



# A critical analysis of 'face'-managing factors in isiZulu idioms

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People have an inherent need to communicate. They communicate out of need as well as for leisure. Human speech abounds with unpleasant and undesirable statements that could embarrass and even humiliate those spoken to or oneself. Brown and Levinson assert that unpleasant and undesirable statements have the potential to threaten the 'face' or self-esteem of the other person or persons. They define 'face' as the public self-image that every member of society wants to claim for themselves. Simply put, 'facework' refers to ways people cooperatively attempt to promote both the other's and their own sense of self-esteem in a conversation. As linguistic speech forms, idioms perform a variety of functions in a language. Not only do they make speech more colourful, but they also perform a communicative function in that they tend to soften the embarrassment and humiliation that often accompanies unpleasant and undesirable statements in speech. IsiZulu idioms will be examined in this article to establish to what extent they could contribute to managing 'face' issues. Examples of idioms will be drawn from C.L.S. Nyembezi and O.E.H. Nxumalo's work *Inqolobane Yesizwe*. The facework theory as espoused by Brown and Levinson will underpin this discussion on isiZulu idioms.

**'n Kritiese analise van die hantering van aansienkwessies in isiZulu idiome.** Die behoefte aan kommunikasie is eie aan alle mense. Mense kommunikeer sowel uit noodsaak as vir ontspanning. Kommunikasie bevat dikwels onaangename en ongewenste stellings wat verleentheid skep vir die ontvangers en wat hulle selfs kan verneder. Brown en Levinson stel dat sulke onaangename en ongewenste stellings die vermoë het om die aansien ('face') of selfrespek van die ander persoon te bedreig. Hulle definieer aansien ('face') as die openbare selfbeeld wat elke lid van 'n samelewing vir hom- of haarself opeis. Eenvoudiger gestel, verwys die term 'aansienkwessies' ('facework') na die maniere waarop mense saamwerk in 'n poging om sowel die eie as die ander se sin vir selfrespek te bevorder in 'n gesprek. As linguïstiese uitingsvorme vervul idiome 'n verskeidenheid funksies in enige taal. Hulle maak nie net die taal kleurriker nie, maar vervul ook 'n kommunikatiewe funksie in dié sin dat hulle die gevoelens van verleentheid en vernedering kan versag wat dikwels deel uitmaak van onaangename en ongewenste stellings in gesproke taal. In hierdie artikel sal Zoeloe-idiome onder die loep geneem word om vas te stel tot watter mate hulle kan bydra tot die hantering van aansienkwessies. Voorbeelde van idiome is afkomstig uit C.L.S. Nyembesi en O.E.H. Nxumalo se werk *Inqolobane Yesizwe*. Die aansienkwessieteorie soos uiteengesit deur Brown en Levinson sal die raamwerk vorm vir hierdie bespreking van die Zoeloe-idiome.

## Introduction

Idioms are a linguistic device that not only enriches speech by making it more colourful, but also performs a communicative function in that they tend to soften the humiliation that often accompanies unpleasant and undesirable statements in everyday speech. Scholars such as Brown and Levinson (1987:61) assert that unpleasant and undesirable statements, which have the potential to occur within every act of communication, threaten the 'face' or the self-esteem of the speaker and of the person spoken to. This article examines isiZulu idioms as face-managing devices in instances where participants find themselves in situations that tend to threaten face. Idioms that will be used as illustrations in this article will be drawn from *Inqolobane Yesizwe* by C.L.S. Nyembezi and O.E.H. Nxumalo (1966). The examples used in this article are not exhaustive of all idioms which can be used as face-managing devices in isiZulu; the few chosen in this article are only for the purpose of illustration. The theory of facework as espoused by Brown and Levinson will be used to strengthen the discussion that will be presented.

## Face and facework

Littlejohn and Foss (2009:374) argue that in facework theories, the word 'face', instead of referring to one's physical face, is a metaphorical allusion to one's desired social identity or image. They

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maintain this metaphorical 'face' is manifested through communication and assert that 'face' resides in interactions of communication and the meanings assigned to those interactions. They further state that the rules for honouring one's own face or the face of others can vary from culture to culture, group to group or context to context.

