

## Expressions of Disapproval in a Virtual Professional Forum: A Study on (Im) Politeness and Facework

### Expressões de Desaprovação em um Fórum Profissional Virtual: um estudo sobre (im)polidez e trabalho de face

Ana Larissa Oliveira  
Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG)  
[adornomarciotto@gmail.com](mailto:adornomarciotto@gmail.com)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1857-0207>

**Abstract:** This study focuses on the expressions of disapproval and their follow-up responses found in a forum of teaching development held at a federal university in Brazil. The framework of facework (Goffman, 1967; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Leech, 2014), and relational work (Garfinkel, 1964; Locher, 2004; Spencer-Oatey, 2005; Haugh, 2014; Culpeper and Tantucci, 2021) support the research. Of relevance to this study are the strategies employed to enhance reciprocity and to display compliance with pre-established social norms of forum participation (Landone, 2021; Orsini-Jones and Lee, 2018). We hypothesize that, in the face of a threat, in this case, an expression of disapproval, intersectional and interactional politeness strategies are applied so that professional images are jointly constructed and reaffirmed. To categorize the data, we manually analyzed the expressions of disapproval employing the categories adapted from Schaefer (1982, p. 14-15) and Traverso (2009). The results show that the expressions of disapproval were mitigated to promote face protection and to assure reciprocity. As for the follow-up responses, they focused on pursuing professional ethics, particularly related to principles of guidance, and solidarity. Altogether, the strategies identified lessened the emergence of conflict while curbing genuine debate, therefore diverging from the original objectives of a forum.

**Keywords:** Virtual Forums; Facework; Politeness; Expressions of Disapproval.

**Resumo:** Este estudo centra-se nas expressões de desaprovação e suas respostas identificadas em um fórum de desenvolvimento docente, realizado em uma universidade federal no Brasil. A estrutura do trabalho de face (Goffman, 1967; Brown e Levinson, 1987; Leech, 2014) e a polidez relacional (Garfinkel, 1964; Locher, 2004; Spencer-Oatey, 2005; Haugh, 2014 e Culpeper e Tantucci, 2021) apoiam a pesquisa. Importantes para este estudo são as estratégias empregadas para ampliar a reciprocidade e demonstrar o cumprimento de normas sociais de participação no

fórum (Landone, 2021; Orsini-Jones e Lee, 2018). Hipotetizamos que, havendo uma ameaça, neste caso, uma expressão de desaprovação, são utilizadas estratégias de polidez interseccional e interacional, visando à construção e à preservação das imagens profissionais. Para categorizar os dados, analisamos manualmente as expressões de desaprovação empregando as categorias adaptadas de Schaefer (1982, p. 14-15) e Traverso (2009). Os resultados mostram que as expressões de desaprovação foram mitigadas para promover a preservação da face e garantir a reciprocidade. Quanto às respostas, elas centraram-se na observação da ética profissional, especificamente nos princípios de orientação para o grupo e solidariedade. Em geral, as estratégias identificadas atenuaram a emergência de conflitos e impediram o debate genuíno, divergindo, portanto, dos objetivos originais do fórum.

**Palavras-chave:** Fóruns Virtuais, Trabalho de Face, Polidez, Expressões de Desaprovação.

## Introduction

The need for face protection may occur in virtual forums for various reasons, such as the constant search for emotional attachment to the others' image, the feeling that interlocutors have a moral right to face protection, or the desire to avoid hostility or embarrassment (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Leech, 2014, Oliveira e Cunha, 2020; Oliveira e Marques, 2021). Compliance with social conventions regarding face protection also happens as a result of power relations and may be described as a kind of "noblesse oblige" since those of high social status are expected to "curb their power of embarrassing their lessers" (Goffman, 1955, p. 8).

For Goffman (1951, p. 294), social status "may be ranked on a scale of prestige, according to the amount of social value placed upon it relative to other statuses in the same sector of social life". As such, individuals may be rated on a scale of prestige, depending on how close they are to the ideal behavior expected and the status symbols they display. The status symbols, for Goffman, are "the cues that select for a person the status that is to be imputed to him and how others are to treat him" (Goffman, 1951, p. 295).

From this view, any constituent of a person's social behavior may be considered an indication of his social position in rank. Because social classes and individual members may sometimes rise or fall concerning their "relative wealth, power, and prestige" (Goffman, 1951, p. 297), status symbols play an important role in reaffirming the established position. They also impede the social emergence of those who have recently acquired power or wealth while holding back the fall of those who have lost it. In other words, through symbols, the continuity of a tradition of social status may be assured, and the effects of social privilege may remain unaltered. These elements, altogether, underscore the relevance of reciprocity and relational work in social interactions, as they help form identities (Garfinkel, 1964; Locher, 2004; Spencer-Oatey, 2005; Haugh, 2014 and Culpeper and Tantucci, 2021).

Taking this initial framework into consideration, the purpose of this study is to analyze the expressions of disapproval and their follow-up responses in a forum on teaching development that

took place as part of a training course in remote teaching at a federal university in Brazil. To do that, the principles of facework (Goffman, 1967; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Leech, 2014) and politeness (Garfinkel, 1964, Haugh, 2014; Spencer-Oatey, 2000 and Culpeper and Tantucci, 2021) will guide the analysis. We hypothesize that the professional teacher image is mutually constructed in the forum and is constantly at risk, particularly in the face of expressions of disapproval.

Section 2 of this paper focuses on relevant issues about social status and professional image on virtual forums. Section 3 elaborates on politeness, relational work and reciprocity while discussing their possible implications for digital interactions. In Section 4, the framework of face-the threatening acts such as complaints will be discussed due to their similarity with the expressions of disapproval in focus in Section 5t brings about the methodology of data gathering and analysis, based in the forum interactions selected. In Section 6, a sample analysis is presented, followed by the discussion, and the final remarks.

