

# An Exploration of the Concept of Face in Saudi Arabic Folk Expressions

Inas I. Almusallam

Department of Humanities & Administrative Sciences, College of Applied Studies & Community Service,  
King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Received December 11, 2021; Revised January 5, 2022; Accepted January 28, 2022

## Cite This Paper in the following Citation Styles

(a): [1] Inas I. Almusallam , "An Exploration of the Concept of Face in Saudi Arabic Folk Expressions," *Linguistics and Literature Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 1 - 9, 2022. DOI: 10.13189/lls.2022.100101.

(b): Almusallam, I. (2022). *An Exploration of the Concept of Face in Saudi Arabic Folk Expressions*. *Linguistics and Literature Studies*, 10(1), 1 - 9. DOI: 10.13189/lls.2022.100101.

Copyright©2022 by authors, all rights reserved. Authors agree that this article remains permanently open access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License

**Abstract** In recent years, there has been much debate about the concept of face. Some researchers call to consider face as an area of research on its own [1], [2], [3], [4]. The study investigates how the concept of face can be related to the Arab world through the exploration of the emic meanings of face as encoded in Saudi Arabic folk terms. The corpus includes 89 expressions collected using my knowledge of Arabic as a native speaker of the language through observation of authentic conversations, TV series and programs, Twitter, and Google. The analysis shows that although the concept of face in Saudi culture can be individual and situational, it is seen as an individual's or group's property that emerges overtime as the accumulative effect of previous interactions with the same individuals or other members of the groups they belong to. Face appears to be a valuable possession more oriented to in-group relationships rather than individual autonomy, and it is mainly enhanced by retaining group and cultural values such as collectivism, honour, and religion. The study aims to stimulate further investigation of the etic and emic conceptualization of face as well as contribute to the related continuing debate in pragmatics by exploring a novel culture in the field.

**Keywords** Arabic, Brown and Levinson, Collectivism, Face, Goffman, Group Face

## 1. Introduction

Although the notion of face originated in China [5], it has not attracted attention in the West until the work of the sociologist Erving Goffman. Goffman introduced the

concept of face into social communication with "On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements of Social Interaction" (1955) and *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* [6]. His notion of face has been considered a key concept in both pragmatic studies and anthropology, sociolinguistics, sociology, psychology, communication studies, and related fields [3]. Face is perceived as a fundamental influence on human interaction. Agassi [7] believed that people are human "because they have face to care for—without it they lose human dignity". Although Goffman introduced the notion of face, Brown and Levinson's [8] application of face in the context of politeness theory is what increased its popularity.

Despite its importance, researchers disagree on how face should be defined. Most discussions have questioned the applicability of Brown and Levinson's notion of face across various cultural contexts [9], [10], [11] as face has been treated as a universal concept. However, cultures vary in how they view face [12], [13], [14], [15]. For example, Grainger, Mills and Sibanda [16] found that British and South African Choir members differed in their interpretations of face work. The understanding of face is affected by several factors in any culture, including personal values, self-identity, rights, and obligations of interactants, role expectations, and normative constraints [17], [18]. Bargiela-Chiappini's [5] extensive research found a clear-cut distinction between those cultures where face is considered a significant, if not dominant, factor that determines interpersonal behaviour and those where face is placed after other more dominant notions such as discernment, respect, and deference. Earley [17] noted the importance of understanding cultural conceptualizations of the social self and its relationship to

others in studying the dynamics of face and face work in interpersonal contacts.

Investigation of the concept of face has long been encompassed as a subordinate of im/politeness research. In the last decade, several politeness researchers have called for analysing face distinctly from im/politeness and for examining its folk and emic conceptualization in different cultural contexts [1], [2], [3], [4]. A key reason for this call is that face and face work include “issues broader than simply politeness” [19] (p. 3). O’Driscoll [20] described that face and politeness are different; face “is something interactants have” whereas politeness is “something they [interactants] do” (p. 22). In other words, politeness is a quality of interactions, but face belongs to the interactants themselves. Since then, several studies of face in Western and east-Asian cultures have been conducted, including TripAdvisor reviews in English, Italian, Dutch [21], and L2 German [22]. However, research on face as an independent concept from politeness remains in infancy in Arab cultural contexts. This paper aims to fill this gap by exploring the emic meanings of face in Saudi Arabic expressions that explicitly include the term ‘face’. It builds on Sifianou’s [4], [23] view that lay expressions of face may offer valuable insights into the concept and that Goffman [6] admittedly derived the face concept from “folk notions” [15] (p. 6). This account does not aim to capture how face is constructed in interaction [2]. It relies on data collected using my knowledge of Arabic as a native speaker through observation of authentic conversations, TV series and programs, Twitter, and Google. This investigation hopes to contribute to the emic conceptualization of face in an under-studied language and culture. The study also hopes to contribute to the etic conceptualization of face by exploring a novel culture in the field. By exploring how existing theoretical conceptualization of face relate to Saudi language use, I can contribute to the ongoing debate on the nature of face in politeness and pragmatics research. I may also highlight potential gaps for further research on the notion of face in Arab cultures.