Brown and Levinson (1987) developed a model of politeness grounded in Goffman's (1955) notion of face. The word 'face' as used by Goffman refers to the desired self-image that a person wishes to present to others; the notion of face also includes recognition that your interactional partners have face needs of their own. This phenomenon has two dimensions, namely positive face and negative face. Positive face includes a person's need to be liked, appreciated and admired by selected people. On the one hand, maintaining positive face will thus include acting in a manner that will ensure that others continue viewing you in an affirming fashion. On the other hand, negative face assumes that a person has a desire to act freely, without constraints or imposition from others (Dainton & Zelle 2011:57).

Brown and Levinson (1987:61) advance the notion that face management works best when everyone involved helps maintain the face of others, because everyone's face depends on everyone else's face being maintained. In addition, Brown and Levinson posit that 'it is in the best interest of all participants in a conversation to make decisions that will uphold this mutual and rather vulnerable construction of face'. To maintain face, speakers, as rational agents, accept their vulnerability and are prepared to cooperate with others.

The underlying assumption behind Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory is that face is constantly at risk, since any kind of linguistic action that has a relational dimension (termed a face-threatening act or FTA) is seen as posing a threat to the interlocutor's face. Consequently, such face-threatening acts need to be 'counterbalanced by appropriate doses of politeness' (Kasper 1990:158).

Facework is referred to as 'tact' in some linguistic circles. According to Janney and Arndt (1992:28), tact is directed towards two basic face needs: the need to feel unimpeded, free or self-determining within an inviolable, internal personal preserve and the need to feel accepted, appreciated or respected by at least some others. Karsberg (2012:11) asserts that the function of tact is to manage face and maintain positive relationships with a partner. To create and maintain this desired self-image, individuals must use facework, specific messages that thwart or minimise face-threatening acts.

Ho (1976), as cited by Ting-Toomey (1994:308), correctly states that 'it is virtually impossible to think of a facet of social life to which the question of face is irrelevant'. According to O'Driscoll (1996:14), the contents of a good face vary according to the kind of value judgements that people make. The attributes that are considered praiseworthy and

admirable, or blameworthy and reprehensible, are a product of cultures. For this reason, characteristics that are likely to lead to the bestowal of a good face, and to a bad one, are often culture specific. While the desire for a good face is universal, the constituents of a good face are culturally variable (hence the term 'culture-specific face'). Because the concept of face has been associated with diverse phenomena ranging from embarrassment to conflict, an examination of the specific communication strategies used to negotiate face will help in understanding a wide range of human communicative behaviour (Ho 1976:883, cited in Ting-Toomey 1994:308).

Cupach and Metts (1994:6-7) distinguish between preventive facework on the one hand and corrective facework on the other. They allege that preventive facework strategies include communications that one uses to help oneself, or another, avert face-threatening acts, whereas corrective facework consists of messages that an individual can use to restore their own face or to help another person to restore face after a face-threatening act has occurred. Idioms, therefore, perform a preventive function in communication. The following section will examine some isiZulu idioms to establish if they truly can be used as face-saving devices.

## IsiZulu idioms suitable as face-managing devices

The maintenance of 'face' in Zulu culture involves putting group interests over the wants and needs of the individual. In collectivistic cultures, people are integrated into strong cohesive groups, such as the family, clan and extended community, and they feel obliged to be protective of others in exchange for conclusive loyalty. This sense of group identity is driven by the world view of *ubuntu* ('humaneness'), the idea that 'I am what I am because of who we all are'. The self-image of individuals is therefore interdependent.

In the following section an analysis of some isiZulu idioms and how they could be used to manage face will be provided.

