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Mastering the "Term of Art": Linguistic Avoidance in David Mamet's *Oleanna*

Mohammad Hossein Mahdavinejad[1,*], Reza Bagheri Nevisi[2], and Arezoo Bahadori Moghaddam[3]

[1]Corresponding author: MA in English Language and Literature, Malayer University, Malayer, Iran, ORCID: 0000-0002-7272-1902
Email: mhmahdavinejhad@yahoo.com

[2]Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities, University of Qom, Qom, Iran
ORCID: 0000-0002-8582-8119; Email: re.baghery@gmail.com

[3]PhD Candidate in English Language Teaching, Torbat-e Heydarieh Branch, Islamic Azad University, Torbat-e Heydarieh, Iran
ORCID: 0000-0003-1331-419; Email: arezo.bahadori@yahoo.com

Abstract

Many critics have read David Mamet's (1993) *Oleanna* as a locale for issues of gender, misogyny, and sexual harassment. Another group, however, believe that it is the potentials of language and its manipulation which are central to the play, which need to be delved into. In line with the latter view, the present article assumes that the interactions of both John and Carol in this two-character play exemplify an interview in which they constantly attempt to preserve their faces through adopting a number of linguistic avoidance strategies. Therefore, by drawing upon linguistic avoidance frameworks suggested by Janney (1999) and Anchimbe (2009), the present article links up linguistic avoidance to Spencer-Oatey's (2000) notion of rapport management and shows to what extent John and Carol adopt these strategies to attend to their personal and professional face needs at the cost of further alienation and frustration. The findings of this paper are also an affirmation of Žegarac and Spencer-Oatey (2013) who argue that participants' self-oriented perspective due to face concerns may cause difficulties within joint projects, which is a barricade to spirit of cooperation and reciprocity.

Keywords: linguistic avoidance, rapport management, cooperation, face concerns, *Oleanna*

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Introduction

Having been introduced to the world of American drama during the time of political uncertainty, tumult, and political correctness of 1990s, David Mamet's (1993) two-character play *Oleanna* has been widely reviewed and critiqued as a work dealing with intricacies of language. The three-act play puts on stage the confrontation of a male professor, John, and his student, Carol. John, who is going to be granted tenure, is busy with negotiations to buy a new house while Carol meets with him in order to ask for a passing grade. Pressured by his obligation to his students, John shows concern for her and promises her a grade 'A' only if she comes back to his office a few more times. In Act Two soon we find that Carol, as a representative of a feminist group, has accused her professor of sexual harassment, an act which presumably manifests a shift of power. The teacher-student conflict becomes more serious in Act Three, where Carol offers to withdraw her complaint from the tenure committee on condition that he sign a list of banned books, including his own book. Finding himself obliged to the dignity of his family and profession, John refuses her offer only to surprisingly find that Carol has filed charges of battery and attempted rape against him. This, along with Carol's warning him not to call his wife 'baby', leads to John's physical and verbal attack on Carol, which presumably leads to his destruction and loss of job.

A number of critics, including Macleod (1995), Baudenhausen (1998), and Murphy (2004), firmly believe that the conflict over power is readily visible in *Oleanna* and that it is through language that its characters establish, maintain, and lose their power. These critics believe that it is through inspection of language that we may uncover the motives behind this play. Following the premier of the play in 1993, Mamet's audience have greatly disagreed over the idea of manipulation of power. Some, irritated by the later cruelty and ferocity of Carol, give the upper hand to John, and some tend to throw blame at John and his miscalculations in teaching as well as his exploitativeness. However, having accepted that the source of the conflict between the teacher and his student lies within their mismanagement of relationship or taking it as "a struggle to achieve and maintain certain kinds of privilege: economic, sexual, and academic," (Skloot, 2001, p. 96) the present article attempts to maintain a linguistic perspective regarding the very strategies employed by these two characters and investigates *linguistic avoidance* in their interactions in the course of the three acts, by means of which they try to avoid topics which possiblize making any threat to their faces.

To the best of our knowledge, no study has taken up a study of Mamet's (1993) play through the frameworks of linguistic avoidance which has its roots in ideas of politeness and facework. Due to the vastness of the literature and theories on linguistic politeness and facework which has been a focal point since 1960s, the present article draws on two frameworks of linguistic avoidance discussed by Anchimbe (2009) and Janney (1999) in order to throw light on the underlying motives of Mamet's characters and the way they try to preserve their faces in their interactions. This seems to have been initially inspired by Domenici and Littlejohn who assume "'facework' is not an incidental or ancillary goal of communication. It is central to all human social interaction" (2006, p. 204). We believe that a more enlightening reading of Mamet's (1993) play can be offered through the above-mentioned frameworks, as the interactions between the two characters in Mamet's play exemplify a dialogue in

which both of them follow a question-answer pattern in order to persuade the other party and to uphold the validity of their views while trying to keep their own agenda safe and unchallenged. With regard to this, grounding our argument upon the above-mentioned frameworks, we chose from Mamet's play a number of extracts in which avoidance strategies were more noticeable in order to demonstrate how both Carol and John, with the aim of keeping their faces unthreatened, become involved in linguistic avoidance which leads to their further frustration and finally to John's physical violence.