In this paper, I first review the main discussions on the notion of face since Goffman [6] and then overview face with special reference to Arab nations. Next, I outline the study’s methodology and provide a qualitative analysis of face folk expressions. Finally, I offer a few conclusions regarding the face conceptualizations in Saudi folk expressions.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Overview of Face

We owe a debt of gratitude to the work of the sociologist Erving Goffman in our understanding of the concept of face in pragmatic research. Goffman [6] defined face as the following:

“The positive social value a person effectively claims

for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self-delineated in terms of approved social attributes—albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself.” (p. 5)

Face is thus the conceptualization people make of themselves through the interpretations of others in social interactions. People endeavour to maintain their face in social situations. They are emotionally attached to their face, so they feel good when their faces are maintained or enhanced; loss or harm of their face results in emotional pain and may be expressed in anger [6].

In an attempt to extend Goffman’s [6] notion of face, Brown and Levinson [8] proposed a universal theory of politeness in which they define face as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (p. 61). Their notion of face could be perceived as both self-image and the desire for a positive self-image, and it underpins two forms of face: ‘positive face’, which refers to the person’s desire for their wants be appreciated or desirable by at least some others, and ‘negative face’, which refers to the person’s want to have their actions “unimpeded” by others (p. 61-62). Brown and Levinson [8] argued that these face aspects could be threatened by what they call face-threatening acts (FTAs), and people employ politeness strategies to reduce face threats and to maintain each other’s face.

Although Brown and Levinson [8] have been influential, their concept of face has been criticized for their universality claim and Western bias [5], [24], [25], [26]. These later researchers dealt with interlocutors as individuals rather than as members of a society governed by its rules [27], [28], [29]. Researchers who worked with non-Western cultures strongly opposed the role of negative face outside of a so-called Western context. Several studies have found that the notion of face is perceived differently in Eastern cultures, including the Chinese [30], [31], Persian [27], Igbo [11], and Japanese [9], [10]. The Chinese face, for example, is argued to be a fundamentally more social and positive concept firmly embedded in relations [32].

This has encouraged a movement to seriously reconsider Goffman’s notion of face instead of Brown and Levinson’s, e.g. [33], [34], [35], [20], [29]. Some of Goffman’s [6] original ideas were ignored in Brown and Levinson’s [8] model, particularly the social, interactional, and relational aspects of face, which were original qualities of Goffman’s socio-psychological concept of face. Moreover, it is widely recognized that face work encompasses more than politeness because it includes a wider range of various kinds of interpersonal phenomena than politeness [15], [29], [36]. This move has been echoed, at least somewhat, in the emergence of other approaches in which politeness encompasses just one part of a much larger continuum, including rapport management theory [37], [38], relational work [34], and

face constituting theory [33], [39], [40].

However, the return move has its difficulties. Some researchers argued for reconsidering the recent call for a return to Goffman's original notion of face [3], [5], [38]. For example, even though Bargiela-Chiappini [5] called for revisiting Goffman's face [6], she highlighted that Goffman's view was proposed to investigate North American contexts and so is eventually rooted in individuals' concerns about enhancing or protecting their self-image. Haugh and Bargiela-Chiappini [3] argued that if we return to Goffman's face, we could move beyond the cognition of individuals to the norms shared across sociocultural groups.

As a result, others have proposed an extension of Goffman's face (e.g. [37], [41]). Many researchers admit that face can be a group-based phenomenon, not just an individual one. It may reflect on any social group that a person belongs to and is concerned about, such as one's family, neighbourhood, work group, nationality group, and religious group [13], [14], [23], [38]. The face constitution of a group member impacts the face constitution of the other members in the group. A loss, a threat, or enhancement of any member's face causes the same to other group members. In the relevant literature, the notion of group face has been acknowledged in several non-Western societies such as the Chinese [31], Japanese [9], [10], and Igbo [11].

Moreover, several researchers (e.g. [20], [23], [24], [42]) have argued that although face is constituted discursively in the flow of interaction, an individual has some prior expectations of how face should be formed, and these expectations are internal, based on one's own feeling of self-worth and understanding of the context of previous similar encounters. Ho [32] argued that while Goffman's notion of face is likely situation specific, the Chinese concept of face is not. It is related to the person's position in their social network and is thus "largely consistent over time and across situations, unless there is a significant change in public perceptions of [a person's] conduct" (p. 274). Indeed, the idea of group face supports the argument that there are some prior expectations of how interactants should construct face in a given interaction; thus, face cannot be the construct of just solo interaction at hand while ignoring the lines taken previously.

Finally, it is important to note that contemporary research on face has differentiated between two complementary levels of analyses: 1) analyses conducted from the perspective of the participant, i.e. emic; and 2) analyses conducted from the perspective of the analyst/outsider, i.e. etic. Consequently, two levels of face have been identified: Face1, referring to the emic/insider point of view, and Face2, referring to the etic/theoretical standpoint [2]. The present study takes an emic perspective on exploring Face1 in Saudi Arabic folk expressions and does not aim to provide a theoretical account of Face2. However, it is hoped that the findings could contribute to Face2 conceptualizations.

