
Research Article

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Face-threatening acts performed by Joe Gardner in *Soul* movie

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Abstract

Speech acts are actions carried out through language that do more than just share information; they can also affect the listener or change social situations. Sometimes, these spoken interactions may cause the listener to feel uncomfortable or lose respect. The idea of protecting a person's dignity and social standing in communication is known as 'face.' When speech acts threaten this sense of face, they are called face-threatening acts. This study aims at identifying and analyzing the face-threatening acts performed by the character Joe Gardner in Pixar's animated movie *Soul* (2020), by applying Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework. Data were collected using the documentation method and note-taking technique, focusing on Joe Gardner's utterances throughout the movie. The analysis employs a descriptive qualitative method, involving classification, identification, and verification based on the four types of face-threatening acts. The findings show that Joe Gardner performs all four types of face-threatening acts in 103 utterances: threatening the hearer's negative face (61.2%), threatening the hearer's positive face (23.3%), threatening the speaker's negative face (6.8%), and threatening the speaker's positive face (8.7%). The most frequently used type is the threat to the hearer's negative face.

Keywords: Face-Threatening Acts; Animated Movie; Joe Gardner

1. Introduction

The way we speak and behave with others affects the success of our daily interactions and relationships. In these interactions, people use language with attention to politeness to establish and maintain social relationships. Politeness is the key factor in ensuring smooth and respectful exchanges, as it reflects the practice of respecting and considering others' feelings during communication. Politeness is a significant area of pragmatic study, which examines how language is used in various social contexts. Polite expressions, such as kind words, a warm tone of voice, or respectful body language, help to "save face" for the other person.

Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 61) stated that all competent adult members of a society have (and know each other to have) 'face', the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself. In many forms of face-to-face interactions, participants are often concerned not only with maintaining their own face but also with saving the face of others. The concept of 'face' can be defended, enforced, or damaged. The term "damaged" can be explored with Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of face-threatening acts.

Face-threatening acts refer to any action or utterance that risks a person's self-esteem or social identity, commonly known as their 'face.' Individuals usually try to avoid face-threatening acts to maintain harmonious relationships and prevent discomfort. However, it is important to note that people may not always be aware of how their words or actions could potentially threaten the face of others. The primary function of addressing face-threatening acts is to maintain effective communication

between interlocutors. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), face-threatening acts can be categorized into four types: threats to the hearer's negative face, threats to the hearer's positive face, threats to the speaker's negative face, and threats to the speaker's positive face. The important role of face-threatening acts in understanding human communication and social dynamics underlies the researcher's decision to focus on face-threatening acts as a research topic.

Several empirical studies have investigated the use of face-threatening acts. Saputra's (2016) analysis focused on face-threatening acts in the movie *Bad Neighbors*, Claudinetta's (2016) study examined such acts in the Jokowi–Prabowo presidential debate, and Rahmawati's (2017) research explored face-threatening acts and politeness strategies in *Beauty and the Beast*. Additionally, Cahyaningrum's (2022) study investigated face-threatening acts and their strategies in the movie *The Half of It*, while Cahyadi's (2023) research analyzed face-threatening acts in the TV series *House of the Dragon*. However, studies analyzing the use of face-threatening acts in animated movies are rarely found. Considering the rich dialogue and diverse contexts found in animated movies, this research seeks to fill this gap by examining how face-threatening acts are portrayed in a non-realistic setting.

This research aims at analyzing the face-threatening acts performed by the character Joe Gardner in the animated movie *Soul*. *Soul* is a 2020 animated movie by Pixar about Joe Gardner, a jazz musician and music teacher who unexpectedly ends up in the afterlife just as he's about to seize the biggest opportunity of his career. Throughout his journey, Joe interacts with various characters, such as his friend 22, his mother Libba, and his idol Dorothea Williams. These interactions involve moments of disagreement, persuasion, and self-reflection, that show the phenomenon of face-threatening acts. His experiences reveal how these acts, which challenge a person's social identity or self-esteem, appear naturally in animated movies, for they demonstrate the presence of face-threatening acts in everyday communication. This research adopts Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of face-threatening acts as the main framework.