Finally, this paper relates the conflict of John and Carol to some remarks by Žegarac and Spencer-Oatey (2013) in order to explain how facework and face concerns within human interactions, specifically the realm of education, can hamper the path of vital and humane cooperation and reciprocity. In addition, all these attempts thus prove how literary texts may come handy as data for investigation of human interaction.

Literature Review

Brief Overview of Studies on Politeness

Linguistic politeness has been framed within the field of pragmatics which is defined by Verschueren (2009) as "an approach to language which takes into account the full complexity of its cognitive, social and cultural (i.e., meaningful) functioning in the lives of human beings" (2009, p.19). With this regard, it can be said that pragmatics is concerned with the actual use of language and how utterances can be perceived differently in different contexts. Concurrently, studies on politeness also start to grow within this field. Theoretically, these studies were embarked upon through the seminal work by Brown and Levinson (1987) which is considered as an influential, yet controversial, model which thoroughly gave over itself to analysis of politeness and strategies we adopt to be polite.

Brown and Levinson (1987) maintain their discussions of politeness through the concept of *face*. As is known in people's everyday sense of the word, face refers to notions such as reputation, self-esteem, or the public self-image that each member of a given society claims regarding their overall personality. They explain politeness with reference to the notion of face and assume that face consists of two desires or "face-wants": "negative face" refers to a rational persons' want that their actions not be impeded by others, and "positive face" refers to a rational person's desire to be approved of by others. For instance, I may want others to admire my actions and approve of my existence in the world (positive face), or I may want others to attend to my wants and avoid trespassing them (negative face). Brown and Levinson regard face as something "that can be lost, maintained or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (1987, p. 66). Thus, they term any threat to face as a Face-Threatening Act (FTA) and state that in order to avoid a breakdown in communication, each threat to one's face needs to be followed by a mitigating statement or some redressive statements which constitute politeness. For the purpose of analysis, Brown and Levinson (1987) trace a number of strategies that are adopted by speakers in order to mitigate or minimize threats to the positive or negative faces of the hearers. For example, they maintain that requests inherently threaten hearer's negative face or that criticizing them threatens their positive face.

Since 1990s, politeness research has confronted revisions and divisions offered by new trends. The scope of research was enlarged by a number of researchers (e.g., Culpeper 1996, 2005, 2011) who turned their attention to the study of verbal aggression and politeness (i.e., face-aggressive behavior). Labelled as "impoliteness," this trend is no more concerned with strategies adopted to mitigate the threat of utterances. Rather, it considers "the use of strategies that are designed to have the opposite effect – that of social disruption" (Culpeper, 1996, p. 350) via face attacks. In other words, as McIntyre and Bousfield put it rightly, "where politeness is concerned with mitigating face-damage, impoliteness is concerned with aggravating it; and mitigating strategies can often be reversed to achieve this objective" (2017, p. 774).

Toward a Definition of Linguistic Avoidance

As the term linguistic avoidance denotes, we may relate it to avoiding words or expressions which threaten the face of the interlocutors in interactions. Janney, who has identified avoidance strategies within a trial testimony, proposes that "linguistic avoidance is a uniquely human type of *symbolic adaptation* to threats in the discourse environment" (1999, p. 259). Accordingly, he believes that in the same way that mere organisms adopt strategies to distance themselves from the source of discomfort, interactions of human beings also entail such avoidance patterns. Thus explained, Janney proposes five instances of linguistic avoidance strategies including:

> (1) a *valence* dimension, in which lexical substitutions weaken the negative connotations of references to *x*; (2) a *proximity* dimension, in which substitutions of demonstratives, pronouns, verb tenses, etc. increase the implied deictic distance between the speaker and *x*; (3) a *specificity* dimension, in which lexical substitutions of narrower or broader semantic scope weaken the clarity of references to *x*; (4) an *evidentiality* dimension, in which modal substitutions weaken the implied reliability, validity, or truth value of references to *x*; (5) a *volitionality* dimension, in which lexical, grammatical, and discourse framing substitutions weaken the speaker's implied responsibility for or volitional connection to *x*; and (6) a *degree* dimension in which substitutions of adverbs and adjectives reduce the implied amount, duration, measure, or intensity of *x*. (Janney, 1999, p 263)

Anchimbe has drawn on the idea of linguistic avoidance within the realm of broadcast political interviews. What brings his argument closer to the discussions of politeness and face is his belief that politicians possess vulnerable positions and they need to preserve not only their own faces, but also their political status, their political parties, their countries, and even the alliances their countries are a member to. As a result, they adopt linguistic avoidance strategies through which they can "'save' [themselves] from supposed media distortion, political accusation, falsehood, and above all to defend [their] position[s]" (2009, p. 99). With this regard, Anchimbe defines this strategy which aims at face-saving as "interlocutors' ability to avoid topics and concepts they deem harmful to their face" (2009, p. 97). While Janney (1999) identified five strategies of linguistic avoidance, here, apart from valence, specificity, and evidentiality strategies, Anchimbe comes up with three other strategies including generalization, correction, and non-committal, which he defines as "remaining[ing] generalized and vague," (2009, p. 106) moving "from an earlier

(misunderstood) position to a new (intended) one," (2009, p. 108) and "avoiding words that commit or bind one to a future action" (2009, p. 109), respectively.