## 2.2. Face in the Arab Nations

Like English, Arabic has only one term for 'face', which is *ʔal-waʒh*, and the term *ma:ʔ ʔal-waʒh* often refers to 'face' in formal idiomatic expressions.<sup>1</sup> Other than the literal meaning of the face as the front part of the head, it may figuratively refer to the front part or beginning of things (e.g. a building's face) or abstract concepts (e.g. morning's face). It may also refer to a person or a group as a whole. Drawing on dictionary meanings and my knowledge of the idiomatic usage of the face as a native speaker of Arabic, I conclude that the figurative meanings of 'face' in Arabic primarily involve the concepts of a person's or group's dignity, pride, esteem, and honour.

It was not an easy task to review previous research on face work in Arab cultures for this paper. There seems to be very limited research on how face is conceptualized in Arab interactions. The scarcity of research in Arab cultures does not mean that face does not have an essential role in regulating people's behaviour in the Arab world.

Goffman [6] hinted at the effect of cultural values on face considerations, so we can assume that the analysis of face is inseparable from the cultural values that govern a given community. In her review of cultural communication patterns in the Arab world, Feghali [43] stated that the central values in Arab cultures involve collectivism, hospitality, and honour. Moreover, reputation, respect, pride, power, religious beliefs, and emotional attachment to self-image and others' images all cause individuals in the Arab nations to consciously and unconsciously attempt to take care of face in their interactions [44], [45], [46]. Therefore, Arabs have found it difficult to refuse a request or invitation because they have been obliged to come up with convincing excuses to save their face and protect the face of the others [47], [48], [49]. Saudis usually avoid a direct *no* in refusals for face consideration reasons [45]. Danielewicz-Betz and Mamidi [46] argued that Saudis might choose a white lie to enhance an interlocutor's face and avoid threatening it. Arabs, similar to Chinese [50], seem to follow this rule in their interaction; everyone should refrain from losing face and endeavour to maintain their face in interactions. This can only be achieved by looking after the other's face. The maintenance of the other's face seems to be an integral part of face work.

Arab cultures, as collectivist nations [51],<sup>2</sup> emphasize positive face and connectedness with others [46], [47], [52]. Face is associated with others' perception that one has comprehended and acknowledged the structure and hierarchy of the group. Feghali [43] said that "social life in the Arab region is characterized by 'situation-centeredness', in which loyalty to one's

1 It is important to note that although there is only one equivalent of 'face' in Arabic, the term has different pronunciations in different dialects of Arabic, including *waʒh* in standard Arabic; *wif* in Syria and Egypt; and *wajh* in Kuwait and Emirates.

2 The concept of individualism vs. collectivism is an essential part of Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory. Individualism describes the human characteristic in a way where the individual self is prioritized over a social institution such as a family or society. Collectivism, meanwhile, describes the human characteristic such that the social institution or group, such as a family or even the entire society, is prioritized over the individual.

extended family and larger “in-group” takes precedence over individual needs and goals” (p. 352). Bouchara [49], for example, found that Moroccans tend to adopt more religious expressions aiming at mitigating the face of both the speaker and the hearer to emphasize the role of harmonious personal relationships in building close social connections. Similarly, Nazzal [53] pointed out that the maintenance of one’s face (self-image) is the primary concern in individualistic cultures such as American, whereas the main concern in collectivistic cultures (e.g. Arab, Chinese, Japanese) is the maintenance of both the speaker’s and their addressee’s face. Elarabi [54] found that face is maintained through in-group identity within social groups in Modern Tunisian. This understanding gives rise to the concept of ‘group face’ [38], which seems to take priority over individual face in Arab societies.

Finally, claims about face in Arab societies must be treated with caution because evidence about the constitution of face in Arab nations is still empirically unexplored. The studies discussed above provided some insights about face in Arab nations by applying Brown and Levinson’s model of politeness, which equates face work and politeness. It seems that their focus was on politeness strategies and their insights about face were marginal. The only available studies that deal with the face concept from a perspective other than Brown and Levinson’s [8] are Labben [55], [56], which explore face and identity in Tunisian Arabic. However, Labben [55] stated that “many Tunisians do not perceive themselves as purely Arab” (p. 102). As a result, we cannot assume that what applies to Tunisian Arabic would be the same to the other 22 Arab countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and so on. There is a need for a comprehensive investigation of both the etic and emic conceptualization of face in several Arab cultures and contexts.

### 3. Methods

The corpus in this study includes 89 folk expressions that explicitly contain the word ‘face’. These expressions were collected using my knowledge of Arabic as a native speaker of the language through the observation of authentic conversations, TV series and programs, Twitter, and Google. Interestingly, I found most of these expressions in informal use of the language, which suggests that most of face expressions may be infrequent in formal uses of language. Space limitations make it impossible to examine all the collected terms. The data collected were categorized into main themes reflecting the main aspects of face in related literature. I discuss representative samples of each category below.