2. Methods

The primary data source for this research comes from the movie *Soul*, with the movie script serving as the secondary data. The focus of the analysis is on Joe Gardner's dialogues, particularly those that display face-threatening acts. To collect the data, the movie was watched multiple times with English subtitles to fully understand the dialogues and their context. The movie script was downloaded and carefully reviewed to ensure its alignment with the movie. Following this, the documentation method and note-taking technique were employed to collect specific utterances by Joe Gardner that demonstrate the use of face-threatening acts, along with the time stamps for each instance.

Once the utterances had been documented, the purposive sampling technique was employed to determine which data would be selected for further analysis. According to Sugiyono (2019, p. 133), purposive sampling is a technique where samples are chosen based on specific considerations. Due to the large number of dialogues displaying similar types of face-threatening acts, this technique was applied to choose the most relevant examples from each type and ensure that only the most representative instances are shown.

Data analysis in this research utilized qualitative descriptive methods and the triangulation technique based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory. The data were first organized and classified by type, then coded to identify themes and patterns. This was followed by cross-checking to ensure accuracy and reliability. Finally, the results were presented informally through narrative descriptions that offer detailed explanations and interpretations of the face-threatening acts found in the movie..

3. Results

A total of 103 utterances by Joe Gardner that involved face-threatening acts were found in the analysis. These utterances were then categorized according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) classification of face-threatening acts, which includes four types: (1) acts that threaten the hearer's

negative face, (2) the hearer's positive face, (3) the speaker's negative face, and (4) the speaker's positive face. The data obtained are presented below:

Table 1. Types of Face-Threatening Acts Performed by Joe Gardner in *Soul* Movie.

No	Types of Face-Threatening Acts	Frequency	Percentage
1	Threatening Hearer's Negative Face	63	61,2%
2	Threatening Hearer's Positive Face	24	23,3%
3	Threatening Speaker's Negative Face	7	6,8%
4	Threatening Speaker's Positive Face	9	8,7%
	Total	103	100%

Table 1 above presents the frequency of the four types of face-threatening acts performed by Joe Gardner in *Soul* movie. Joe Gardner produces 63 utterances that threaten the hearer's negative face, 24 utterances that threaten the hearer's positive face, 7 utterances that threaten the speaker's negative face, and 9 utterances that threaten the speaker's positive face. These utterances are directed toward various characters in the movie, including 22, Libba, Dorothea Williams, and others.

4. Discussion

This section explains the results from analyzing the face-threatening acts used by Joe Gardner in *Soul*. In the movie, Joe engages in many social interactions that provide useful examples of how face-threatening acts appear in his communication. The analysis focuses on the moments when Joe's words or actions may threaten the self-image or feelings of others.

4.1 Types of Face-Threatening Acts

The findings of this study were organized using Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework of face-threatening acts. This framework categorizes face-threatening acts based on whether they threaten the positive face (the desire to be liked and accepted) or the negative face (the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition) of either the speaker or the listener. The types of face-threatening acts identified in the movie are explained as follows.

4.1.1 Threatening Hearer's Negative Face

Datum 1 [00:04:46 – 00:04:47]

CURLEY (O.S.) : Okay Mr. Gardner. Hey, look, I'm the new drummer in the Dorothea Williams Quartet and we're kicking off our tour with a show at The Half Note tonight.

JOE : Dorothea Williams?! Are you kidding me? **Congratulations, man!** Wow, I would die a happy man if I could perform with Dorothea Williams.

Curley, one of Joe Gardner's former students, becomes the drummer for Dorothea Williams' jazz quartet and excitedly shares the news with Joe. Joe responds with congratulations and expresses his admiration for the opportunity to perform with Dorothea Williams. While positive, Joe's **compliment** threatens Curley's negative face by creating an expectation to respond or reciprocate, thus imposing on his freedom to act.

Datum 2 [00:25:11 – 00:25:15]

22 : Unless it becomes an Earth Pass, I'm stuck with it.

JOE : **Well what if I help you turn that into an Earth Pass?** Will you give it to me then?

