 1 included watching the excerpt of the senate hearing that transpired on October 03, 2017, about the complaint made by PCOO Asst. Sec. Mocha Uson regarding the allegedly fake news made by the GMA News online portal about her. It served as the primary data source, running for ten minutes. It was transcribed and analyzed to determine the existing power relations. Phase 2 included the framing analysis style and the primary approach of coding, comprehending, synthesizing, theorizing, and re-contextualizing to identify the recurring face-threatening acts in the discourse. The data were treated using the framework of Brown and Levinson's Face Theory (1978).

### 5. DISCUSSION

In communication, faces are threatened either explicitly or implicitly. In analyzing the faces of the interlocutors involved in the discourse, the researcher used face-threatening acts (FTA). Lim & Bowers (1991) asserted that a positive face could be threatened if the need to be accepted, liked, and treated as a member of the same group is challenged. Examples of these are disapproval, criticism, and complaints. Meanwhile, the negative face can be threatened if independence and image not to be imposed are challenged. Examples of these are requests, orders, and warnings, among others. In the discourse, the following face-threatening acts were observed.

**Table 1**. Positive and Negative Face Threatening Acts were observed in the excerpt of the senate hearing dated October 03, 2017, concerning PCOO Asst. Sec. Mocha Uson (complainant) and GMA News online agency (defendant) about fake news

| Types of Faces | Face Threatening Acts (FTA) |
| --- | --- |
| *Positive* | |
| 1. Fellowship (+) | 1. Insulting/Shaming<br>2. Disagreeing<br>3. Disapproving<br>4. Provoking<br>5. Asking for clarification<br>6. Verifying something |
| 2. Competence (+) | 1. Avoiding<br>2. Disrespecting/ Ignoring those in the positions<br>3. Neglecting orders<br>4. Making excuses |
| *Negative* | |
| 1. Autonomy (-) | 1. Imposing<br>2. Commanding<br>3. Demanding<br>4. Suggesting<br>5. Warning<br>6. Reminding |

Table. 1 shows the positive and negative face-threatening acts observed in the discourse in the senate hearing dated October 03, 2017, concerning PCOO Asst. Sec. Mocha Uson (complainant) and GMA News online agency (defendant) about fake news. It can be gleaned from the result that the positive fellowship face has the following face-threatening acts: insulting, disagreeing, disapproving, provoking, asking for clarification, and verifying something. These FTAs were generally used by the senators, especially by Sen. Bam Aquino against PCOO Asst. Sec. Mocha Uson. lines such as:

**Face Threatening Acts for Fellowship Face (+)**
*Statement 29*
Sen Bam:
*Ahhh hinihinge mo sa GMA online ang side mo. Sa dinamidaming blog mo tungkol sa amin dito, may isang beses ba na humingi ka ng side namin?*
Sen. Bam:
So sa tingin mo ba dapat hininge nya ang side mo?
*Statement 39*
Sen. Bam:
*In your case, never kang huminge ng sides ng lahat ng mga ginawa mong blog dito. In fact the other*

*day, may blog ka sa minority. May isang beses ka bang huminge ng side namin?*

*Statement 55*

Sen Bam:

*Because…in the grounds of?*

In statements 29, 39, and 55, provocations can be observed in the framing of questions. The manner of asking the question and Sen. Bam intends to provoke PCOO Asst. Sec. Mocha to be involved in the argument. In the process of eliciting a response, his tone became demanding. These two face-threatening acts challenged the positive fellowship face of PCOO Asst. Sec. Mocha, and that is to be accepted by others.

*Statement 33*

Sen. Bam

*No no no.I agree. Asec Mocha, sabi mo kay ano…pardon, what's your name again (referring to GMA representative) You asked him kung hininge ba nya ang side mo, and he said he tried. And sinabe mo hindi?*

In this statement, the senator is asking for clarification, signifying the answer of PCOO Asst. Sec. Mocha was not accepted by the senator.