I transcribed the selected face expressions following the Leipzig glossing rules (<https://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/pdf/Glossing-Rules.pdf>). Accordingly, the selected face expressions were transcribed in three steps: 1) transliterated using the

International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), 2) morphemically glossed, and 3) translated into English.

Building on Labben [55] and Sifianou [4], [23], this study does not explore how facework unfolds in discourse; rather, it investigates how the emic aspects of face is conceptualized in folk expressions in Saudi Arabia. Although my focus is on emic face, I believe that the emic understandings of face would provide useful insights into the etic theorization of the concept.

## 4. Data Analysis and Discussion

The Saudi folk expressions of face use the face as a body-based metaphor reflecting different beliefs, attitudes, and emotions. Drawing on data from Saudi Arabic, I demonstrate that:

- Face can be a group possession as well as an individual’s possession with group consequences.
- Face can be both constructed in a given situation and a pre-existing property (but not static).
- Face can be a reflector of one’s personality as behaving in accordance with or against societal norms.

### 4.1. Group Face and Individual Face

Some expressions show that face may be a group-based phenomenon rather than just an individual one. The expressions represent group face in two ways. First, some of them show that a whole group may have one face, as stated in the following examples:

- |                              |                     |
|------------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. <i>biwaʒh</i>             | <i>ʔil-gabi:lah</i> |
| in-face                      | the-tribe           |
| <i>In the tribe’s face.</i>  |                     |
| 2. <i>biwaʒh</i>             | <i>ʔal-ʕa:jlāh</i>  |
| in-face                      | the-family          |
| <i>In the family’s face.</i> |                     |

Saudis use the above examples to show that in-group members must take care of the social value of the group they belong to because their actions would affect the tribe/family face. In addition, the examples can metaphorically refer to the social position of the family/tribe leader as the main person in the group whose responsibility is to protect the whole group face by behaving themselves according to societal norms and ensuring that other group members act in conformity with these norms. The expressions reflect how group face may be in a higher rank than individual face among Saudis.

Second, other expressions show that the face constitution of a member of a group impacts the face constitution of the other group members. This understanding gives rise to the concept of group face [38], which seems to take priority over individual face in Arab societies. Consider the following examples:

3. <i>wei:n</i>	<i>nu-wadi</i>	<i>wazh-na:</i>	<i>min</i>	<i>ʔan-na:s</i>	
where	we-move	face-our	from	the-people	
<i>How can we hide our face from the people?</i>					
4. <i>ma:l-na</i>	<i>wazh</i>	<i>ne-ħaki:h</i>	<i>baħad</i>	<i>ʔilli</i>	<i>sawait-ah</i>
not-have-we	face	we-talk-him	after	that	did-you
<i>We do not have face to talk with him after what you've done.</i>					
5. <i>sawad-t</i>		<i>wazh-na</i>		<i>ba-ʔaħsal-ik</i>	
blacken-you		face-our		with-actions-your	
<i>You blackened our face with your actions.</i>					
6. <i>ʔana:</i>	<i>s'aħajt</i>	<i>wa</i>	<i>ʔan-na:s</i>	<i>ta:kil</i>	<i>wazh-i</i>
I	woke up	and	the-people	eat	face-my
<i>I am awake now and people eat my face.</i>					

Example 3 is widely used when a group member does something shameful. For example, a speaker in a TV series used it to describe how he lost his face because of media reports about his cousin's wife's affair. This shows that the wife not only lost her face but also caused the loss of the face of her entire extended family. Such an expression draws a clear border between the in-group and the outside world. Moreover, Saudis tend to employ examples 4 and 5 in situations when someone's behaviour has violated the expected norms of the community or the broader society. They reflect shame on individuals and the groups they belong to indicating negative evaluations of other group members because of the misbehaviour of only one member. For example, parents may say the expressions to their child showing that they lost face as a consequence of their children misconduct. Example 6 was used by a blogger to justify his late divorce saying that the people ate his face because of how his ex-wife behaved and dressed. His face was threatened as a result of the behaviour of a family member (i.e. his ex-wife). This example reflects the importance of group face among Saudis. It can be concluded that one's face is connected to the reputation of the whole group (e.g. family members) and its honour.

I don't claim here that the personal/independent value of face does not exist within the Saudi culture. Spencer-Oatey [41] explained that face is associated with both personal/independent and social/interdependent values. The emphasis of each perspective varies from culture to culture and even context to context. Autonomy and imposition issues are regarded as components of the independent value of face. In fact, one can find concerns about an individual's autonomy in Islamic cultures. For example, in the Islamic norms of seeking permission to enter one's house, Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) has said, "When any one of you seeks permission three times and he is not granted permission, he should come back." This shows respect for one's private space.

The following expression shows how Saudi speakers can isolate someone's individual face from other group members:

7. <i>tamaha:</i>	<i>bi-wazhik</i>	<i>mob</i>	<i>bi-wazh-i:</i>
it is	in-face-your	not	in-face-my
<i>It is in your face not in mine.</i>			

The above expression was said by a daughter to her mother when they were planning for a dinner party. The mother refused the daughter's suggestion about the appropriate quantity of food for the party, so the daughter isolated her face from her mother's, showing that she would not allow her mother's decision to threaten her face. This provides further evidence to how the concept of group face is profound in the Saudi culture as individual's decisions would affect other group members.