Based on the arguments above which concerned linguistic avoidance in courtrooms and political interviews, the present article aims to extend this argument to the world of drama and, in our case, to David Mamet's (1993) *Oleanna* which has been a locus of continuous critical review. Building on some critics (e.g., Weber, 1998) who have attributed to it the characteristics of courtroom questioning, we aim to show that *Oleanna* verges on the backdrop of the above-mentioned endeavors. Undoubtedly, we may also look at it as an interview in which John and Carol try to preserve their own faces as well as the faces of their groups.

Where Linguistic Avoidance and Rapport Management Converge

As Marsh has written, "evasive answers are motivated by considerations for both speaker and hearer's positive face-wants." (2018, p. 1) The term positive face-wants brings to our minds Brown and Levinson's (1987) positive face which is related to one's desire to be approved of and maintained. Moreover, they have asserted that interlocutors make use of politeness strategies since they want to cooperate with each other. Integrating this with Marsh's (2018) statement, we may come to conclusion that evasive answers or linguistic avoidance are caused by participants' desire to maintain a smooth and harmonious relation and to maintain their faces. This argument can seemingly direct our attention to what Spencer-Oatey (2000) has termed *rapport management*.

Haugh places Helen Spencer-Oatey among researchers who claim that "face and facework should be a focus of research in their own right, as they involve issues broader than simply politeness" (2009, p. 3). This explains Spencer-Oatey's interest in the notion of face which she thinks focuses "on concerns for self" (2000, p. 12) as has been reflected in Spencer-Oatey (2000-2008). She draws upon Goffman's definition of face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line [sic.] others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (as cited in Spencer-Oatey, 2000, p. 329). Spencer-Oatey distances herself from politeness and embraces the notion of rapport management which she thinks "suggests a greater balance between self and other" (2000, p. 12), thus defining it as "the management (or mismanagement) of relations between people" (2002, p. 96).

Rapport management and linguistic avoidance seem to come closer to each other when Spencer-Oatey raises the question as to whether face concerns are "personally oriented (i.e., oriented to the speaker and hearer as individual participants" or "group oriented (i.e., oriented to the speaker and hearer as group representatives" (2002, p. 533). Moreover, Spencer-Oatey (2008) seems to revise her previous work by arguing that face consists of three levels of representation including:

> the personal or individual level ("I am Tara, a successful twenty-two-year-old female musician"), the relational level ("I am the daughter of A, the wife of B, the coworker of C, the employee of D, etc."), and the group or collective level ("I am Algerian, Arab, and Muslim"). (as cited in Leech, 2014, p. 41)

This indicates that when considering linguistic avoidance in interviews, it is noteworthy that we consider interlocutor's face at least at the three levels of personal, relational, and collective. However, in his discussion of linguistic avoidance in political interviews, Anchimbe considers political figures as "four-faced", in that their

statements in broadcast political interviews can have an irrecoverable effect "on the political aspirations and political positive face of the politician making them; on the political party s/he represents; on his or her country; and on the alliance or coalition his country is member to" (2009, p. 98). It can thus be inferred from the above arguments that there is a possibility for someone's face to be threatened at least at the levels of: (1) their person, (2) their parentage, (3) their groups, (4) their profession, or (5) their nations. Therefore, when it comes to interviews, we may observe how participants, especially interviewees, oblige themselves to preserve these face concerns and not to threaten them.

The notion of linguistic avoidance seems to be tied to the notion of *cooperation* as well. With this regard, Anchimbe vigorously argues that there exists "a bizarre form of co-operation between the interviewer and the interviewee" in political interviews since "ironically. . . the interviewer is assumed to have a right – a responsibility, even – to threaten the interviewee's political face and the interviewee is expected to allow this to happen without attacking the interviewer back" (2009, p. 97). The answer to this riddle seems to lie in the fact that there are face-saving reasons that interviewees need to be aware of. Furthermore, Žegarac and Spencer-Oatey (2013) touch upon the issue of cooperation ingenuously. Their arguments seem to enrich the results of Anchimbe (2009) in that they argue that it is 1) "participants' lack of an adequate set of presumed shared beliefs" and 2) "lack of appreciation of the need to avoid a self-oriented perspective" that cause difficulty within joint projects (2013, p. 435). Arguably, extending this view of cooperation to the issue of linguistic avoidance is likely to yield new results since participants in interviews pretend to have shared beliefs, while, in fact, they have self-orientated concerns. Within these situations, it can be said that interviews are doubly bizarre in terms of cooperation in that trying to keep their shared beliefs at their disposal, participants need to avoid threatening the faces (personal, familial, group, professional, national, etc.) of the other while trying to hide their own self-oriented intentions.