22 : Wait! I've never thought of that! I'd get to skip life. So yes! But we've gotta get this thing to change first, and I've never been able to get it to change.

Seeing his sick physical body in the Hall of You intensifies Joe's desire to return to Earth. Meanwhile, 22 doesn't want to go to Earth and sees her badge as a trap unless it allows her to skip life. Joe **offers** to help 22 change the badge so he can use it to go back to Earth. Even though it looks like he's helping, Joe's offer makes 22 feel like she has to say yes to avoid Earth, thus threatening her negative face.

Datum 3 [00:37:30 – 00:37:35]

JOE (to 22) : **You gotta talk to her!**
22 : Umm... Ms. Doctor, this body's soul is in this cat—
JOE : **Stop talking!**
22 : So naturally he wants to stay close.
DOCTOR : Uhhh, keep the cat. Just get some rest. A lot of it, okay?

Due to Joe's astral impulsiveness, their souls swapped bodies on Earth: 22 ended up in Joe's body, and Joe's soul went into a cat. In the hospital, Joe, as a cat that only 22 can understand the words, directly **orders** 22 to speak to the doctor. These orders are face-threatening acts, specifically threatening 22's negative face because they demand compliance

Datum 4 [00:39:05 – 00:39:07]

JOE : Move your... No... Careful! **Those fingers are my livelihood!**

During their hospital escape, Joe (whose soul is in a cat) **warns** 22 (whose soul is in Joe's body) to be careful with the elevator buttons, exclaiming that his fingers are his livelihood. This warning, born from Joe's fear of 22's clumsy movements harming his pianist hands, acts as a face-threatening act. It restricts 22's freedom and autonomy, thus threatening her negative face.

Datum 5 [00:40:47 – 00:40:48]

JOE : 22! I didn't know I had claws, okay? Look, I'm sorry, but **come on, let's go.**
22 : Mm mm. No way.

In the chaotic New York city street, 22 (in Joe's body) becomes overwhelmed by the city's chaos and suddenly stops walking. Joe (as a cat) unintentionally scratches her, causing her to panic and run. Joe then apologizes and **requests** that she come on and go with him. This request pressures 22 to act immediately, thus threatening her negative face.

Datum 6 [00:44:34 – 00:44:37]

JOE : Ugh! Dorothea Williams saw me! What am I going to do!? She's gonna think I'm crazy!
JOE : (continued) **Maybe you should call her up and tell her that we're not crazy!**
22 : I've only been a person for an hour and even I know that's a bad idea.

Panicked by unexpectedly meeting his idol, Dorothea Williams, while trying to hail a taxi, Joe (as a cat) impulsively shoves 22 (in Joe's body) into the cab. Later, distressed about the encounter, Joe **suggests** 22 call Dorothea to explain their sanity. This suggestion limits 22's freedom to choose how to respond to the situation. Consequently, this act constitutes a threat to 22's negative face, as it infringes upon her autonomy and her right to make independent decisions without being told what to do.

Datum 7 [01:00:33 – 01:00:37]

JOE : **Alright, remember, I need the suit fixed for a band recital. Got it?**

When 22, who is currently in Joe's body, accidentally rips his pants, Joe, whose soul is in a cat, becomes concerned because he needs the suit for his performance. Since no other tailors are open, Joe instructs 22 to go to his mother's tailoring shop for a repair. Significantly, Joe **reminds** 22 to say the suit is for a school band recital, which implies a desire to conceal the true reason. This reminder from Joe acts as a face-threatening act against 22's negative face.

Datum 8 [01:13:18 – 01:13:22]

DOROTHEA : Who let this lunatic in here?
JOE : Listen, you've gotta give me another chance!
DOROTHEA : This is my band. I decide who plays.

JOE : **And if you don't go with me, you'll be making the biggest mistake of your career.**

After regaining his body on Earth, Joe rushes to meet Dorothea to convince her not to replace him with someone else for the performance. He insists she give him another chance, and he states that refusing him would be a career mistake. Joe's statement, functioning as a **threat**, directly challenges Dorothea's authority over her band and pressures her to comply, thus severely threatening Dorothea's negative face.