*Statement 57*

Sen. Bam:

*(laughing) No..no. You don't have the right to refuse, you have the right to self-incrimination. So ibig sabihin noon, mag…*

*Statement 59*

Sen. Bam:

*Anong point ang sinasabi mo Asec. Mocha? And self-incrimination presupposes may pinapataw sayong grievance. Ano yun?*

Statements 57 and 59 clearly show how shaming was embedded in the statements and questions made by Sen. Bam. Apparently, PCOO Asst. Sec. Uson did not have background knowledge regarding the legal proceeding inside a senate hearing. In the discourse, Sen. Bam knew more compared to Asec. Mocha and his manner of asking served as a way to resurface the ignorance of PCOO Asst. Sec. Mocha.

*Statement 70*

Sen. Poe:

*Asec. Mocha, ganito lang, kunting ano lang…kunting payo lang ukol dito. Hindi naman incriminating yan kahit sagutin mo kasi it doesn't imply naman a crime. It might be,others can…can probably say that..ahhh. ahmmm, incompetence or negligence or opinionated blogging, but you can answer it.*

In statement 70, Sen. Poe clarifies the idea of self-incrimination to PCOO Asst. Sec. Uson. Yet, in her statement, one can observe the words such as *incompetence, negligence,* and *opinionated blogging.* The subtleness of the statement implicitly tells that Asst. Sec. Uson was guilty of what she made, and it was indirectly stated.

For the competent positive face, the observable face-threatening acts were: avoiding, silencing, ignoring those in the positions, neglecting orders, and making excuses.

**A. Face Threatening Acts for Competence Face (+)**

*Statement 40*

Asec. Mocha:

*Sen. With all due respect, hindi po ako journalist.*

In statement 40, the use of the hedge indicates that PCOO Asst. Sec Mocha might sound offensive to her answer. That is why she used the phrase *with all due respect".* In effect, the subtleness of the statement shows disrespect on the part of PCOO Asst. Sec Mocha. It threatens the competence positive face of Sen. Bam, which is the image of respect.

*Statement 49*

Sen. Poe:

*I think the answer is no, but then your reason is…because….*

*Statement 50*

Sen. Bam:

*I'm sorry Madame Chair, I would like to hear it from Asec. Mocha.*

*Statement 51*

Sen. Poe:

*Ok….go ahead.*

In the middle of the argument, there were instances where Sen. Bam ignored the position of Sen. Poe as the presiding officer. Sen. Bam avoided and neglected even the order on how the proceeding should be conducted. The bypassing of the legal proceedings was observed in the following statements:

*Statement 60*

Sen. Bam:

*Madame Chair, I only ask a simple question…*

*Statement 61*

Sen. Poe:

*Sen. Bam…I think.. I think..*

*Statement 62*

Sen. Zubiri:

*I don't think madame chair that we should embarrass here our resource person who ever they*

are whether  they are from the other side of the political party.

*Statement 63*

Sen. Bam:

*No…no..no. Mr. chair,Madame Chair*

*Statement 64*

Sen. Zubiri

*No..Madame Chair..*

*Statement 65*

Sen. Poe:

*Ok.ok. order..order. Sen.* Zubiri

*Statement 66*

Sen. Zubiri:

*Yes Madame Chair. Every senator should address the chair rather than,..including her , Asec. Mocha, to Ms. Chair  so that we will have an order here so that we don't embarrass each other.*

In the thread, it can be seen that Sen. Bam's tone and manner of questioning were so imposing that the role of Sen. Poe as presiding officer became meaningless. It was not until Sen. Zubiri observed it and gave his remarks. In this case, the competent positive face of Sen. Poe was threatened. As a result, she reminded everyone that all concerns should be directed to her since she is the chairperson of the proceedings.

Meanwhile, the following were observed for the face-threatening acts for autonomy:  imposing, commanding, demanding, suggesting, and warning. Below is the analysis of the FTA for autonomy.

## B. Face Threatening Acts for Autonomy Face (+)

*Statement 21*

Sen. Bam:

*I saw it. Di ba nakataas ang kamay mo? Naandon yung mukha mo.*

In this statement, Sen. Bam was imposing that PCOO Asst. Sec. Mocha did the claim made to her by GMA news online. This FTA threatens the autonomy face of PCOO Asst. Sec. Uson because the aim of statement itself is to impose that she was guilty.

*Statement 45*

Sen. Bam:

*Maglalabas po kami mamaya ano. But can I ask lang, Asec Mocha, huminge k aba ng side naming all those times na sumulat ka ng blogs mo?*

The face-threatening act in this statement is threatening. The line *Maglalabas po kami mamaya ano* is a strong statement to show that Sen. Bam was definite with his claim and had evidence. It threatens the autonomy face of PCOO Asst. Sec.