Hence, it is a core requirement for this paper to take into account the face concerns of both John and Carol and the way they attempt to manage the relationship between them in David Mamet's (1993) *Oleanna* since we consider their arguments throughout the three scenes as a dialogue in which the role of the interviewer and interviewee constantly changes and, at some intervals, entails their being involved in several patterns in discursive interaction, including linguistic avoidance.

A Brief Review of the Literature on David Mamet's *Oleanna*

The enigmatic nature of David Mamet's (1993) *Oleanna* has welcomed a large number of critical views and scholarly articles (e.g., Silverstein, 1995; Macleod, 1995; Baudenhausen, 1998; Weber, 1998; Ryan, 1996; Skloot, 2001; Bean, 2001; Kulmala, 2007; Murphy, 2004, 2013, among others). The bulk of this criticism has often defended the playwright against misogyny, sexual harassment, and political correctness. Opposed to these arguments, some scholars (including Baudenhausen and Ryan) concur that situating *Oleanna* merely within the above-mentioned frameworks is not enough. For instance, Macleod writes: "the narrow critical preoccupation with sexual harassment, political correctness and beleaguered masculinity in *Oleanna* has obscured what is in fact a far wider and more challenging dramatic engagement with issues of power, hierarchy and the control of language" (1995, p. 202). Consequently,

it can be said that the issue of power has been crucial within *Oleanna* scholarship. Ryan, for example, argues that *Oleanna* is about "Carol and John's struggle to overpower each other" (1996, p. 393). Weber (1998) postulates that instead of focusing solely on the text, through integration of social (power relations) and cognitive (background schemata) contexts in *Oleanna*, we can uncover three models of power including "power of" (Carol's seeing power as acquisition of knowledge, "power to" (John's seeing power as giving lectures to students so that they can achieve their goals), and finally "power over" (Carol's seeing education as dominance and thus reversing the power relations). Hence, through the perspective of schema theory, Weber concludes that there is a

> dynamic tension between social and discursive power, as well as between power as domination and power as enablement; and that this precarious balance can easily be abused, from both sides, by the more powerful as well as the less powerful participants. (1998, p. 126)

Some critics also have directed their attention to the potentials of language along with hierarchal power which constitute the continuation of the conflict in *Oleanna*. With this regard, Macleod (1995) explains that "every exchange between the two characters bears directly or indirectly on the use or acquisition of *linguistic power*" [italics added] (1995, p. 209). Hence, he argues that in the same way that John exercises his power on his tuition-paying student in order to maintain his status, Carol also "discovers that she can use the rhetorical strategies of sexual politics to change her position in the hierarchy" (1995, p. 207). Arguing for an analysis which is more in favor of engagement with issues of power, hierarchy, and the control of language, Murphy asserts that *Oleanna* is about "specialized language or jargon which serves as the ticket of admission into restricted linguistic communities that confer power, money, and/or privilege upon their members" (2004, p. 126). Having said that, she assumes that Carol's predisposition to become familiar with John's linguistic community and his seeking empowerment through the language of academia have been nothing more than mere illusions.

These remarks by the aforementioned scholars emphasize that seemingly it is through the doors of language that we may explore and fathom the hidden layers of *Oleanna*. These arguments heighten the need for a more extensive and theory-based exploration of linguistic strategies and tactics adopted by John and Carol, which lead to their further alienation. Moreover, it can be said that *Oleanna* calls for more scholarly research in order to delineate how politeness considerations and face concerns and linguistic avoidance patterns to take account of these considerations dominate the interactions of John and Carol.

Analysis

The data used in this study is a corpus of extracts from David Mamet's play *Oleanna* (1993). In Act One, we deem Carol as dominantly interviewing John since she is in an urgent need of a passing grade. Hence, she questions the professor from the very beginning of the play, thus leaving him no choice but employing a series of face-saving strategies through making use of linguistic avoidance. In Act Two and Act Three, however, it is John who invites his student in order to convince her to drop her complaints about his acts of sexual harassment. Here, although Carol's answers soon turn out to be mostly blatant or on-record, they exemplify to what extent she has

mastered the art of linguistic avoidance from her teacher. Therefore, in these two acts, we deem John as the interviewer and Carol as the interviewee, with respect to the reversal of their roles. While the two characters are mostly involved in exploiting language to maintain power, there are some instances within the course of play where they capitulate and their conversations take up a fairly humane or cooperative coloring, hence leading to their acceptance of difference which starts with shattering face concerns. In the following, by drawing upon a number of aforementioned strategies regarding linguistic avoidance, we aim to disclose how both John and Carol exploit some of these strategies in order to preserve their personal, familial, group, and professional faces, thus deepening the rift within their interactions.

Act One

The first act of *Oleanna* is replete with a large number of linguistic avoidance strategies mainly on the part of John. Dissatisfied with her low grade, Carol visits her teacher in his office in order to ask for a passing grade, which leads to further discussions related to the essence of education and John's promotion by the tenure committee. From the outset, Carol starts questioning John, whose mind is obsessed with tenure, buying the new house, and security of his family, regarding the meaning of "term of art" which he has just discussed with his wife on the phone and is probably related to a problem in their negotiation for the house:

Carol: (*pause*) What is *a* "term of art"?