## **Social status and professional image on virtual forums**

In the 1990s, Knorr-Cetina (1997) pointed out that, in the so-called “liquid modernity”, individuals are constantly engaging in interactions that are in the main mediated by an object, for example, the computer or the cell phone. Alongside these lines, Thompson (2020) proposed that digital interactions be characterized according to the diffusion and the variety of the digital spaces supporting them. On social media profiles, for example, posts tend to be used as an opportunity to strengthen social connectivity that usually surpasses the basic need for informational content (Yus, 2011; Vetere and Gibbs, Yus, 2011).

As for the virtual forums, the interactions involve asynchronous debate on specialized themes resembling the dialogical structure of physical communication. The general expectations are that members are mutually ratified and successfully contribute to the discussion (Herring, 2001, 619-621; Landone, 2012; Orsini-Jones e Lee, 2018, Author 1, Author 2). Social norms concerning equity and association are prominent in forums and seek to form social bonds while enhancing affiliation (Garfinkel, 1964; Locher, 2004; Spencer-Oatey, 2005; Haugh, 2014 and Culpeper and Tantucci, 2021). Strategies of modulation are also employed to create rapport and reaffirm each member as a legitimate interlocutor, implying that a meaningful contribution to the debate must be prioritized based on pre-established norms (Landone, 2012, Orsini-Jones e Lee, 2018). For this reason, in forum interactions, Spencer-Oatey’s definition of rapport management is of particular significance since the phenomenon is seen as “the relative harmony and smoothness of relations between people” (Spencer-Oatey 2005: 96), involving the avoidance of face loss and the use of politeness principles to enrich solidarity.

As Eckhardt (2020:91-93) asserts about the dynamics of status-related consumption in late modernity, social status is established through gaining the skills and the resources to become flexible and invest in “attention capital” (Eckhardt2020: 91-93). Thus, gaining attention in the digital space has become especially valuable as it can be often converted directly to either economic capital or prestige.

Taken that professional ethics has been historically attached to social status and image projection, it is of relevance to this study to investigate whether professional ethics are mutually asserted in

virtual interactions. Initially emerged as a manifestation of everyday moral consciousness, influenced by labor division and the emergence of civic and moral principles within modern societies (Durkheim, 1957/2013), professional ethics is also connected to the formation of “social groups” and it is also indispensable to govern “individual behavior” (Durkheim, 1957/2013, p. 33). More recently, the concept of professional ethics has been developed as a rationale for due professional behavior, forming the professional standards belonging to various professions (Vedder-Weiss et al., 2019).

Overall, the code of ethics for teachers is designed to protect the student’s rights and the social images of teachers themselves. According to Paquay et al. (2001), teachers are expected to actively promote their pupils’ development while encouraging their active role as learners. More importantly, teacher ethics involves the perception that teachers should foster ethics in society by promoting the cultivation of virtues like mutual respect, civility, and in-group solidarity (Paquay, et. al., 2001; Evans, 2008). Most of the features encompassing teacher ethics can be achieved via social interaction and the observance of valid social norms.

From the perspective of this study, when employing language to express disapproval, interactants tend to frame their verbal behavior to allow for the communicative effectiveness of implicit messages to take place while also avoiding conflict or causing embarrassment. In doing so, implicit messages may provide a convenient way to inform people that their current line may lead to face loss and that collaboration is needed to keep the communicative flow.

According to Goffman (1955, p. 11), a strategy to incite tacit cooperation is “reciprocal self-denial”. It consists of “depriving or depreciating oneself” while “indulging and complimenting the others”. By providing some kind of unfavorable judgments about himself and complimenting the other, the speaker performs a type of “negative bargaining” since each participant agrees to make the terms of trade more favorable to the other side.

Moreover, in the context of teacher professional development, evidence has shown that interactants, when faced with expressions of disapproval, choose to avoid conflict first by depreciating their images. Such behavior may include manifestations of lack of knowledge, extensive use of clarification requests, and confessions of incapacity, among others. Teachers also avoid presenting themselves as authorities and refuse to impose their viewpoints and judgment on their peers, reaffirming their professional ethics (Filliettaz, 2013; Vedder-Weiss et al., 2019). In participating in virtual forums, the social convention suggests that users ratify each other as legitimate interlocutors, which also implies a valuable contribution to the debate (Orsini-Jones e Lee, 2018).

## Politeness and relational work

According to Goffman’s (1967) proposal, social interactions are understood in terms of a theatrical metaphor, in which speakers are viewed as actors who work to project a desirable public image of themselves to an audience. Once on the front stage, actors are conscious of being observed, and they follow specific rules and social conventions to manage their faces and protect their interlocutor’s image. From this view, facework is a collaborative activity that allows interlocutors to form or reaffirm

their identities and convince the audience of their current social status. Since the presence of any negative information (or objection) in social interaction embroils issues of face management, complaining, disagreeing, and interrupting, for example, represent potential face threats that require extra interactional work (Cunha, 2020).

Brown and Levinson (1987) revisit the concept of face, postulated by Goffman, based on the assumption that the politeness phenomenon can be understood under a ‘Model Person’: “a willful fluent speaker of a natural language”, endowed with rationality and with two face types, that is, a ‘negative face’ (the need to be unimpeded) and ‘positive face’ (‘the want to be approved of in certain respects’)” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 58). From this view, a central tenet of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) model is the notion of Face Threatening Acts (FTAs), which are associated with “certain kinds of acts intrinsically threatening the face” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 65). FTAs are classified relative to the kind of face threatened (positive or negative) and whether the threat concerns the hearer’s face or the speaker’s (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 65-68). For Leech (2014) FTAs represent “a constraint on human behavior that makes us, on the one hand, avoid discordance or communicative offense and, on the other, maintain or increase communicative courtesy or courtesy” (Leech, 2014, p. 64). That said, orders and commands, for example, threaten the hearer’s negative face while criticisms attack the positive face of the hearer.

