Sociopragmatics Analysis of The Joker's Madness Through Face Theory

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Abstract

This study examines the role of sustained face-threatening acts (FTAs) in the psychological decline of Arthur Fleck in Joker (2019) and their contribution to identity fragmentation. This study aims to explain how recurrent threats to positive and negative face function as a sociopragmatic mechanism that erodes self-esteem and accelerates psychological disintegration. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) face theory, the study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to identify and classify FTAs across six key scenes and interpret them within their broader social contexts. The analysis reveals that Arthur is persistently subjected to bald-on-record and unmitigated FTAs that undermine his positive face, while his negative face is constrained in institutional interactions, particularly in therapeutic settings. These patterns reflect clear power asymmetries and demonstrate how linguistic marginalization aligns with broader forms of social exclusion. The study concludes that the cumulative impact of FTAs constitutes a sociopragmatic process through which micro-level linguistic aggression contributes to the erosion of identity and the narrative transformation of Arthur Fleck into the Joker.

Keywords: *Face-Threatening Acts; Sociopragmatics; Politeness; Joker; Psychological Breakdown*

INTRODUCTION

Film has been widely accepted since it is not only a source of entertainment but also a cultural reflection that re-creates and criticizes social realities. According to Meng (2024), films have the power to make people enter the real world and experience, sense, and engage with reality on a more profound level. In real life, individuals will share their thoughts and feelings with others without thinking about others, and this may result in threatening the face of others. To be superior, people tend to attack the face of their interlocutor (Hartanto et al., 2023). The movie Joker (2019) by Todd Phillips is one of the movies where the protagonist is marginalized, alienated, and his identity is weak in a fractured society.

Arthur, the main character, is a person who desires to be connected with but is always deprived of recognition. His efforts to communicate with others are usually ignored, mocked, or looked at with distrust. The recurrent sense of being neglected or humiliated is consistent with the results of Rahmansyah et al. (2020) that prolonged face-threatening behavior can severely hurt the self-esteem and emotional condition of a person. In the case of continued such violations, retaliation tends to be an instinctive, yet devastating, reaction (Ren et al., 2018).

This analysis is based on the theoretical background of the politeness approach introduced by Brown and Levinson (1987). This conception involves three important concepts: face, face-threatening acts, and politeness strategies. Face is not just a physical mark in daily interaction, but it is also the

social identity of a person and his/her image to society. Face is strictly connected to self-esteem, which is why its maintenance is essential to human dignity, as Sifianou and Tzanne (2021) argue. Face-threatening acts (FTAs) are those instances when the need of an individual to be approved (positive face) or to be autonomous (negative face) is impeded.

The model by Brown and Levinson was initially created to describe politeness in Western societies, in which conversational practices tend to mirror the autonomy, individuality, and directness values. This theoretical orientation would be in line with the setting of Joker, which is in Gotham City, a fictionalized version of New York in America. The cultural context of the West is also clearly supported in the movie, such as when Murray Franklin mentions American Playboy, which places the story in the context of American popular culture. This renders the model by Brown and Levinson particularly useful in the process of examining the politeness strategies and face-threatening acts that define the experiences of Arthur.

The relevance of face and facework in relationship maintenance and conflict prevention has been proven in previous studies. Romo et al. (2015) demonstrate that people can also take an active stance against FTAs to protect their face in social contexts, whereas Alias et al. (2024) highlight that restorative facework can be used to salvage broken interactions. On the other hand, Rahmansyah et al. (2020) demonstrate how people can voluntarily lose face to maintain relationships, including wives who lose face to keep their marriage. These instances unveil the two-sided nature of facework: it can either enable people to fight against marginalization or make them remain silent.

The role of FTAs in the construction of narratives and identity has also been discussed by recent scholarship. Asheva (2022) explores politeness strategies in Joker and emphasizes how the path that Arthur follows can be followed in terms of the unabated threats. Similarly, Putra (2024) and Napoli and Tantucci (2022) state that FTAs are the key to identity struggles in fiction and the real world of communication. This analysis is furthered by other researchers, including Sianti and Skolastika (2023) and Cahyaningrum et al. (2022), who apply it to other characters in the cinema to highlight the importance of politeness in preserving dignity and survival. Combined, these works point to the far-reaching social and psychological impacts of FTAs.

Nevertheless, this body of research still has a major gap. Although researchers have studied the role of FTAs in causing exclusion, less research has been conducted on the role of long-term breaches of positive face, in particular, in causing psychological fragmentation. The distinction is not very obvious but significant. Social exclusion is an expression of the outward effects of being disregarded or disliked, and psychological fragmentation is the inward destruction of identity and self-esteem. What the literature lacks is a clear connection between micro-level FTAs and macro-level identity collapse, especially in the description of madness as a sociopragmatic process.