Although the above discussion shows that group face may dominate Saudi contexts to some extent, some discursive researchers have challenged the notion of group face. For example, O'Driscoll [20] considered group face problematic because it is unusual for all members of two or more groups to take part in the same encounter, and if face exists only in interaction, this condition would be compulsory for group face to make sense. However, it seems that we constitute group face by accumulating its members' constituted faces in previous interactions. It thus presents the lines expected to be taken by its members in future interactions. Moreover, group face assumes to some extent that face has pre-existing static aspects generated by several members of the group, as will be discussed in the following section. Although O'Driscoll refused the concept of group face, he accepted that social identity variables including ethnicity and geographical provenance affect the constitution of one's face at any time. These variables identify certain behavioural expectations that constitute the line one is assumed to be taking. However, the group face's effect may be partial and temporary. We can only assume that it may influence the expectations of the feelings of both parties.

#### 4.2. Face as Pre-Existing and Situation-Specific Aspect

In this section, based on Saudi face expressions, I argue that Saudis conceptualize face as multifaceted. A distinction is made between face as constructed in the current interaction (i.e. situation specific) and as pre-existing phenomenon. Consider the following examples:

8. *bajad<sup>f</sup>a*      *allah*                      *wazh-ik*  
whiten            god                                      face- your

*God Keeps your face bright.*

9. *t<sup>f</sup>a:h*              *wazh-i*  
fall                face-my

*My face fell down.*

10. *t<sup>f</sup>ajaht*        *wazh-ah(a:)*  
I- fall            face- his/her

*I made his (her) face fell down.*

11. *lagat<sup>f</sup>*        *wazh-k*  
pick up            face-your

*Pick up your face.*

Expression 8, metaphorically meaning ‘well done’, is widely used in situations in which one behaves according to societal norms to evaluate situation-specific actions. It indicates that the behaviour has enhanced face work. Examples 9, 10, and 11, meanwhile, refer to the loss of face in a current situation when an act causes feelings of embarrassment, shame, or guilt. The expressions are widely used to mean causing loss of face to the speaker’s own face or their interlocutor’s face. Face-losing expressions are more frequent than face-saving expressions in Saudi Arabic, as with the Greek, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean [23]. However, most expressions do not directly state “lose face”. The Arabic equivalent of *fagad ma:ʔal-wazh* is rather that one either drops face or one’s face falls. The above examples show that face loss or enhancement is temporary to the situation.

However, the following expressions show that face can be a pre-existing entity constituted over time and across situations. It is an evaluation of an individual’s behaviour according to or against accepted social norms and traits reflecting honour, pride, shame, or guilt. Consider the following examples:

12. *ma:l-ah*      *wazh*  
not-have-he      face

*He is out of face.*

13. *wain*      *ʔaxabi*      *wazh-i*      *min*      *ʔan-na:s*  
where      I-hide      face-my      from      the-people

*Where do I hide my face from the people?*

14. *bi-ʔai*      *wazh*      *ʔa-ga:bi:-ha*  
with-which      face      I-meet-her

*With which face I meet her?*

15. *ʔimsah-ha:*      *bi-wazh-i:*  
wipe-it      in-face-my

*Wipe it in my face.*

Saudis usually use Expression 12 to show that a person is out of face from their behavioural histories. For example, children may not have face to ask their parents to raise their allowance due to their bad performance in school. Example 13 shows how a shameful action in the past

impacts one’s face afterwards. In such situations, the speaker does not remorse a given behaviour or situation by itself but also worries about the possible effect in the future. In addition, example 14 shows how behaviour histories impact one’s status or feeling about themselves. A student uttered the expression to express her embarrassment because her instructor caught her cheating. Interestingly, research has reported equivalent examples to some Saudi expressions in other languages. For example, Sifianou [23] reported a similar example to 12 in her investigation of Greek face expressions, and Nwoye [11] reported an equivalent example to 14 in his exploration of Igbo face.

Example 15 shows two characteristics of face in Saudi Arabia. First, it shows how face’s constitution of a group member impacts the face constitution of the other members in the group, as discussed earlier. Second, Saudis consider face a valuable possession that exists before any conversation and is needed to perform social transactions. A speaker utters the expression to perform an apology on behalf of another group member to show regret and request forgiveness. Employing face increases the sincerity of the apology because Saudis see it as a pre-existed valuable possession.