In sum, for Brown and Levinson (1987), facework is mainly rooted in preserving the spaces of the interlocutors, together with the desire to act freely and autonomously. Similarly, for Leech, politeness principles represent a “restriction observed in human communicative behavior, that avoids discordance or communicative aggression while maintaining or enhancing communicative courtesy” (Leech, 2014, p. 87). Along the same lines, Cunha and Oliveira (2020) claim that the notion of facework under Brown and Levinson (1987) is, on the one hand, restricted since it only corresponds to the use of linguistic devices that mitigate the threat of speech acts. On the other hand, the notion is broadened, since it encompasses the strategies used to lessen the attacks on the negative face and not only on the positive face. Altogether, these strategies are designed to sustain the communicative flow by meeting the face wants and the interactants’ goals.

Of great relevance for this study, as Spencer-Oatey (2005, p. 07-108) notes, is that different interactional goals yield different kinds of judgments concerning discursive appropriateness and social compliance. For this reason, a widely accepted classification of interactional goals encompasses two major types: (a) “transactional goals” (e.g., carrying a task) and (b) relational goals (e.g. enriching friendship) Spencer-Oatey (2005, p. 107-108).

Because appropriateness judgments are mostly rooted in the principle of reciprocity, a kind of unmarked and appropriate behavior to be expected, it typically involves “routine exchanges and reciprocal greetings, partings, favors and thanks, requests and compliances, assertions and acknowledgments (Culpeper and Tantucci, 2021, p. 151-152). Thus, rules of conduct establish how interactants are morally compelled to act concerning one another so that reciprocity is perceived as “a normal course of actions” (Garfinkel, 1964, p. 225) in social interaction. From this perspective, Haugh (2014, p. 159) asserts that the interpersonal evaluation of social rules involves “the casting of persons and relationships into particular valenced (i.e., positive-neutral-negative) categories, according to some kind



of perceived normative scale or frame”. Of relevance to this judgment, is the principle of reciprocity viewed as inherent to politeness (Meier, 1995; Schneider, 2012).

Locher (2004) and Locher and Watts (2005), define relational work as “the process of defining relationships in interaction”. According to the authors, the term is used to highlight the verbal work towards adjusting language to meet different expectations concerning the speech events per se and the different interactional goals underlying them. By pointing this out, the authors reinforce that relational work does not only refer to polite linguistic behavior. On the contrary, it also covers any kind of general language use leading to identity construction, including impolite and contemptuous language, for example. Essential to this view of identity is that it is seen as a multidimensional product, that encompasses various elements such as age, class, gender, and in the case of this study, professional work. Moreover, identity construction employing social interactions was defined by Mendoza-Denton (2002) in the following terms:

Identity is the active negotiation of an individual’s relationship with larger social constructs, in so far as this negotiation is signaled through language and other semiotic means. Identity, then, is neither attribute nor possession but an individual and collective-level process of semiosis. (Mendoza-Denton 2002, p. 475)

It is also interesting to note that, because politeness strategies are employed to reduce the conflictive potential of interactions, it is indispensable to relate them to the notions of democracy and egalitarian participation. In doing so, challenging the so-called “rational speaker”, who is observant of the social rules, is paramount in more recent discussions about Politeness (Culpeper and Tantucci, 2011, Grainger, 2018). As Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1997) points out, politeness principles can be challenged at least for two reasons: for helping to deepen social divides and for trying to transcend them. Traditional studies on politeness are guided by an ideal of “perfect harmony among people” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1997, p. 304), who seek to overcome their conflicts at any cost. For Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1997, p. 304), social harmony may be “an illusion created to make inequalities sound bearable and to perpetuate the social order, as unfair as it may be.”

Similarly, Kienpointner and Stopfner (2017) bring to the fore that the description of facework in Brown and Levinson (1987) tends to overestimate the importance of conscious choice, reinforcing the notion of rational and goal-oriented practical reasoning. In being polite, speakers can either challenge or reinforce the status quo, strengthening or weakening existing social bonds (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1997). For the author, traditional studies on politeness argue in favor of a “perfect harmony among mankind” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1997, p. 304). The author postulates that politeness cannot be constrained because interlocutors are “extremely gentle and relatively attentive.” When exercised by a superior, politeness may operate as a powerful force towards social control. Criticisms, mainly when coming down from superiors, can aggravate the face threat and may be detrimental to the interlocutor’s public image (Bousfield, 2010, Culpeper, 2011, 2011).

## **Expressions of disapproval: criticisms and complaints**

Tracy and Eisenberg (1990) define both complaining and criticizing as the act of ‘finding faults’, involving giving “a negative evaluation of a person or an act for which he or she is deemed respon-

sible” (1990, p. 56). For the authors, whether an utterance can be taken as a complaint or a criticism seems to depend on its “content and form and the salient role identity” (1990, p. 87) of the giver and the recipient. From this view, criticisms are mainly associated with higher social status and complaints with lower social status.

According to Wajnryb (1993, p. 57), in the educational scenario, criticisms tend to be softened using several strategies which typically include ‘measuring words’ (to avoid being too negative), ‘soft-pedaling’ (using internal and external modifications to lessen the harshness of the criticism), ‘distancing and neutralizing’ (to depersonalize the criticism) and ‘using negotiating language’ (to avoid imposing on the addressee).

Taking that expression of disapproval always carry some degree of criticism, in this study, we will consider Searle’s (1975) taxonomy, according to which expressions of disapproval are expressive speech acts that relate to moral judgments expressing the speakers’ approval or disapproval concerning a situation impacting them. They are types of speech acts that may affect discursive collaboration, potentially hurting the complainer and the complaineé (Boxer, 1993; Cohen and Olshtain, 1993; Geluykens; 2003). For this reason, complaints may be fruitful when studying facework and politeness, as Trosborg puts it:

In a complaint, the utterance may only indirectly express the complainer’s ill feelings towards the complaineé, or these may be phrased in terms of a straightforward accusation or in terms of moral judgment. In the former case, the complaineé has to perform an inference process to establish a link between what is said and what is intended based on the situational context (Trosborg, 1995, p. 314).