### Idioms to manage face in situations of inebriation

Beer drinking is a social activity among Zulu people; however, excessive drinking that will lead to problematic behaviour is disapproved of. Nevertheless, countless drinking festivities are held in communities and it is considered appropriate that those who indulge in these festivities should guard against becoming inebriated. However, if an individual's inebriated state is obvious to those with whom they interact, the following idiom is often used: *ukwaliwa amabele* (lit. 'to be "unwanted" by sorghum'). Sorghum has been used as staple food in African communities for many centuries. When sorghum is left to ferment, it becomes intoxicating. The idiom *ukwaliwa ngamabele* can therefore be used in instances where a person has had this intoxicating drink in excess, an action that could result in unsuitable behaviour. In such circumstances the person is then said to be 'unwanted' by the drink. When this



idiom is used in instances where a person is inebriated, the effect of a direct face-threatening utterance such as *udakiwe* ('he or she is drunk') could be averted. The idiom *ukwaliwa ukudla* (lit. 'to be "unwanted" by food'), expresses the same meaning as the example supplied above. Another example that also could avert the same face-threatening utterance is *ukuqhuba imbuzi* (lit. 'to drive a goat'). In the case of this idiom, the focus is on the movements of an inebriated person, as the staggering motion from one side to the other is captured in the idiom. This idiom paints a picture of someone holding a goat by a leash. As the goat will be moving this way and that way, so will this person. Their movements will be controlled by the movements of the goat. As a result, this person will not move in a straight line as sober people would do. This idiom could cover up the repugnant act of drunkenness and thereby manage the face of the speaker and that of the person spoken to or spoken about.

Other expressions such as *ubaba usuthi* ('father has eaten and is satisfied'), *ubaba udlile* or *udlayidlile* ('father has eaten') and *ubaba umnandi* ('father is nice') could also communicate politeness in instances where people show signs of being intoxicated. Those under the authority of such people could use these idioms to mitigate the effect of the face-threatening communication. In using idioms such as those provided above, unpleasant and undesirable statements such as *udakiwe* ('The person is drunk') could be avoided, thereby preventing the embarrassment that both the speaker and addressee would experience.

The act of and camaraderie inherent in drinking is also camouflaged by the use of very rich idioms in isiZulu. *Ukubamba okhambeni* ('to take a drink from the calabash') and *ukuhabula amponjwana* ('to take a sip from the water that emits horn-like bubbles') are some of the instances of idioms used that are illustrative of employing camouflaged language to manage face. Sitting and drinking African beer with equals is a gratifying pastime in Zulu culture. Therefore, the isiZulu word for drinking, *ukuphuza*, is seldom used to refer to this pastime. *Ukuphuza* in relation to drinking African beer will be used only if the speaker is infuriated by some action of the person spoken to. Otherwise people, particularly those who partake of this pastime, would refer to the act of drinking African beer as *ukubamba* ('to take a drink') or as *ukuhabula* ('to take a sip'), which has resulted in an expression which describes African beer as *amanzi amponjwana* ('water that emits horn-like bubbles'). The use of these idioms effortlessly saves face in that if both speaker and hearer partake of this pastime, the idiom will, in this case, also cover the repugnant act of drunkenness.

### Idioms to manage face in situations of larceny

Larceny or stealing is another misdemeanour that is frowned upon in Zulu culture. Talk that refers to such practices is often softened. The word *isela* ('a thief') is a label that no one would like to be called by. It is shameful to be labelled a thief among the Zulu people. Stealing damages the good name of the family in the community.

Idioms such as *ukuthatha ngozipho* ('to take with a nail') and *ukucosha ngozwane* ('to pick up with a toe') are idioms that refer to the act of larceny. In the first example, a person who steals is described as someone who uses their nail to take objects that belong to other people. A nail is a very small part of the body and is not as active as other parts of the body. The same could be said of the second example, *ukucosha ngozipho*. In this instance, a toe, which is also a very small part of the foot, is used to pick up something. Other idioms that could be used in similar contexts are *ukuba neminwe* ('to have fingers') and *ukuba nesandla* ('to have a hand'). These idioms also feature parts of the body. The meaning of the words for parts of the body has been extended for them to be used as idioms. As is the nature of idioms, the meanings of the idioms cannot be derived from the meanings of their constituents. Thieves will use their hand and fingers to pinch from others; therefore, to say that thieves have hands and fingers, instead of accusing them directly of stealing, has the effect of weakening the face-threatening act. Taking other people's things without their permission has never been encouraged in Zulu culture; instead, people are urged to be generous to the needy and the needy are urged to make their penury known so that they will receive the necessary help. As a result isiZulu abounds with idioms and proverbs that serve to encourage helping the needy, such as *ukupha ukuzibekela* ('to give is to put away for yourself, meaning that a hospitable act breeds another) and *ukufaka isandla* ('to lend a hand'), among others. The essence of these examples is that although thieves take people's things without permission, this they do without anyone noticing. The use of these idioms could avert the face-threatening effect carried by the word *isela* when used in situations of larceny.