4.1.2 Threatening Hearer's Positive Face

Datum 9 [00:28:07 – 00:28:09]

JOE : Well, I think that's... everything.
22 : Sorry.
JOE : **You told me you'd try!**
22 : I did! I'm telling the truth. If there's one thing I'm not, it's a liar. Unlike Abraham Lincoln...

Joe and 22 leave the Hall of Everything after several failed attempts to discover 22's spark, which leaves Joe visibly frustrated and 22 bored. Joe feels the weight of his responsibility as 22's mentor and grows increasingly impatient. He eventually snaps, saying, "*You told me you'd try!*" while pointing at 22 with a furrowed brow. His tone and gesture convey a **complaint** that serves as a face-threatening act toward 22's positive face, as it suggests she has failed to meet Joe's expectations. By expressing his disappointment in this way, Joe risks making 22 feel unappreciated or incapable.

Datum 10 [00:31:32 – 00:31:34]

MOONWIND : That's Windstar Dreamermoon, Dancerstar Windmoon, and that's Dreamerwind Dreamerdreamer.
JOE : **These weirdos are going to help me get back?**

In this scene, Joe and 22 meet Moonwind on the astral plane to ask for help in getting Joe back to his body. Moonwind proudly introduces his three eccentric friends to Joe. However, instead of being impressed, Joe looks doubtful and questions whether they can really help. He even calls them 'weirdos,' which is rude and disrespectful. The **insult** suggests that Joe finds them strange and unqualified, making it a face-threatening act toward the positive face of Moonwind's colleagues.

Datum 11 [00:41:58 – 00:42:00]

22 : I'm telling you, Joe, it's pronounced Yee-row!
JOE : **Yeah, but in New York, we call 'em Gyros. It's Greek.**

When Joe and 22 wandered through the bustling streets of New York City, they passed a gyro stand, which made 22 slow down, intrigued by the food. Joe, inhabiting the body of a cat, grew impatient and leapt onto her back to get her moving again. This sparked a brief exchange between them over the pronunciation of 'gyro,' during which Joe **contradicted** 22's opinion by asserting the way it is pronounced in New York. His correction served as a face-threatening act to 22's positive face, as it subtly undermined her confidence by challenging her knowledge.

Datum 12 [00:52:17]

DEZ : Should I even ask you how this happened?
22 : The cat did it.
JOE (to 22) : **Stop sounding insane.**

While trapped in the cat's body, Joe tries to fix his human body's hair for the gig but accidentally slips on some records, causing the clippers to cut a large chunk of hair. Joe quickly tells 22 to take him to Dez's barbershop to fix the damage. When Dez asks how the haircut happened, 22 says the cat did it. Joe then **reprimands** 22 by telling her to stop sounding 'insane.' This reprimand threatens 22's positive

face by implying that her explanation is unreasonable and illogical. Joe's use of the word 'insane' and his physical elbow nudge emphasize his dismissal of her perspective.

Datum 13 [00:57:09 – 00:57:15]

JOE : You know what, you did all right back there. How did you know how to deal with Paul?
22 : I didn't. I just let out the ME. Hey, like you said about jazz! I was jazzing!
JOE : **First of all, “jazzing” is not a word. And second, music and life operate by very different rules.**

After Joe (as a cat) and 22 (in Joe's body) leave Dez's barbershop, Joe praises 22 for handling an annoying customer named Paul and is surprised at how well she talked to Dez. 22 happily says she was 'jazzing,' meaning she was just going with the flow like Joe explained about jazz music. However, Joe **disagrees** by saying that 'jazzing' is not a real word and that music and life are very different. His act of disagreement makes 22 feel like her idea is not accepted and threatens 22's positive face by making her feel less valued.

Datum 14 [01:02:43 – 01:02:50]

JOE : Mom, I know we've had some rough times. But you're right. I can't be truthful with you. Because it seems that no matter what I do, you disapprove.
LIBBA : Look, I know you love playing...
JOE : **Then how come except for church, you're happiest when I don't? I finally land the gig of my life and you're upset.**

Joe, with 22 in his human body, visits his mother Libba's tailor shop to get his suit fixed before his big performance. Libba has always worried about Joe's music career and wants him to have a more stable job. Their conversation becomes heated when Joe says she never truly believed in his dream. He **interrupts** her as she tries to explain and accuses her of being happier when he isn't playing music, except at church. This interruption and dismissal threaten Libba's positive face by rejecting her perspective and support.