Alongside these lines, in the framework initially proposed by Olshtain and Weinbach (1987), a complaint requires that the complainer expresses discomfort towards a particular action that affects him/her negatively. Taking that complaints and expressions of disapproval commonly affect relationships, complainers are compelled to employ politeness strategies when addressing the complaineé (Boxer, 1993; Cohen and Olshtain, 1993; Geluykens, 2003). For the same reason, the complainers’ responses commonly contain a justification and an offer of repair.

The different discursive moves within a complaint characterize it as a complex speech event in which faces are at risk of being confronted or damaged (Cohen and Olshtain, 1993; Geluykens, 2003). When comparing complaint sequences in two different interactional contexts (everyday conversations and institutional calls), Monzoni (2008) has shown that questions were used to establish common ground and prepare for the complaint. These results reinforce that complaints require certain pre-conditions to become felicitous, once again supporting their pragmatic complexity (Boxer, 1993; Cohen and Olshtain, 1993; Geluykens, 2003).

Complaints may be subcategorized into direct and indirect (D’Amico-Reisner, 1985; Boxer, 1993, 1996). Indirect complaints refer to “the expression of dissatisfaction to an interlocutor about oneself or someone/something that is not present” (Boxer, 1996, p. 219). In direct complaints, the speaker expresses “displeasure or annoyance as a consequence of a past or ongoing action that affects him/her unfavorably, and that directly involves the complaineé” (Olshtain and Weinbach, 1987: 134).

As Decock and Depraetere (2018) claim, indirectness in complaints can be reassessed by considering a continuum of indirectness:

1. implicit complaint: the four constitutive elements of a complaint are implicated;
2. presence of a verb/noun that names the speech act;
3. one constitutive element communicated on-record/explicitly;
4. two constitutive elements communicated on-record/explicitly;
5. three constitutive elements communicated on-record/explicitly;
6. four constitutive elements communicated on-record/explicitly

As one can see, indirectness operates effectively in complaints, with various implications to the degree of face aggravation. After a complaint is made, the complaineé often formulates a response, which puts together face repair strategies. In the context of business (responding to customers) reactions to complaints proved to express solidarity with the customer at the expense of the company (Depraetere, et. al, 2021), In the educational setting, similar findings were hinted by Orsini-Jones and Lee (2018) since they assert that forum participants tend to express in-group solidarity even in the face of complaints or other types of face attack.

## Methodology of data collection

The data was collected in a virtual forum held on the Google Classroom platform as part of a remote course at a federal university in Brazil. The interaction in the forum was asynchronous and structured on a weekly basis to deepen the debate about the content addressed in the course. As such, after a prompt by the instructor, the course participants engaged in discussions by making comments.<sup>1</sup> The training course was held in April 2020, with a workload of 40 hours. It was intended for Elementary, Middle, or Higher Education Teachers, from different disciplines. The participants agreed to contribute to this research as long as their anonymity was preserved. In total, 177 posts were published by the forum participants on the topic “Pedagogical Tools Presentation”, created by the tutors during the forum participation. After manual analysis, 45 posts were identified as carrying expressions of disapproval. These posts were then analyzed according to the interactional moves illustrated in Table 1, which were adapted from Schaefer (1982, p. 14-15) and Traverso (2009):

We believe these categories serve the purpose of this study since relational work is meant to refer to “the moves within the interactional work “ (Tracy 1990, p. 212). It is also important to note that, in the face of space limitations, we will present a selected sample of expressions of disapproval and their corresponding follow-up responses in the section dedicated to data analysis.

---

<sup>1</sup> A partnership between the Office of International Affairs and the Faculty of Languages (UFMG) with the University of Southampton (UK) offered input for the course design.



**Table 1** – interactional moves in expressions of disapproval

Function type	Function description
Opener	Initial utterance with general information about the origin of the disapproval criticism
Mitigator	Utterances expressing affirmation of the interlocutor's face or mitigating the problem stated in the opener.
Orientation	Utterances expressing the object of disapproval or criticism more openly, usually with a justification.
Reinforcement	Utterance used to conclude the expression of disapproval or criticism by reinforcing the dissatisfaction or by presenting an additional problem.

(Adapted from Schaefer, 1982: 14-15 and Traverso: 54, 2009)

## Ethical issue<sup>2</sup>

The messages analyzed in this study contained non-sensitive language and were anonymized through the generic labels of “tutor”, to refer to the course facilitator, and “course participant”, or simply “participant”, to refer to the teacher taking part in the professional development course of which the virtual forum was a key component. Additionally, most complaints or expressions of disapproval were designed to the pedagogical tools presented in the course and not explicitly addressed to a particular, identifiable individual. Given the non-invasive nature of the research, we can thus cautiously assume that no one will be harmed by the use of the messages we present in the section of analysis.

## Analysis of selected the interactional moves

Since the presentation of pedagogical Internet tools was the topic of the first week of activities in the training course, they were the focus of attention in the online forum, generating expressions of disapproval. A selected sample of these expressions and the follow-up responses are presented here. To classify these expressions, as mentioned earlier, we employed four categories: (a) opener; (b) mitigator; (c) orientation; and (d) reinforcement, as proposed by Schaefer (1982, p. 14-15) and Traverso (2009), and freely adapted by the author in this research.

<sup>2</sup> Este projeto foi aprovado pelo COEP/XX (CAAE no 26951119.0.0000.5149). Agradecemos à coordenadora do projeto e uma das coordenadoras do curso de capacitação a cessão dos dados analisados neste trabalho.