### Idioms to manage face in situations of cowardice

Cowardice is a form of behaviour which was not historically encouraged in Zulu culture, especially among boys. They would always be encouraged to show acts of valour among their contemporaries in the veld where they would be looking after cattle. Those who showed acts of valour were referred to as *izingqwele* ('chief herdboys') and would be given the liver when dividing the meat of an animal killed during a hunting expedition. Those who showed cowardice were called *amagwala* ('cowards') and were given lungs immersed in water. *Igwala* will cry or run away during stick fighting. The face-threatening communicative effect expressed by the use of the word *igwala* could be weakened by idioms such as *ukucela empunzini* (lit. 'to request speed from a duiker') or *ukubonela empunzini* ('to get an example from a duiker'). These idioms are derived from the action of antelopes when danger is imminent. Antelopes run for their lives in an attempt to leave behind the animal chasing them. The use of these idioms is a polite way of saying that the speed at which a boy runs has been emulated from that of an antelope, the analogy being that in fleeing the boy would use great speed similar to that which an antelope would use when running away from its predator. The use of the idioms of the idiom *ukubeletha izithende* ('to carry one's heels on one's



back'), *ukubeletha izinyawo* ('to carry one's feet on one's back') would also weaken the effect of being called *igwala*. The idioms affirm their use as a face-saving mechanism, since neither the speaker nor the addressee would experience any embarrassment by the use of these idioms.

### Idioms to manage face in situations of homelessness

If it happened, for various reasons, that a member of the community decided to disappear from the group and become a wanderer, they were labelled *umhambuma* ('vagrant'). As people who believed in communal life, wanderers were fairly non-existent in traditional Zulu culture. People were open to help any needy person in their communities. Poverty was alleviated by a process known as *ukusisa* ('cattle lending'), which is a process in which wealthier members of the community give some cattle to destitute members with the intention that they should have milk for their families and that they would start off their own flocks by keeping the offspring of such cattle. The homeless were also allotted land to plough and live on. Currently, with the way of life of the Zulu people changing from being communal to individualistic, people leave their homes and go to the big cities of the country. When encountering difficult circumstances in the cities, such as loss of employment and income, they fail to go back home and thus become wanderers in the cities. The notion of 'mounds' or 'mountains' in the following idioms designate the mounds or mountains that are abundant around Johannesburg. It was common for men to leave their rural homes and be 'swallowed' by the Golden City. Idioms such as *ukudliwa yizindunduma* ('to be eaten by the mounds'), *ukudliwa zintaba* ('to be eaten by the mountains') and *ukweduka nezwe* ('to stray away') would all weaken the effect of being labelled *umhambuma*. These idioms would save members back home from the embarrassment that they would experience when asked about their errant relative. As people who practised the philosophy of 'I am because you are', communality is what bound the Zulu people together. The Zulu people's tendency to communality is evidenced by their everyday utterances. People who stray from the group are considered to have been swallowed by the hills or the mountains.