John: (*pause*) I'm sorry…?

Carol: (*pause*) What is a "term of art"?

John: Is that what you want to talk about?

Carol: … to talk about…?

John: Let's take the mysticism out of *it*, shall we? Carol? (*Pause*) Don't you think? I'll tell you: when you

have some "thing." Which must be broached. (*Pause*) Don't you think …? (*Pause*) (Act One, pp. 2-3)

As seen above, from the very beginning, John starts to impose what Bean calls "rhetorical aggression" (2001, p. 111) on Carol by moving from an indefinite article to a definite pronoun. Shocked by her abrupt question, as a university professor pressed to define a term he does not know himself, John finds his professional face threatened. In order to preserve his face, he resorts to specificity strategy, which is defined by Anchimbe as moving "from a general concept to a specific one" (2009, p. 107), in order to give Carol the impression that he is unconditionally offering an answer, while in fact he avoids being credited as a professor incompetent at providing the right answer to his student. This can be seen when he moves from "a" (see italicized areas henceforth) to 'it'. In addition, John's "obscure academic-speak" (Baudenhausen, 1998, p. 13) seems to go further when he stumbles to touch upon the issue while using vague terms: "It seems to mean a *term*, which has come, through its use, to mean something *more specific* than the words would, to someone *not acquainted* with them . . . indicate" (Mamet, 1993 p. 3).

Following John's sharing his childhood experience with Carol and the fact that he was told to be stupid, in order to assuage Carol, he gives the following pep talk:

John: … And you will think: why was I born to be the laughingstock of a world in which everyone is

better than I? In which I am entitled to nothing. Where I can not learn.

(*pause*)

Carol: Is that… (*pause*) Is that what I have…?

John: Well. I don't know if I'd put it that way. Listen: I'm talking to you as I'd talk to my son. Because

that's what I'd like him to have that I never had. I'm talking to you the way I wish that someone had talked

to me. I don't know how to do it, other than to be personal, …but… [italics removed] (Act One, p. 19)

In the above dialogue, John seems to be making use of proximity strategy which is a way of avoiding threatening concepts by pretending "as if they were somehow 'far away'" (Janney, 1999, p. 264). Here, puzzled by the far-fetched arguments of the professor, Carol makes use of present perfect tense "what I have . . .". However, this is followed by John's use of past perfect tense "I'd put it" which seems to be a strategy aimed at shifting the context of answering. John's expression of uncertainty "I don't know of I'd put it that way" also implicates that he wants to distance himself from his previous stance and any possible interpretation on the part of Carol which threatens his face. Hence, it is quite clear how John's attempts at saving his own face leads to further confusion on the part of Carol, especially when she confronts John's intention to be personal with her:

Carol: Why would you want to be personal with *me*?

John: Well, you see? That's what I'm saying. *We* can only interpret the behavior of others through the

screen we… (*The phone rings.*) … (Act One, p. 19)

This can be another instance of specificity strategy which was illustrated above. In fact, John does try to answer Carol's explicit and threatening question but still through vague terms "well" and "you see?". John asserts "that's what I'm saying" while in fact he is not providing any answer to Carol's question. He further moves from Carol's "me" to the generic pronoun "we" in order to maintain his professional face and to give more credibility to his argument, hence maintaining a positive face.

As we move further to the middle of the first act, John and Carol's discussion of the politics of education leads to John's criticism of the educational system as well as the tenure committee. However, his self-enhancing arguments and harsh criticism of the committee seems to end in an act of self-depreciation. Having already left Carol with a negative image of himself as a person who bites the hand that feeds him, he decides to make use of non-committal strategy which refers to "avoiding making binding commitments" (Anchimbe, 2009, p. 109):

John: …The "test." Do you see? They put me to the test. Why, they had people voting on me I wouldn't

employ to wax my car. And yet, I go before the Great Tenure Committee, and I have an urge, to vomit, to,

to, to puke my badness on the table, to show them: "I'm no good. Why would you pick me?"

Carol: They granted you tenure.

John: Oh no, they announced it, but they haven't signed. Do you see? "At any moment…" [italics

removed] (Act One, p. 23)

Finding himself in a situation where he has insulted the committee, he needs to humble himself in order to create a positive image of himself. That aside, although he knows that he will be given the tenure, most likely, in the near future, he resorts to non-committal strategy, by stating "they haven't signed," in order not to submit himself to any future decisions. Given the normal process, he is certain that he will be granted tenure, but to preserve his face and to avoid being deemed as unappreciative to the system which provides for him, he contends that future is uncertain.

Following John's explanation about the reasons people pursue higher education, the contention between John and Carol seems to take root. Here, John brings up the question as to whether all kids should go to college when they do not learn:

Carol: But how do they feel? Being told they are wasting their time?

John: *I don't think* I'm telling them that.