**Excerpt 1 – expression of disapproval**

Eu amei as indicações das ferramentas, já assisti aos tutoriais e gostei bastante, bem explicativos. Já criei vários quizz e formulários. Já havia feito alguns formulários no google, mas aprendi outras funcionalidades que só enriquecem, amei! Só o Flipgrid que não me senti muito a vontade em executar, como estou com alunos do Fundamental II, essa questão de imagens é bem complicada. Fora os contextos de falta de acessibilidade que limita a execução das tarefas apenas pelo celular.

I loved the suggestions of tools, I already watched the tutorial and I liked it too, it was very didactic. I already created several quizzes and forms. I had already done forms on the Google Platform, but I learned other affordances that were very enriching, I loved them! It is just with Flipgrid that I am not so comfortable using, since I teach Elementary School children, this issue of images is very complicated. On top of it are the contexts of lack of Internet access that limits carrying activities only done over the cell phone.

**Move classification**

**Opener:** I loved the suggestions of tools, I already watched the tutorial and I liked it too, it was very didactic.

**Mitigator:** I already created several quizzes and forms. I had already done forms on the Google Platform, but I learned other affordances that were very enriching, I loved them!

**Orientation:** It is just with Flipgrid that I am not so comfortable using since I teach Elementary School children, this issue of images is very complicated.

**Reinforcement:** On top of it is the context of lack of Internet access that limits carrying activities only done over the cell phone.

The Opener introduces a positive judgment concerning the Internet tools and the tutorial presented in the course, the latter being assessed as “very didactic” (“I already watched the tutorial and I liked it too, it was very didactic”). Since compliments boost the interlocutors’ faces and help create interactional harmony, the use of the intensifier “very” highlights a positive judgment (Haugh, 2014; Leech, 2014; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1997) and operates as a form of preparation for the complaint to be voiced.

Following the Opener, the Mitigator also favors the tutor, putting forward more compliments and expressions of approval. Moreover, this positive orientation gains legitimacy because it is rooted in the complainer’s professional expertise (“I already created several quizzes and forms, but I learned other affordances that were very enriching, I loved them”). The use of emotional and attitudinal components (“I loved them”) enhances the principles of politeness and acts to form common ground (Culpeper Tantucci, 2021). From this view, the mitigator also suggests tacit cooperation in which the complainer attempts to make the terms of the exchange more favorable to the other side (Goffman, 1955, p. 11).

In the Orientation, the object of the complaint is openly stated (“It is just with Flipgrid that I am not so comfortable using “Since I teach Elementary School children”). Because expressions of

disapproval express a kind of discomfort or a problem from the complainer's viewpoint, they need to be clearly stated. In this sense, the use of "not so comfortable" is noteworthy. Albeit this expression of dissatisfaction, the use of the term "just" is employed as a down toner (Partington, 1993), serving to ease the threatening potential of the complaint. In the Orientation, the complainer also underscores that he is a colleague of equal status ("I teach Elementary School children"), which is a justification for the complaint he makes. He also evokes his professional experience as a potential object of joint attention in the forum ("This issue of images is very complicated").

Finally, the Reinforcement operates as a closing act pointing to other limitations of using the tool ("On top of it are the contexts of lack of Internet access that limit carrying activities that can be done over the cell phone"). As one can see, the complainer expressed dissatisfaction towards a situation that negatively affected him, although he mitigated face loss by using various politeness strategies.

Overall, the complaint in Example 1 also displays strategies of face protection and in-group solidarity that express a positive judgment about the course and, as a result, enhance the tutor's face. Whilst these strategies encompass transactional goals (Spencer-Oatey, 2005, p.107-108), mainly concerning task development and the use of the pedagogical tools presented, they are mostly designed to accomplish relational goals. The strategies employed are instrumental in encoding reciprocity and highlighting the expected social behavior for the case (Haugh, 2014; Culpeper and Tantucci, 2021, p.151-152). This finding is also supported by the use of some attitudinal expressions, such as "I loved them!" and "I loved the suggestions" that enhance the complaint's emotional tone. At the same time, they prevent the production of any aggressive reading of the message and serve to impede face loss.

### Excerpt 2 – follow-up response

Aug 12

Oi, Realmente temos que ficar atentos pois alguns dados e fotos dos alunos podem ficar disponíveis dependendo da ferramenta que usamos. Se mesmo com o acompanhamento dos pais você não ficar tranquila em usá-la temos sempre o Quizizz, o Kahoot ou até mesmo o Padlet que permitem atividades semelhantes e o acesso pelo celular. Muito obrigada pela participação!

Hi, we really have to be aware since some data and photos may be available depending on the tool that we use. If even with the parent's guidance, you do not feel confident using it, we still have Quizizz, Kahoot or even Padlet that permit activities similar and with cell phone access. Thank you for your participation.

In its initial move, the tutor admits the validity of the complaint, which she highlights by employing an intensifier "really" ("Hi, we really have to be aware of since some data and photos may be available depending on the tool that we use"). The response also focuses on the right to personal privacy over the Internet and the issue of the students' limited Internet access, as mentioned in the complaint. When admitting the limitations of the course material's tools, the tutor consents that her authority and higher status in the forum may be subject to questioning. As a form of repair, she offers alternatives that may help lessen the dissatisfaction expressed by the course participant ("We still

have Quizizz, Kahoot or even Padlet that permit activities similar and with cell phone access”). Additionally, the tutor’s response serves to prevent further attacks from being performed on her face and professional image. In the response closure, while thanking the complainer for his participation in the forum, she also attests to following social conventions of courtesy and “noblesse oblige” (Goffman, 1955: 8, Leech, 2014). On the other hand, her thanks also serve to end the discussion (“Thank you for your participation”) and potentially allow for introducing a new discussion topic, preventing the emergence of further objections to her message. From the viewpoint of a relational approach, thanking and greeting are strategies to comply with social norms perceived as polite and, therefore, acting in favor of the speaker or author (Spencer-Oatey, 2005, p.107-108; Culpeper and Tantucci, 2021, p.151-152), as it may be observed here.