Uson because the imposition of something was strong because of the act of threatening.

*Statement 47*

Sen. Bam:

*Yes or No Ma'am.*

*Statement 52*

Sen. Bam:

*Yes or No, may isang beses ba na hinige mo yung side naming?*

Both statements 47 and 52 show a demand. This face-threatening act challenges the negative face of PCOO Asst. Sec. Uson, which is autonomy. The framing of questions and the manner of telling them demanded an answer.

## 6. DISEMPOWERING THE POWERFUL

The Face theory of Brown and Levinson (1978) reveals the power relations among the "powerful." In the discourse, all the persons involved possessed power and carried dominance because they were all government servants who occupied some of the highest positions in the government. They are the senators and the Assistant Secretary of the Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO) Mocha Uson. They all have the power and dominance and have high social access. However, due to the case raised by PCOO Asst. Sec. Uson, regarding allegedly fake news propagated by GMA News online, all their powers were tested and challenged in one hearing. PCOO Asst. Sec. Mocha is the complainant, while the GMA news online through its representative was the defendant. Sen. Poe was the presiding officer during the senate hearing, and several senators were there.

When the proceeding started, tension was observed between the complainant and the defendant. The heat was even fuelled when Sen. Bam began to ask questions to PCOO Asst. Sec. Mocha. The tension was observed because of PCOO Asst. Sec. Mocha knew that she also had power and did not easily give in to Sen. Bam though the Sen. was the one dominating the discourse. Yet what is interesting here is when Sen. Bam's manner of dealing with the matter lost its control and overpowered the presiding officer, Sen. Poe. Furthermore, the senators' tones and pitches were tense because they did not want to be overpowered. It wasn't until Sen. Zubiri reminded everyone about the need for decorum in the proceedings.

The positive and negative faces of everyone involved in the conversation were threatened and challenged by one another. As a result, their

threatened expressions reflected their power struggle. Sen. Bam was the dominant perpetrator of the face-threatening acts against PCOO Asst. Sec. Uson.The power of PCOO Asst. Sec. Uson weakened as her positive and negative faces were both threatened and challenged. Moreover, the power of the presiding officer who was Sen. Poe, was also overpowered by Sen. Bam. The competent positive face and the expectation of valuing what Sen. Poe was doing as Sen. Bam neglected the presiding officer. Yet, in the conversation exchanges, Sen. Bam's positive and negative faces were also threatened by the answers given by PCOO Asst. Sec. Uson and by the responses coming from the other senators. In this case, the question remains: in a space occupied by the "powerful," who will stand tall among them all? In the given discourse, it was clear that the power play became a "pass-the-ball" effect. No one holds absolute power because it weakens once the face of the person possessing it is threatened; thus, one can conclude that to disempower the empowered, one must learn how to play and use face-threatening acts against the powerful. In this way, one may strike a social balance.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The paper analyzed the power relations that transpired in a senate hearing and its relationship with the face-threatening acts that each person involved in the discourse experienced. Results showed that the people involved in the discourse were all powerful, creating tension when they projected their dominance on one another. Each member threatened and challenged the positive and negative faces of the participants in the discourse. The power play became a "pass-the-ball" effect, and it was observed that no one holds the absolute power because it weakens once the face of the person possessing it is threatened; thus, one can conclude that to disempower the empowered, one must learn how to play and use face-threatening acts against the powerful. In this way, one may strike a social balance.

### Implications of the Findings

The research findings can be used to subvert the idea that power only resides in the powerful. In any discourse, power relations occur. With the help of the face theory in the pragmatics field, anyone can benefit because it suggests that even ordinary people have the latent power to do something for social good. The understanding of face-threatening acts and their application over the powerful can be an answer to social injustices and inequalities that transpire both on the macro and micro levels of society.

### Contribution to the Pragmatics Analysis

Though the study combined critical and pragmatics discourse, the study can still help in the conduct of pragmatic analysis if the analyst intends only to study the face theory or even the speech acts that transpire in the discourse. One can further the investigation of the application of face theory in daily conversation or everyday discourse.

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