Carol: You said that education was "prolonged and systematic hazing."

John: Yes. It *can* be so. [emphasis added] (Act One, p. 35)

John, who has continuously added up to Carol's confusion, seems to be making use of evidentiality strategy which aims "to signal doubt about the accuracy or reliability of one's knowledge of them or to refer to them as if they were only hypothetical possibilities" (Janney, 1999, p. 265). Arguably, John, who has provided Carol with his maverick dispositions about education, resorts to linguistic avoidance in order to preserve his face and not to be called a revolutionary teacher. As a result, he reduces his own knowledge to mere thought "I don't think" or makes use of the modal "can" in order to reduce what has previously been stated to mere possibility. This mode of linguistic avoidance practiced by John can be equal to what Murphy calls "academic mystification" (2004, p. 131), hence leading to further confusion on the part of Carol at the cost of saving the professional face of the pedagogue.

Drawing nearer to the end of the first act of *Oleanna*, we find Carol no more enlightened than before. Hence, we find Carol more confused as she cries out in bewilderment, "I don't *understand*. I don't know what it *means*. I don't know what it means to *be* here" (Mamet, 1993, p. 36). The politics of John aimed at saving the face of his person and his profession through creating uncertainty leads to more misunderstanding on the part of Carol, thus creating an image of hypocrisy[1] around him. John does not let up to the end of this act as it turns out that all of her wife's

phone calls have been a ruse to get him to come home for a surprise party to celebrate the announcement of his tenure:

John: They're throwing a party for us in our new house.

Carol: Your new house.

John: The house that we're buying.

Carol: You have to go.

John: It seems that I do.

Carol: (*pause*) They're proud of you.

John: Well, there are those who would say it's a form of aggression. (Act One, p. 40)

Following all of his maverick, against-the-grain theories about education, John furthers confuses Carol by making use of contradictory ideas. Here we find Anchimbe's definition of valence strategy useful: "One way to avoid the negative connotations or face-threatening concepts within a question is to choose the words that transform the negative concept into a less negative, neutral, or positive one" (2009, p. 104). In the excerpt above, John, who has found he has turned to be a total two-face in front of his student, confronts Carol's suggestion that his family are proud of him. However, John has hitherto tried to convince her that there is no use in academic advancement, and now with this contradiction becoming clear, he finds his face threatened. As a result, with the purpose of resorting to a more positive concept to save his face, he maintains that a surprise party can be a form of aggression, making a negative statement yet more negative and threatening. While Carol "craves certainty and desires John to mold his theories into a concrete body of information that she can copy down in her notebooks, memorize, and recite at will" (Ryan, 1996, p. 396), John's strategies employed with the aim of saving his face and avoiding being called incompetent further aggravates the situation, leaving Carol much confused and frustrated at the end of this act.

Acts Two and Three

As against the first act in which John is dominantly questioned by Carol, in the two acts that follow, it is Carol who is more or less questioned by her professor. Having found the possibility of tenure at stake due to Carol's charge of sexual harassment, John has invited Carol to his office in order to cajole her into dropping her complaints:

John: … Now. Think: I know that you're upset. Just tell me. *Literally*. Literally: what wrong have I done

you?

Carol: *Whatever* you have done to me—to the extent that you've done it to *me*, do you know, rather than

to me as a *student*, and, so, to the student body, is contained in my report. To the tenure committee. [emphasis

added] (Act Two, p. 47)

Following the language game of John's in the first act, now Carol seems to have learned the lesson, which is aimed at turning the table at him through manipulating language. As a result, she seems to be making use of generalization strategy which is defined as moving "from clear concept or reference to vague ones" (Anchimbe, 2009, p. 105). Hence, John's explicit face-threatening "literally" is responded to by Carol's "whatever," which shows to what extent she can exert her linguistic power over her teacher. As is the case with generalization strategy, confronted with negative face-threatening statements, people move to vague concepts in order to avoid going to details and to maintain their positive faces. Hence Carol showcases her acquired linguistic power from the very beginning of this act by denying John of a precise answer.

While John is reading a list of Carol's accusations in the report, we find that he is growing more tense as he witnesses how his strategies have failed him and are no more amenable:

John: (*He reads.*) "He told me that if I would stay alone with him in his office, he would change my grade

to an A." (*To* Carol:) What have I done you? Oh. My God, are you so hurt?

Carol: What I feel is irrelevant. (*pause*) (Act Two, p. 49)

In this excerpt, again Carol refuses to provide a clear answer to John's explicit question which seems to constitute an example of evasiveness. As Marsh notes, sometimes interlocutors manipulate evasive answers in order to express their discomfort about a topic (2018, p. 16). Hence, Carol's answer may implicate "It is no business of yours how I feel" or "I wouldn't like to explain how hurt I am." Thus explained, Carol seems to save her face by making use of implicatures[2] which refer to leaving something unsaid for politeness reasons. As excerpt (11), which is the continuation of the above excerpt, illustrates, apart from evasiveness, Carol intends to confuse the professor much further:

John: Do you know that I tried to help you?