Moreover, the response contributes to strengthening the exchange’s positive tone, according to the perceived rules of interaction (Haugh (2014: 159). In the case of forum participation, it is perceived that interlocutors work collaboratively (Landone, 2012; Orsini-Jones and Lee, 2018). From this view, the unmarked and appropriate behavior inherent to forum participants compels the users to contribute to the interaction that is supportive and, at the same time, instrumental to achieving the forum educational aims. One explanation for this verbal behavior is that the tutor pursues both transactional and relational goals mainly because she feels compelled to be supportive and offer guidance. Verbal solidarity is thus noted in “Hi, we really have to be aware of since some data and photos may be available depending on the tool that we use”. As for guidance, it may be identified in “Quizizz, Kahoot, or even Padlet that permit activities similar and with cell phone access”, which is also a kind of behavior usually expected from teachers (Vedder-Weiss et. al., 2019).

It is also interesting to note that, by avoiding further dissent, the tutor prevents herself from falling from the “social status rank” (Goffman, 1951, p. 295). She thus reaffirms a creditable professional image associated with unity and mutual respect. This behavior also contributes to accumulating social capital because it enriches bonds among the course participants by asserting the strength of the social connection.

Overall, the complaint and the response to it assure that the social relations in the forum remain unaltered and more easily managed (Goffman, 1955: 8, Lecher and Watts, 2005). More importantly, they reiterate that teachers tend to evade projecting their images as authoritative professionals and usually refuse to impose their viewpoints and judgment on their peers directly (Filliettaz, 2013; Vedder-Weiss et al., 2019).

### Excerpt 3 – expression of disapproval

Decidi usar o wordcloud e achei ele menos intuitivo que imaginava. Peguei um dos tópicos da minha última disciplina e coloquei as palavras-chaves (que não eram poucos) e atribui os pesos. Não coube todas as palavras. Fui tentando reduzir os pesos, mas ele só foi ficando mais vazio e ainda sim as palavras não cabiam. Por fim, decide reduzir o objetivo da minha nuvem para os aspectos que trabalharia nas primeiras aulas e ainda sim tive dificuldade em colocar tudo. O que me incomodou é que a relação peso das palavras com caber na nuvem não é tão lógica como achei que seria.

I have decided to use WordCloud and it was less intuitive than I thought. I took one of the topics from my last course and placed the keywords- they were not few- and I assigned the scores. Not all words fit in. I tried to reduce the scores, but it became almost empty, and even so, the words would not fit in. Finally, I decided to reduce the goal of my cloud to the topics that I would address in the first classes even though I had a lot of difficulties including everything. What upset me was that the scoring of the words and the cloud size is not as logical relation as I thought they would be.

#### **Move classification**

**Opener:** I have decided to use WordCloud

**Mitigator:** and it was less intuitive than I thought

**Orientation:** I took one of the topics from my last course and placed the keywords (they were not few) and I assigned the scores. Not all words fit in. I tried to reduce the scores, but it became almost empty, and even so, the words would not fit in.

**Reinforcement:** Finally, I decided to reduce the goal of my cloud to the topics that I would address in the first classes even though I had a lot of difficulties including everything.

The Opener (“I have decided to use WordCloud”) and the Mitigator (“and it was less intuitive than I thought”) are very intertwined in Example 3. They both serve as a preparation for a partially reduced conflict through the use of the down toner “less intuitive”. Operating as a possible alternative for “not intuitive at all”, the use of “less intuitive” expresses the intent to establish common ground and to soften the objection in the complaint.

Following the Mitigator, the Orientation frames the origin of the complaint openly, focusing on the lack of effectiveness of the pedagogical tool recommended in the course material (“I took one of the topics from my last course and placed the keywords - they were not few - and I assigned the scores. Not all words fit in”). Of notable importance is the use of the apposition, (“they were not few”) since it anticipates a potential objection from the tutor by implicitly admitting that the excessive number of words in the cloud (“not few” meaning “too many”) might have caused the tool underperformance. Nonetheless, the negative aspects involving the tool are underscored and the course participant once more displays discomfort and apprehension as a possible justification for the complaint (“I tried to reduce the scores, but it became almost empty, and even so, the words would not fit in”).

In the complaint closure, the Reinforcement (“Finally, I decided to reduce the goal of my cloud to the topics that I would address in the first classes even so I had a lot of difficulties to include everything”) the course participant exhibits his frustration for having to adjust his pedagogical goals to overcome the limitations of the tool.

#### **Excerpt 4 - Response**

Oi, Palavras muito grandes são problemáticas de encaixar no Wordcloud. No meu exemplo mesmo, o termo "memória imunológica" ficou de fora em alguns formatos de nuvem. Uma opção seria mudar o desenho da nuvem para que os termos maiores pudessem ser encaixados.



Words that are too big are problematic to fit in WordCloud. In my example, the term ‘immunological memory’ was not fit to be included in some cloud formats. One alternative would be to change the design so that more terms can be incorporated.

In her response, the tutor admits the tool’s limitations and offers alternatives (“One alternative would be to change the design so that more terms can be incorporated”). By doing that, she demonstrates following the conventions related to respect, patience, fairness, and unity, which are commonly expected from teachers (Evans, 2008; Porquay, 2001). Likewise, by being supportive (“One alternative would be to change the design so that more terms can be incorporated”), she encourages in-group solidarity and mutual collaboration also avoiding further confrontation (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Leech, 2014; Culpeper, 2011). The response suggests behavior that helps forge her professional image before the other forum participants (Durkheim, 1957/2013; Goffman, 1967).