The above examples show that face may be discursively constructed throughout an interaction and may encompass issues beyond a particular encounter. This discursive construction of face goes in line with Werkhofer’s [42] argument that face is not only related to “here and now” but also connected to “processes that may go on over longer stretches of time” (p. 176). Interestingly, Goffman [6] acknowledged this pre-existing facet of face. He explained that for individuals to maintain face in the ongoing situation, they must have refrained from certain acts in the past that would be challenging to face up later. This conceptualization does not entirely deny the discursive construction of face but stresses the argument that what is co-constructed at the moment also draws from previous encounters and socio-cultural resources accessible to interactants [4], [33], [57]. When interactants act at any moment, they usually make use of their socio-historical knowledge and assess which facets of their multifaceted face are relevant to the current situation. I can interpret this view by referring to Spencer-Oatey’s [38] distinction between identity face, which is situation-specific and highly vulnerable, and respectability face, which is pan-situational and refers to the honour, prestige, or good reputation that a social group or an individual holds and claims within a community. The pre-existing face is also supported by using face as a mirror of personality in Saudi folks, as discussed below.

### 4.3. Face as a Reflector of Personality

In some face expression, it seems that Saudis may consider face as the entryway to an individual’s personality. One can understand many things about the inner workings of a person through his/her face, such as one’s lack of

shame or capacity for shame. Consider the following:

16. *wazh-ah*      *maysu:l*      *bi-marag*  
 face-his      washed      by-broth  
*His face is washed by broth.*
17. *wazh-ah*      *wa*      *gifa:h*      *waḥid*  
 face-his      and      back-his      one  
*His face and back are the same.*
18. *bu:*      *wazh-i:n*  
 father      Face-two  
*He has dual faces/ two faces.*
19. *fla:n*      *ʕla:*      *wazh-ah*  
 person      on      face-his  
*A person is on his/her face.*

Examples 16 and 17 are an overall assessment of a person as totally shameless and, hence, capable of any imaginable disgraceful act. The examples imply that a person has no face to care about it. Example 18 is used in Saudi culture to describe a person as viperous. I found the example in a newspaper article. The expression describes a person as having two personalities, i.e. two-faced, and that the face (personality) the person demonstrates does not reflect his/her real personality or intentions. Depending on the context, the last one (19) functions either as a compliment meaning a kind-hearted person or as a put-down to mean a stupid person.

Saudis use these expressions to describe someone's personality based on their negative or positive dispositions towards others in previous experiences, which provides evidence that face is conceptualized as a pre-existing entity by Saudis rather than just discursively negotiated in an interaction, supporting Spencer-Oatey's [38] respectability face. Moreover, these expressions mostly reflect negative qualities of personality rather than the positive. This provides evidence that the default situation among Saudis is to see face as a mirror of one's dignity, shame, honour, and esteem, so only if one loses or threatens face this is a negatively salient act meant to attract attention.

## 5. Conclusion

The analysis supports the argument that face is not only an image discursively constructed in the interaction but also an individual's or group's valuable property that can change across interactions. Moreover, face seems more oriented to in-group relationships than to individual autonomy. Saudis probably use face expressions to express evaluative judgments made by individuals showing that they are behaving by or against societal norms reflecting honour, pride, shame, or guilt. Like Greek, face in Saudi Arabia is generally a personal/group possession constructed based on accepted social behaviours or a set of norms and values which are presumed to exist in the society and people should follow. Face is enhanced by

maintaining group and cultural values such as collectivism, honour, and religion. Behaving according to these values maintains face, whereas violating them threatens it. The degree of commitment to these values mainly determines group membership.

Due to the unavailability of a large spoken Arabic corpora, I cannot make claims regarding the frequency of use of the face expressions beyond my observations as a native speaker of Arabic. Future research should explore the frequency of the face expressions in different varieties of Arabic from both intracultural and cross-cultural perspectives.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Arundale, R. "Face as a Research Focus in Interpersonal Pragmatics: Relational and Emic Perspectives," *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 58, pp. 108–20, 2013, doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2013.05.013.
- [2] Haugh, M. "Disentangling Face, Facework and Im/Politeness," *Pragmática Sociocultural / Sociocultural Pragmatics*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 46–73, 2013, doi:10.1515/soprag-2012-0005.
- [3] Haugh, M., F. Bargiela-Chiappini. "Face in Interaction," *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 42, no. 8, pp. 2073–77, 2010, doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2009.12.013.
- [4] Sifianou, M. "On Culture, Face, and Politeness. Again," in *New Ways to Face and (Im)Politeness*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2016, pp. 15–30, doi:10.13140/RG.2.1.2653.0001.
- [5] Bargiela-Chiappini, F. "Face and Politeness: New (Insights) for Old (Concepts)," *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 35, pp. 1453–69, 2003, doi:10.1016/S0378-2166(02)00173-X.
- [6] Goffman, E. "Interaction Ritual. Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior," *Interaction Ritual*, Pantheon Books, 1967.
- [7] Agassi, J., I. Jarvie. "A Study in Westernization," in *Hong Kong: A Society in Transition*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969, pp. 129–63.
- [8] Brown, P., S. Levinson. *Politeness: Some Universals of Language Use*. Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- [9] Ide, S. "Formal Forms of Discernment: Two Neglected Aspects of Linguistic Politeness," *Multilingua*, vol. 8, no. 2–3, pp. 223–48, 1989.
- [10] Matsumoto, Y. "Reexamination of the Universality of Face: Politeness Phenomena in Japanese," *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 403–26, 1988, doi:10.1016/0378-2166(88)90003-3.
- [11] Nwoye, O. "Linguistic Politeness and Socio-Cultural Variations of the Notion of Face," *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 18, no. 4, pp. 309–28, 1992, doi:10.1016/0378-2166(92)90092-P.
- [12] Bogdanowska-Jakubowska, E. "Cultural Variability in Face Interpretation and Management," in *Politeness across Cultures*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 237–57.