Carol: What I know I have reported. (Act Two, p. 49)

In this excerpt, Carol seems to be drawing on what John had previously inflicted upon her repeatedly which is specificity strategy. Since John has enquired her about a knowledge of something, that is, "know", here Carol retains this presupposition, that is, "what I know" to imply that she is answering the question while merely discussing the act of reporting. She adopts this strategy in order to simultaneously rescue herself from the paternalistic gesture of John and to consider the face concerns of conversation. However, seeing that John is by no means aware of his mistakes, "I would like to help you now", Carol seems to disregard the face concerns and directs open, on-record criticism at John: "You can't do that anymore. You. Do. Not. Have. The. Power. Did you misuse it? *Someone* did. Are you part of that group? *Yes. Yes.* …" (Mamet, 1993, p. 50).

Act Three also includes a number of instances of linguistic avoidance on the part of both John and Carol. Nevertheless, for space restrictions we only mention two examples. What follows seems to be the most outrageous example of linguistic avoidance on the part of John who seems to have found himself disarmed by Carol's "linguistic terrorism" (Silverstein, 1995, p. 112). As Weber notes, the following scene

exemplifies "the prototypical question and answer structure of courtroom discourse" (1998, p. 124):

Carol: Do you hold yourself harmless from the charge of sexual exploitativeness…? (*pause*)

John: Well, I…I…I…You know I, as I said. I…think I am not too old to *learn*, and I *can* learn, I…

Carol: Do you hold yourself innocent of the charge of…

John: …wait, wait, wait…All right, let's go back to… (Act Three, p. 71)

As is clear in the second turn, pressed to provide a clear answer to Carol's explicit question, John still seems to be attending to his face concerns, thus avoiding to yield a clear-cut answer to his furious student. Apart from the inherent hesitations on the part of John, he does not respond even to the very presupposition embedded in Carol's question: "I am not too old to learn." Instead of supporting or refuting the accusation, in vague terms, he seems to make use of non-committal strategy, that is, "as I said", to mean that his future stance does not take priority over what he has said before, thus not committing himself to any future changes of opinion. The same happens quite similarly in the next turn. Now, having herself made use of the power inherent in language and angry as she is, Carol comes to full understanding that John evades providing clear answers. Hence, she forgets about face concerns: "YOU FOOL. Who do you think I am? To come here and be taken by a *smile*. You little yapping fool. You think I want "revenge." I don't want revenge. I WANT UNDERSTANDING" (Mamet, 1993, p. 71).

By the end of *Oleanna*, having his face completely threatened and probably his job completely lost, John finds himself with little choice but to accede to Carol and her group's demand regarding the texts they need removed from the university curriculum. However, to his dismay, he finds his own book included within the list, which is quite face-threatening to his personal, professional, and familial face:

John: LOOK. I'm reading your demands. All right?! (*He reads*) (*pause*) You want to ban my book?

Carol: We do not…

John (Of list): It says here…

Carol: …We want it removed from inclusion as a representative example of the university. (Act 3, p. 75)

This example illustrates to what extent Carol has mastered the language game of academia. Hence, she seems to resort to volitionality strategy which is defined by Janney as making "topic framing and focus substitutions weakening one's implied active role in, responsibility for, or volitional connection to the potentially incriminating fact or event" (1999, p. 266). With this regard, in order to preserve her own face, she seems to make use of this strategy in two ways: Firstly, she makes use of inclusive "we" in order to imply shared agent responsibility, thus emphasizing her membership to her group and distancing herself from the act of removal of the book. Secondly, she makes use of agentless passive voice, that is, "want it removed," in order to preserve the face of her group and minimize the likelihood of her role in the act of removal.

Face Concerns as a Barrier to Cooperation

Many *Oleanna* scholars, including Macleod (1995), Baudenhausen (1998), and Murphy (2004), concede that both Carol and John make attempts to grab power through making use of language. As Murphy remarks, "the ending [of the play] indicates that Carol's empowerment through the language of her group has been an illusion, just as has John's empowerment through the language of academia" (2004, pp. 135-136). The failure at making use of language is equal to failure of communication, cooperation, and reciprocity. As is seen throughout the play, with exception of a few moments when John and Carol remind each other of humanity and respect, both John and Carol deny each other of their communities of practice[3] due to the face concerns they attribute to themselves and their groups. In other words, as stated by Murphy, "*Oleanna* is about the use and abuse of terms of art, specialized language or jargon which serves as the ticket of admission into restricted linguistic communities that confer power, money, and/or privilege upon their members." (2004, p. 126)