### Idioms to manage face in various inappropriate behaviours

As indicated previously, politeness is rated very highly among the Zulu people. There are natural occurrences, actions and body parts that are not called by their name; it is considered taboo to call these occurrences, actions and body parts by name. In talking about these, polite equivalents would be used instead. The meaning of the word *ukulala* ('to sleep') can be extended to mean 'having sexual intercourse'. Since the use of this word is taboo, the idiom *ukuya ocansini* (lit. 'going to a mat') could be used. This idiom softens the effect of *ukulala* 'to have sexual intercourse' which would be perceived as face-threatening. The unpleasant connotation which accompanies the word *ukunya* ('to excrete faeces') could be experienced as a face-threatening act and could

also be weakened by the idiom *ukulahla itshe lentaba* (lit. 'to throw away a mountain stone'). Faeces are compared to mountain stones because of the greyish-brown colour that they have. It is much more acceptable and polite to use the idiom and it also reduces the embarrassment and humiliation that accompany the use of the word *ukunya*. *Ukuchama* ('to urinate') is another word that people regard as unpleasant and that has the tendency to embarrass. The idioms *ukuchitha amanzi* (lit. 'to spill the water') and *ukushaya umfana* ('to beat the boy') also reduce the embarrassment and humiliation that accompanies the use of the word *ukuchama*. Any accidental occurrence of a loud fart is an embarrassment to both the person who performed the act and the one who heard the sound indicating the act. An idiom, *ukukhipha umoya*, is often used instead of the direct expression *ukusuza* ('to fart') especially in the presence of junior members of the family. The use of the idiom lessens the impact of the direct expression. Therefore, the idiom *ukukhipha umoya* will soften the embarrassment.

An individual who gossips about other people's confidential matters is not eagerly welcomed among the Zulus. Such an individual is described as *okhahlelwe yihhashi esifubeni* ('the person has been kicked by a horse in the chest'). The chest is considered the hub of everything that needs to be kept secret. Therefore a gossipmonger is regarded as someone whose chest has been kicked open by a horse because it is believed that as a result of this action, the chest can no longer hold anything. The kick of a horse is thought to carry a greater force than that from any other domesticated animal, which is why it has been chosen for this idiom. The behaviour of people who go about talking about that which should not be divulged to other people is not appreciated in Zulu culture. They are regarded as rejoicing in seeing other people unhappy and as spreading lies. The use of this idiom therefore saves the face of both perpetrator and addressee.

Lying is considered to be very disgraceful. The Zulu people believe that a person who is a liar in their lifetime will not be an ancestor because they were a nuisance in society and therefore their spirit will not be reliable. A person who told an untruth was said to be milking pregnant cows, as illustrated by the idiom *usenga nezimithi* (lit. 'the person is milking pregnant cows as well'). Cows produce milk only after their calves are born. It is a fact that pregnant cows cannot produce milk. Therefore, saying that a person is milking pregnant cows is to say that they are doing something impossible; they are doing something that cannot be done. The use of this idiom will therefore tone down the accusation of telling lies, thus saving the face of the guilty party.

## Conclusion

Scholars on politeness maintain that politeness serves as a form of saving face and that it functions very smoothly in maintaining interaction between members of a group. People communicate appropriately and in a cooperative manner towards other members of a group by showing respect,



consideration, support and empathy, and by not threatening or offending them or injuring their feelings.

Different people, groups and cultures use different devices drawn from the repertoire of their languages to express the notion of politeness and, therefore, of face-saving behaviour. In this article it has been shown how the notions of politeness and face-saving behaviour find expression in isiZulu idioms. Since the individual identity of the Zulu people is usually located within the group's identity, initiating, maintaining or furthering of relationships and saving face are a necessity within their cultural expression. Idioms come in handy as face-saving devices to avoid face-threatening acts that could embarrass and humiliate other persons or make them feel uncomfortable.

The use of some isiZulu idioms acts as an excellent tool for facework. Some idioms have a way of softening harshness that, if ordinary language was to be used, would have humiliated the hearer and at other times the speaker as well. Zulu people use idioms to avoid face-threatening speech acts in order to protect and manage the face of self and others.

There are many idioms that avoid or lessen the embarrassment that comes as a result of a face-threatening act. Impoliteness when speaking to people in authority is regarded as downright disrespectful and is frowned upon in Zulu culture. Thus, the use of idioms as a form of politeness and saving face is a way to bring out the element of *ubuntu*

in people, which embodies a distinctive world view of a community and the identities, values and responsibilities of its members.

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