Datum 15 [01:04:58 – 01:05:01]

22 : I'm telling you, Joe. You really should call Lisa again.
JOE : I don't really have time for a relationship right now, 22.
22 : Oh, busy right now? Want to wait until you die a second time? Cool, cool.
JOE : **Heh heh. I can't believe I'm getting romantic advice from an unborn soul.**
22 : I could think of worse.

After fixing his clothes and sharing a heartfelt conversation with his mother about his dreams, Joe and 22 head to the Half Note Club. During their walk, 22 mentions someone named Lisa, prompting Joe to reveal through his reaction that Lisa was once a crush of his. When 22 suggests Joe should call Lisa, he responds by saying he's too busy for a relationship. Joe then laughs and expresses disbelief at getting romantic advice from an unborn soul like 22, which acts as a face-threatening act by **ridiculing** her. This response threatens 22's positive face by implying her thoughts are not worthy of serious consideration. Joe's reaction reflects how people expect their opinions to be respected, but he undermines 22 due to her lack of real-world experience.

Datum 16 [01:09:31 – 01:09:33]

JOE : I was gonna play with Dorothea Williams!
22 : And I was about to find my Spark!
JOE : Find your Spark?!
22 : You promised but you wouldn't even give me five minutes!
JOE : My life was finally going to change! **I lost everything because of you!**

Joe and 22 return to the Great Before because Terry, the soul Accountant, catches them—he believes Joe should not be alive. Once back, Joe and 22 begin arguing since they both feel the other has ruined their plans. Joe says he was going to perform with Dorothea Williams, while 22 insists she was about to find her Spark. Joe then **accuses** 22 of causing his problems and losing everything. This accusation threatens 22's positive face by implying she is a burden and responsible for Joe's failure.

4.1.3 Threatening Speaker's Negative Face

Datum 17 [00:03:19]

PRINCIPAL ARROYO : Welcome to the M.S. 70 family, Joe. Permanently.
JOE : **Thanks.**

This scene takes place at the middle school where Joe Gardner works part-time as a band teacher. During class, the principal arrives with news that Joe is being offered a full-time position. Joe replies with a simple 'thanks,' which puts some pressure on him, as expressing gratitude can make it seem like he owes something to the principal. By **thanking** her, Joe appears to accept the offer without question, which limits his freedom to make his own choice and slightly affects his self-image—thereby threatening his negative face.

Datum 18 [00:04:17 – 00:04:18]

LIBBA : So, you're going to tell them yes, right?
JOE : **Yeah. Definitely.**
LIBBA : Good.

In this scene, Joe tells his mother, Libba, about the full-time job offer he received from the school. Libba is happy and expects him to say yes because she believes it's the secure and responsible choice. When she asks if he will take it, Joe replies, "*Yeah. Definitely.*" but it's clear he doesn't really mean it. He wants to keep chasing his dream of becoming a jazz musician. The script says he almost speaks up but stays quiet, showing he's unsure and feels pressured. By agreeing against his will, Joe makes an **unwilling promise** that limits his freedom, showing how he threatens his own negative face.

Datum 19 [00:16:58 – 00:17:03]

JOE : Uh look, I'm not sure I'm supposed to be here.
COUNSELOR JERRY A : I understand. Mentoring isn't for everyone. You're more than welcome to opt out.
JOE : **Ah! Actually, on second thought**, you know, the mentoring sounds like fun.

Joe found himself in the Great Before, even though he was supposed to be heading to the Great Beyond after his death. When the Counselors mistook him for a soul mentor, Joe tried to explain he wasn't meant to be there. However, they misunderstood and thought he didn't want to mentor, offering him an exit to the Great Beyond. Seeing the portal, Joe panicked, knowing that stepping into it meant accepting his death. To avoid raising suspicion, Joe quickly made an **excuse**, pretending that mentoring sounded fun. This excuse was a face-threatening act to his own negative face, as he compromised his freedom by staying under false pretenses. In doing so, Joe escaped the Great Beyond but accepted new responsibilities and limitations.