- [13] Bravo, D. "(Im)Politeness in Spanish-Speaking Socio-Cultural Contexts: Introduction," *Pragmatics*, vol. 18, no. 4, pp. 563–76, 2008, doi:10.1075/prag.18.4.01bra.
- [14] Hernández-Flores, N. "Politeness and Other Types of Facework: Communicative and Social Meaning in a Television Panel Discussion," *Pragmatics*, vol. 18, no. 4, pp. 681–706, 2008, doi:10.1075/prag.18.4.06her.
- [15] O'Driscoll, J. "About Face: A Defence and Elaboration of Universal Dualism," *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 1–32, 1996, doi:10.1016/0378-2166(94)00069-X.
- [16] Grainger, K., Mills, S., M. Sibanda. "Just Tell Us What to Do': Southern African Face and Its Relevance to Intercultural Communication," *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 42, no. 8, pp. 2158–71, 2010, doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2009.12.017.
- [17] Earley, P. *Face, Harmony, and Social Structure. An Analysis of Organizational Behavior across Cultures*. Oxford University Press, 1997.
- [18] Ishihara, N., H. Lee. "Face and (Im)Politeness in Aviation English: The Pragmatics of Radiotelephony Communications," *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 180, pp. 102–13, 2021, doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2021.04.030.
- [19] Haugh, M. "Face and Interaction," in *Face, Communication and Social Interaction*, Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2009, pp. 1–30, [https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/32880087/Haugh2009.pdf?1391103060=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DFace\\_and\\_interaction.pdf&Expires=1613766708&Signature=Af1IbSzX6W510w0aWEi7iV94aol1bc1SL37UrfjgCiy6TtfefkNXd~vOKjeHRPKozCdfQqcR TucPcv](https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/32880087/Haugh2009.pdf?1391103060=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DFace_and_interaction.pdf&Expires=1613766708&Signature=Af1IbSzX6W510w0aWEi7iV94aol1bc1SL37UrfjgCiy6TtfefkNXd~vOKjeHRPKozCdfQqcR TucPcv).
- [20] O'Driscoll, J. "Some Issues with the Concept of Face: When, What, How and How Much?" in *Politeness across Cultures*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 17–41.
- [21] Cenni, I., P. Goethals. "Business Responses to Positive Reviews Online: Face-Work on TripAdvisor," *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 180, pp. 38–50, 2021, doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2021.04.008.
- [22] Dippold, D. "Using Speech Frames to Research Interlanguage Pragmatics: Facework Strategies in L2 German Argument," *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 285–308, 2009, doi:10.1558/japl.v4i3.285.
- [23] Sifianou, M. "On the Concept of Face and Politeness," in *Politeness across Cultures*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 42–58.
- [24] Bousfield, D. *Impoliteness in Interaction*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2008.
- [25] Locher, M. *Power and Politeness in Action: Disagreements in Oral Communication*. Mouton de Gruyter, 2004.
- [26] Wilson, S., Kim, M., H. Meischke. "Evaluating Brown and Levinson's politeness theory: A revised analysis of directives and face," *Research on Language & Social Interaction*, Vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 215–252, 1991, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08351819109389363>
- [27] Koutlaki, S. "Offers and Expressions of Thanks as Face Enhancing Acts: Tæ'arof in Persian," *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 34, pp. 1733–56, 2002, doi:10.1016/S0378-2166(01)0055-8.
- [28] Leech, G. "Politeness: Is There an East-West Divide?" *Journal of Foreign Languages*, vol. 160, no. 6, pp. 3–31, 2005, doi:10.1515/PR.2007.009.
- [29] Watts, R. *Politeness*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- [30] Gu, Y. "Politeness Phenomena in Modern Chinese," *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 237–57, 1990, doi:10.1016/0378-2166(90)90082-O.
- [31] Mao, L. "Beyond Politeness Theory: 'Face' Revisited and Renewed," *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 21, no. 5, pp. 451–86, 1994, doi:10.1016/0378-2166(94)90025-6.
- [32] Ho, D. "Face Dynamics: From Conceptualization to Measurement," in *The Challenge of Facework: Cross-Cultural and Interpersonal Issues*, State University of New York Press, 1994, pp. 269–86.
- [33] Arundale, R. "Face as Relational and Interactional: A Communication Framework for Research on Face, Facework, and Politeness," *Journal of Politeness Research*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 193–216, 2006, doi:10.1515/PR.2006.011.
- [34] Locher, M., R. Watts. "Politeness Theory and Relational Work," *Journal of Politeness Research*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 9–33, 2005, doi:10.1515/jplr.2005.1.1.9.
- [35] Terkourafi, M. "Toward a Unified Theory of Politeness, Impoliteness, and Rudeness," in *Impoliteness in Language: Studies on Its Interplay with Power in Theory and Practice*, Mouton de Gruyter, 2008, pp. 45–74.
- [36] Geyer, N. *Discourse and Politeness: Ambivalent Face in Japanese*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008.
- [37] Spencer-Oatey, H. "Rapport Management: A Framework for Analysis," in *Culturally Speaking: Managing Rapport through Talk across Cultures*, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000, pp. 11–46.
- [38] Spencer-Oatey, H. "(Im)Politeness, Face and Perceptions of Rapport: Unpackaging Their Bases and Interrelationships," *Journal of Politeness Research*, vol. 1, pp. 95–119, 2005, doi:10.1515/jplr.2005.1.1.95.
- [39] Arundale, R. "An Alternative Model and Ideology of Communication for an Alternative to Politeness Theory," *Pragmatics*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 119–53, 1999, doi:10.1075/prag.9.1.07aru.
- [40] Arundale, R. "Constituting Face in Conversation: Face, Facework, and Interactional Achievement," *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 42, no. 8, pp. 2078–105, 2010, doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2009.12.021.
- [41] Spencer-Oatey, H. "Managing Rapport in Talk: Using Rapport Sensitive Incidents to Explore the Motivational Concerns Undelying the Management of Relations," *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 34, no. 5, pp. 529–45, 2002, doi:10.1016/S0378-2166(01)00039-X.
- [42] Werkhofer, K. "Traditional and Modern Views: The Social Constitution and the Power of Politeness," in *Politeness in Language: Studies in Its History, Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed., Mouton de Gruyter, 2005, pp. 155–99.
- [43] Feghali, E. "Arab Cultural Communication Patterns," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 345–78, 1997, doi:10.1016/S0147-1767(97)00005-9.
- [44] Al-Issa, Ahmad. *Sociopragmatic Transfer in the*