## Discussion

An interesting phenomenon observed in this study is that the negotiation of disapproval was strategically managed from the angle of relational work mostly because discursive collaboration was considered instrumental to the forum. This finding explains why, in the face of verbal confrontation, the participants decided to forgo their autonomy at the expense of projecting a reputable professional image. As such, gaining attention in the digital space has become especially valuable, being liable for conversion to economic capital or social prestige, which, in this case, meant the tutor and the course participants refrained from risking their faces and opted to maintain a positive attitude (Oliveira e Marques, 2021; Oliveira e Cunha, 2020).

As can be seen, although rapport management softened the expression of disapproval, it also acted in opposition to the central objective of educational forums, which is generally concerned with promoting intellectual enrichment. One explanation for this compensatory verbal behavior may be that the messages remain visible in the forum for a long time, compelling the participants to have extra care with face loss. That the expressions of disapproval were made directly, in the interlocutor’s virtual presence, might also have contributed to forging a communal environment, avoiding dissent. Moreover, the interaction was asynchronous, which calls for linguistic and extra-linguistics resources to create and enrich social bonds.

Furthermore, we speculate that relational work in cyberspace may be attached to the formation of bonds accrued in various types of digital interactions. In the case of this study, the findings suggest that professional images may be shaped and reaffirmed in cyberspace through relational work and by affirming the interactant’s current social or professional status. This helps explain how/why face loss was constantly avoided in searching for a creditable professional image, even when disapproval or criticism was in focus.

More importantly, this study viewed facework and relational work as a phenomenon that is neither steady nor presupposed. On the contrary, it is always in constant transformation and refinement. The phenomenon also alludes to what we believe has occurred to the professional images challenged through expressions of disapproval analyzed. As they were questioned, they were also reinforced and reshaped in interaction.

## Final remarks

In our findings, the expressions of disapproval were performed directly, that is, in the virtual presence of the interlocutor. As the examples show, facework and politeness principles were constantly acknowledged to build a collaborative environment in the forum. The participants and the tutor shared similar professional ethics, involving mutual respect and the belief in egalitarian participation in the forum albeit the restrictions stemming from the lack of face-to-face contact.

Although the expressions of disapproval represented a threat to the projection of a favorable professional image, they were often mitigated by the performance of face-enhancing acts and the use of down toners, which sought common ground formation. Furthermore, the tutor's responses displayed a supportive tone, enhancing in-group solidarity and reciprocity while lessening the possibility of face loss.

It is also noteworthy to underscore that no genuine debate was identified in the forum since relational work was extensively acknowledged to legitimize social rules and avoid confrontation. From this view, by pursuing an imaginary "perfect harmony among mankind" (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1997, p. 304), the expressions of disapproval and their follow-up responses reinforced the *status quo* and the social conventions of forum participation, while impeding the emergence of genuine debate, as one would have expected from an educational forum.

Finally, this research showed that professional images are mutually influenced in a forum of teacher professional development since both tutor and participants seek to reaffirm a reputable image of themselves, mostly grounded on relational work and pre-established standards of professional ethics. These findings reiterate the idea that professional identity is multidimensional and constantly ratified in social interaction. As Tracy 1990: 210 points out, "one person comes into being in the face of another" (Tracy 1990, p. 210).

## References

- BOXER, DIANA. 1993. Social distance and speech behavior: The case of indirect complaints. *Journal of pragmatics*, **19** (2): 103-125.
- BOUSFIELD, DEREK. 2010. Researching impoliteness and rudeness: Issues and definitions. *Interpersonal Pragmatics*, **6**:101-134. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110214338.1.101>
- BROWN, PENELOPE; STEPHEN C. LEVINSON. 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, **4**. Cambridge University Press.
- CLARKE, MATTHEW. 2008. Language Teacher Identities: Co-constructing Discourse and Community. *Multilingual Matters*, **19** (2): 103-125. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781847690838>
- CUNHA, GUSTAVO XIMENES. 2020. Elementos para un abordaje interaccionista de las relaciones del discurso. *Lingüística*, **36**(2):107-129. <https://doi.org/10.5935/2079-312x.20200017>.
- CUNHA, G. X.; OLIVEIRA, A. L. A. M. 2020. Teorias de im/polidez linguística: revisitando o estado da arte para uma contribuição teórica sobre o tema. *Estudos Da Língua(gem)*, **18** (2): 135-162. <https://doi.org/10.22481/el.v18i2.6409>

- CULPEPER, JONATHAN; TANTUCCI, VITTORIO. 2021. The Principle of (Im) politeness Reciprocity. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 175:146-164. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.01.008>
- COHEN, ANDREW D; OLSHTAIN, ELITE. 1993. The production of speech acts by EFL learners". *Tesol Quarterly*, 27 (1): 33-56. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3586950>
- DECOCK, SOFIE; DEPRAETERE, ILSE. 2018. (In) directness and complaints: A reassessment. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 132:33-46. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2018.04.010>
- DEPRAETERE, ILSE; DECOCK, SOFIE; RUYTENBEEK, NICOLAS. 2021. Linguistic (in) directness in Twitter complaints: A contrastive analysis of railway complaint interactions. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 171: 215-233. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2020.09.026>
- DURKHEIM, EMILE, 1957/2013. *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*. Routledge.
- ECKHARDT, GIANA M.; FLEURA, BARDHI. New dynamics of social status and distinction. *Marketing Theory*. 2020, 76: 85-102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593119856650>
- EVANS, L, 2008. Professionalism, Professionality and the Development of Education Professionals. 2017. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 56, (1): 20-38 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745499917740653>
- FILLIETTAZ, LAURENT. 2013. Affording learning environments in workplace contexts: An interactional and multimodal perspective. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 32 (1): 107-122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2012.734480>
- GARFINKEL, HAROLD. 1964. Studies of the routine grounds of everyday activities. *Soc. Probl*, 11 (3): 225e250.
- GELUYKENS, RONALD; KRAFT, B. 2003. *Sociocultural variation in native and interlanguage complaints. Meaning through language contrast*. p.p. 251-261. London: John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.100.16gel>
- GOFFMAN, E. 1967. *Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face-to-face Behavior*. Chicago: Aldi
- GOFFMAN, ERVING. 1955. On face-work: An analysis of ritual elements in social interaction. *Psychiatry*, 18 (3): 213-231.
- GRAINGER, KAREN. 2018. We're not in a club now: a neo-Brown and Levinson approach to analyzing courtroom data. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 14 (1) :19-38. <https://doi.org/10.1515/pr-2017-0039>
- HAUGH, MICHAEL. 2014. *Im/politeness implicatures*. Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110240078>
- HERRING, SUSAN C. 2001. Computer-mediated discourse. In: Schiffrin, D., Tannen, D., Hamilton, H. (eds.). *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, pp. 612-634. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470753460.ch32>