4.1.4 Threatening Speaker's Positive Face

Datum 20 [00:05:27 – 00:05:30]

CURLEY : I'm glad you made it. My boy Bishop said he sat in on with you on a set last year in Brooklyn. Said you were great.
JOE : **Well... you know, for a coffee shop.**

Curley meets Joe for a brief audition before the performance with Dorothea Williams's quartet. He compliments Joe by sharing positive remarks from a mutual friend who saw Joe perform in Brooklyn. Joe **accepts the compliment** by responding modestly. He downplays the praise by saying he was just

performing for a coffee shop. This modest response puts pressure on him, as accepting praise can create an expectation to appear humble. By minimizing his achievement, Joe unintentionally threatens his own positive face.

Datum 21 [00:06:29 – 00:06:30]

DOROTHEA : Get on up here, Teach. We ain't got all day.
JOE : (confused) **What...what are we playing--?**

In this scene, Joe meets Dorothea Williams for the first time during his rare chance to audition for her band. Dorothea quickly tells him to get on stage and sit at the piano, showing she expects him to be ready. Before Joe can fully prepare himself to play, Dorothea suddenly begins playing her saxophone, joined by the bassist and guitarist. This situation leaves Joe **acting confused** and uncertain about how to proceed, so he spontaneously asks what they are playing. This question threatens his own positive face, as it exposes vulnerability and may make him appear incompetent to Dorothea and the band.

Datum 22 [00:22:38 – 00:22:42]

JOE : Look kid. Can I just be honest with you? **I'm not Bjorn Borgenstein or whatever his name is. I'm not even a mentor.**

Joe pretends to be Dr. Bjorn T. Börgensson, a mentor, after he ends up in the Great Before by accident. His main goal is to return to his body on Earth so he can pursue his dream of performing jazz on stage. Joe is assigned to mentor 22, but he doesn't really want to be a mentor, especially since 22 doesn't seem interested in life. When they arrive at the Hall of Dr. Börgensson, Joe decides to tell the truth. He admits that he is not really Dr. Börgensson and not a real mentor. This **confession** threatens Joe's positive face by revealing his deception and lack of authority. His honesty leaves him vulnerable to judgment from 22 and risks damaging his self-esteem.

Datum 23 [01:23:54 – 01:23:55]

JOE : 22, **I was wrong!** Please, will you listen? You ARE ready to live, 22!

Joe returns to his body on Earth after taking 22's Earth pass because he thinks he deserves to live more than she does. He doesn't realize that their time together made 22 feel even more unsure about living. Once back on Earth, Joe realizes that life is about more than just achievements; it's about appreciating simple moments. Meanwhile, 22 feels lost and thinks she does not deserve to live. Joe then goes back to find 22 and tells her he was wrong—she was always ready to live. By **admitting his guilt**, Joe threatens his positive face, as it reveals his vulnerability and fault.

5. Conclusions

Soul is a 2020 animated movie produced by Pixar that tells the story of Joe Gardner, a jazz musician who unexpectedly finds himself in the afterlife shortly before a significant opportunity in his career. Throughout the story, Joe's interactions with other characters demonstrate the use of face-threatening acts. Based on the findings, the movie contains a total of 103 utterances by Joe Gardner that exhibit face-threatening acts, which are further categorized into four types according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework.

First, he threatened the hearer's negative face through actions such as compliments, offers, orders, warnings, requests, suggestions, reminders, and threats. Second, he threatened the hearer's positive face by accepting apologies, expressing thanks, making unwilling promises, and offering excuses. Third, he threatened his own negative face through complaints, insults, contradictions, reprimands, disagreements, non-cooperation, ridicule, and accusations. Finally, he threatened his own positive face by accepting compliments, acting confused, and making confessions and admissions of guilt. The findings indicate that Joe Gardner most frequently uses face-threatening acts that threaten the hearer's negative face.

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