- Performance of Refusals by Jordanian EFL Learners: Evidence and Motivating Factors (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation). Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 1998.
- [45] Danielewicz-Betz, A. "Face Saving Discursive Strategies of Negation: A Saudi-Japanese Comparison," *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 23–51, 2016, doi:10.1515/lpp-2016-0003.
- [46] Danielewicz-Betz, A., R. Mamidi. "Three Dimensions of Relational Work in Saudi Arabia:(Over) Politeness, Praise and Appreciation," 11th IPrA Conference, July, 2009, pp. 1-21, [https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/46556303/THREE\\_DIMENSIONS\\_OF\\_RELATIONAL\\_WORK\\_IN\\_S20160616-29148-1xv7k73.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1511295247&Signature=NDVAjUsG4ZF5XzRyetyI2LqC444%3D&response-content-disposition=inline](https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/46556303/THREE_DIMENSIONS_OF_RELATIONAL_WORK_IN_S20160616-29148-1xv7k73.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1511295247&Signature=NDVAjUsG4ZF5XzRyetyI2LqC444%3D&response-content-disposition=inline).
- [47] Al-Khatib, M. "The Pragmatics of Invitation Making and Acceptance in Jordanian Society," *Journal of Language and Linguistics*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 272–94, 2006.
- [48] Alaoui, S. "Politeness Principle: A Comparative Study of English and Moroccan Arabic Requests, Offers and Thanks," *European Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 7–15, 2011.
- [49] Bouchara, A. "The Role of Religion in Shaping Politeness in Moroccan Arabic: The Case of the Speech Act of Greeting and Its Place in Intercultural Understanding and Misunderstanding," *Journal of Politeness Research*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 71–98, 2015, doi:10.1515/pr-2015-0004.
- [50] Lee-Wong, S. *Politeness and Face in Chinese Culture*. Peter Lang, 2000.
- [51] Hofstede, G. *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*. SAGE Publications Ltd, 1980.
- [52] Tawalbeh, A., E. Al-Oqaily. "In-Directness and Politeness in American English and Saudi Arabic Requests: A Cross-Cultural Comparison," *Asian Social Science*, vol. 8, no. 10, pp. 85–98, 2012, doi:10.5539/ass.v8n10p85.
- [53] Nazzal, A. "The Pragmatic Functions of the Recitation of Qur'anic Verses by Muslims in Their Oral Genre: The Case of Insha' Allah, 'God's Willing,'" *Pragmatics*, vol. 15, no. 2–3, pp. 251–73, 2005, doi:10.1075/prag.15.2-3.05naz.
- [54] Elarabi, N. *Face and Politeness in Traditional and Modern Tunisia: An Application of Brown and Levinson's Politeness* (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation). The University of Texas, 1997.
- [55] Labben, A. "Revisiting Face and Identity: Insights from Tunisian Culture," *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 108, pp. 98–115, 2017, doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2016.11.011.
- [56] Labben, A. "Face and Identity in Interaction: A Focus on Tunisian Arabic," *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 128, pp. 67–81, 2018, doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2018.02.004.
- [57] Mills, S. *Gender and Politeness*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.