Nevertheless, it stands to reason to argue that face concerns are ostensibly a root cause of impasse in communications. As noted by Žegarac and Spencer-Oatey (2013), there are two requirements for a successful communication to follow: 1) establishment of a set of presumed shared beliefs and 2) moving away from self-oriented to other-oriented perspective. With regard to the second requirement which is our concern here, they maintain that "[s]elf-orientation in communication behavior can occur for various reasons, one of the most important of which seems likely to relate to face concerns" (2013, p. 454). Situating this idea within the context of *Oleanna*, it can be argued that cooperation becomes impossible, especially with the final physical violence at the end, as long as the two characters endeavor to preserve the face concerns of themselves and their groups. Moreover, Žegarac and Spencer-Oatey assert that "face concerns "hinder the coordination of communicative actions required for the successful negotiation of mutual understanding" (2013, p. 456). Both John's appeal to humanity, "Don't you have feelings?" (Mamet, 1993, p. 65), which in Silverstein's view "helps legitimate social hierarchies" (1995, p. 114), and Carol's taking pleasure in respect, "I feel that is the first moment which you've treated me with respect" (Mamet, 1993, p. 68), through which she asserts her own presence, seem to have failed Mamet's readers, as these stances merely depict their self-oriented stances. With this respect, although the linguistic strategies we incorporate to maintain our stances may be accredited as inducive of harmonious relationship, deep down, humanity seems to be in need of what Gliman et al. (1989) write: "if human beings have a destiny, it is rather to escape the face, to dismantle the face and facializations, to become imperceptible" (1987, p. 171).

Conclusion

Some scholars have read *Oleanna* merely as a provoking play pivoting on issues including sexual harassment, gender, education, etc. However, it sounds unfair to ignore the linguistic potentials added by the astute playwright and the way language imposes its purposes on the fate of its characters. This fact is confirmed by many *Oleanna* scholars who call for an expansion in analysis of the language potentials in the play. Therefore, we found it quite reasonable to uncover one of the hidden layers

of this challenging and insidious work of drama through one of the branches of linguistic politeness theory which has been based on the idea of face.

Initially, we limited our perspective to face concerns and linguistic avoidance through the frameworks suggested by Janney (1999) and Anchimbe (2009). As was noted by these frameworks, people, especially politicians and defendants, find their faces severely threatened in interviews and trials. As a result, they manipulate a number of linguistic strategies to preserve their personal, familial, professional, group, and even national faces. After studying these strategies, we deemed the two characters in *Oleanna* as constantly questioning one another throughout the course of the three acts and continuously adopting strategies to preserve their faces.

As was shown, as a university professor, John does his best in the first act to make use of specificity, proximity, non-committal, evidentiality, and valence strategies, among others, in order to preserve his personal and professional face, which leads to more confusion on the part of Carol. With the opening of Act Two, and as it continues into Act Three, having accused John of acts of sexual harassment which threatens John's professional position and also the possibility of his tenure, Carol seizes the power by adopting the same linguistic strategies employed by her teacher with the purpose of balancing the power, thus saving the face of herself and her group.

Finally, apart from linking linguistic avoidance to the idea of cooperation, this paper which draws upon data from the realm of drama, is also an affirmation of the framework offered by Žegarac and Spencer-Oatey (2013) who assert that face concerns play a major role in people's adopting self-oriented behavior. With this view in mind, it is through holding self-oriented views and attending face concerns that the establishment of cooperation, reciprocity, and communication is hampered by both John and Carol, thus leading to the cut-and-dried physical violence in the end.

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Notes

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[1] Relevant to our argument is Rossi's contribution to the notion of hypocrisy. With this regard he contends: "an agent is hypocritical with respect to violations of some moral norm just in case she is blameworthy for violations of that norm and is disposed to blame others, but not herself, for such violations" (2018, p. 556).

[2] For more on implicatures see Haugh (2015).

[3] The notion of community of practice was first introduced by Wenger (1998). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet argue that

> a community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavour. Ways of doing, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of their joint activity around that endeavor. (1998, p. 490).

For more modifications of the term see Mills (2003).

Author's Biography

Mohammad Hossein Mahdavi Nejhad received his B.A. and M.A. degrees in English Language and Literature from University of Qom and Malayer University, respectively. In 2021, Mahdavi Nejhad joined the Department of English and Translation, Imam Reza International University, Mashhad, Iran, as a Sessional Lecturer. His most recent research activity includes an article entitled, '"From the I to the We": Desire and Becoming in Carson McCullers' *The Member of the Wedding*' which was published in *Epiphany* in 2023. Mahdavi Nejhad's fields of interest include 19th and 20th English and American fiction, Deleuzian vitalist-inspired philosophy, Post-Humanism, Pragmatics, and Linguistic (Im)Politeness.

Reza Bagheri Nevisi is an Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at University of Qom, Iran. He received his M. A. and Ph. D. from Allameh Tabatabaii and University of Tehran, respectively. He has published more than thirty papers and articles. His research interests include Language Teaching Methodologies, Interlanguage Pragmatics, and Language Assessment.

Arezoo Bahadori Moghaddam received her B.A. and M.A. degrees in Translation Studies and English Teaching from Imam Reza International University, Mashhad, Iran. She has been a Sessional Lecturer in Imam Reza International University since 2020. Currently, she is a Ph.D. candidate at Azad University of Torbat-e Heydarieh, Torbat-e Heydarieh, Iran. Bahadori Moghaddam does research on Emotional Intelligence, Mindfulness, and Teacher's Resilience.