- KERBRAT-ORECCHIONI, CATHERINE. 1997. A multilevel approach in the study of talk-in-interaction. *Pragmatics*, 7 (1): 1-20.
- KIENPOINTNER, MANFRED; STOPFNER, MARIA. 2017. Ideology and (Im) politeness. In: *The Palgrave Handbook of Linguistic (Im) politeness*. Culpeper, Jonathan, Michael Haugh, and Dániel Z. Kádár, eds. The Palgrave Handbook of linguistic (im) Politeness. p.p. 61-87. London: Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-37508-7\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-37508-7_4)
- KNORR-CETINA, KARIN. 1997. Sociality with objects: Social relations in postsocial knowledge societies. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 14 (4):1-30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327697014004001>
- LANDONE, ELENA. 2012. Discourse markers and politeness in a digital forum in Spanish. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 44 (13): 1799-1820. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2012.09.001>
- LEECH, G, 2014. *The Pragmatics of Politeness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195341386.001.0001>
- LOCHER, MIRIAM, A. 2008. Relational work, politeness and identity construction. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 152: 509-540.
- LOCHER, MIRIAM A.; RICHARD J. 2005. Watts Politeness theory and relational work. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 1(1): 9-33. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jplr.2005.1.1.9>
- OLIVEIRA, A. L. M.; CUNHA, G. X. 2020. A formação de vínculos sociais na comunicação virtual: Qual a contribuição da teoria da polidez e da expressão de postura? *Domínios de Lingu@gem*, 17: e1703. <https://doi.org/10.14393/DLv17a2023-3>
- OLIVEIRA, A. L. M.; MARQUES, J.P. C. 2021. Polidez, expressão de postura e a comunicação fática: uma análise de interações em um fórum virtual. *Cadernos de Letras da UFF*, 32 (62): 318-333. <https://doi.org/10.22409/cadletrasuff.v32i62.49226>
- ORSINI-JONES, MARINA; LEE, FIONA. 2018. *Intercultural Communicative Competence for Global Citizenship: Identifying Cyberpragmatic Rules of Engagement in Telecollaboration*. London: Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-58103-7>
- PARTINGTON, A. 1993. *Corpus evidence of language change: The case of the Intensifier*. In M. Baker, G. Francis & E. Tognini-Bonelli (Eds.), *Text and Technology: In Honour of John Sinclair*, p.p. 177- 192. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- SEARLE, JOHN R. 1975. *A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- SCHAEFER, EDWARD JAY.1982. An analysis of the discourse and syntax of oral complaints in English. The University of California, Los Angeles *Teaching English as a Second Language*, 1:195-230.
- OLSHTAIN, ELITE; WEINBACH, LIORA. 1987. Complaints: A study of speech act behavior among native and non-native speakers of Hebrew. *The pragmatic perspective*, p.p. 195-230. London: John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pbcs.5.15ols>

- PAQUAY, L.; ALTET, M.; CHARLIER, E.; PERRENOUD P. 2001. *To form professional teachers Which strategies? Which competencies?* Brussels: De Boeck University Press.
- TROSBORG, ANNA, 1995. Interlanguage pragmatics: requests, complaints, and apologies. *Anthropological Linguist.* 7. Berlin; New York: Mouton de Gruyter. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/9783110885286>
- TRAVERSO, VÉRONIQUE. 2009. The dilemmas of third-party complaints in conversation between friends. *Journal of Pragmatics* 41.12: 2385-2399. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2008.09.047>
- TRACY, KAREN. 1990. Tue many faces of facework. In: Howard Giles and Peter Robinson (eds.), *Handbook of Language and Social Psychology*, p.p: 209-226. Chichester: Wiley.
- TRACY, KAREN; EISENBERG, ERIC. 1990. Giving criticisms: a multiple goals case study. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 24; 37–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08351819009389332>
- VEDDER-WEISS, DANA; SEGAL, A; LEFSTEIN, A. 2019. Teacher face-work in discussions of video-recorded classroom practice: Constraining or catalyzing opportunities to learn? *Journal of Teacher Education* 70(5): 538-551. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487119841895>
- VETERE, F., SMITH, J.; GIBBS, M. 2009. Phatic interactions: Being aware and feeling connected In Smith, J., & Gibbs, M. (eds.). *Awareness systems*. p.p. 173-186. London: Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-84882-477-5\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-84882-477-5_7)
- WAJNRYB, RUTH. 1993. Strategies for the management and delivery of criticisms. *EA Journal*, 11 (2): 74–84. <https://doi.org/10.1515/IP.2008.003>
- YUS, Francisco. 2011. *Cyberpragmatics: Internet-mediated communication in context*. Amsterdã: John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.213>

Submetido: 10/10/2022

Aceito: 29/06/2023