The current paper fills this gap by discussing Joker (2019) in the context of the Face Theory by Brown and Levinson. It dwells on six major scenes in which Arthur is subjected to face-threatening behaviors that are directed against his positive and negative face. The analysis is performed in three steps: the identification of FTAs and politeness strategies on the micro-level of dialogue; the discussion of their social and contextual processes, such as asymmetries of power and cultural norms; and the explanation of their psychological and emotional outcomes. The proposed study intends to show that the linguistic strategies are related to the sociocultural framework and can be used to explain how the metamorphosis of Arthur into the Joker can be interpreted as a sociopragmatic response to the recurring threats to his face.

METHOD

In this paper, the qualitative content analysis was used to discuss the linguistic and sociopragmatic elements of Joker (2019) and the face-threatening acts (FTAs) of Arthur Fleck. The qualitative method has been selected since all the data are textual. It coincides with Creswell and

Creswell (2018), who said that qualitative methods are based on text and image data. Moreover, the qualitative methods can justify why one has attributed a social issue to a human factor.

The information was gathered using six major scenes in the movie where Arthur communicates with others and encounters communicative rejection or humiliation. The selection of these six scenes was done by purposive sampling, which is a sampling technique that chooses samples according to their richness and relevance to the research (Patton, 2014). To achieve reliability, the researcher watched the film several times and watched all the scenes with interpersonal interactions, and then the final six were chosen with the help of the density of FTA and the relevance to the subject of the study. These scenes were recognized by watching the movie repeatedly, where the dialogues and other non-verbal actions were transcribed, noted, and recorded.

The analysis tool was a coding sheet that was designed by the researcher, and the utterances were classified according to the concept of Face as put forward by Brown and Levinson (1987). The operational definition was used to refine the coding based on previous sociopragmatics and facework research (Sifianou and Tzanne, 2021). All the lines were coded as positive or negative FTAs and were further categorized into politeness strategies, including bald-on-record, redressive action, or indirect mitigation. This coding enabled the systematic determination of the micro-level linguistic options of the interlocutors of Arthur.

The data was then sorted into tables with the scene, type of FTA, politeness strategy, and textual instance. This step gave a systematic review of the way the face of Arthur was threatened over and over again in his dealings. The coded data were analyzed at the macro-level with the help of the sociopragmatic framework by Spencer-Oatey (2008, 2013). The wider social and cultural forces that contextualize every exchange were given attention, such as institutional power in therapy, workplace relationships, social classes, group processes, and neighborhood relationships.

Lastly, the linguistic results were explained concerning the psychological and emotional effects of recurring FTAs. The analysis associated micro-level facework with macro-level sociopragmatic patterns of exclusion, stigma, and alienation, and eventually led to identity fragmentation and transformation of Arthur into the Joker. This two-level methodology was necessary to guarantee that the study not only recorded the pragmatic strategies of interlocutors in the short run but also the broader cultural implications of such interactions.

RESULTS
Classification of The Threat Acts and Politeness Strategies

The interpersonal dynamics in *Joker* (2019) are marked by repeated face-threatening acts (FTAs) directed at Arthur Fleck. These FTAs reveal a consistent erosion of Arthur's self-worth across different social contexts. Using Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, six key scenes were analyzed and classified by type of FTA and politeness strategy.

Table 1. The classification of FTAs and politeness strategy

No.	Scene/ Context	Types of FTA	Politeness Strategy	Utterances from the video	Speaker/ role	Time stamps
1.	In a therapy session	Negative face	On record, with redressive action, negative politeness.	[Arthur] Who knows? … if you could ask the doctor to increase my medication. [Therapist] …you are on…different meds.	Therapist	07:13 – 07:33

2.	On a Bus	Positive face	On record, bald without redress, positive politeness	Surely, they must be doing something. [The woman] … stop bothering my kid? [Arthur] I was not… I was… [The woman] Just stop.	Stranger	08:17-08:23
3.	Getting fired	Positive face	On record, bald without redress, positive politeness	[Hoyt] That is bullshit… What…clown carries a fuck.. gun? … You're … a liar. You're fired!"	Arthur's boss	28:58 – 29:12
4.	On a subway attack	Positive face	On record, bald without redress, positive politeness	Men: "What's so funny, asshole? … You think that's fucking funny?"	Stranger	30:51, and 31:57
5.	Murray plays Arthur's failed comedy clip	Positive face	On record, bald without redress, positive politeness	[Murray] … Here's a guy who thinks if you just keep laughing, it'll somehow make you funny…"	The host of the TV Show	59:45
6.	Sophie's rejection	Positive face	On-record, with redressive action, positive politeness	[Sophie] You're in the wrong apartment…. I…need you to leave…Please.	Neighbour	1:17:34

As demonstrated in Table 1, Arthur's daily experiences in Joker are consistently marked by on-record face-threatening acts, most of which lack any form of redressive politeness. The FTAs predominantly target his positive face, his basic human desire to be acknowledged, respected, and valued. However, in certain contexts, such as his therapy session, Arthur's negative face, which is his desire for autonomy and the freedom to express needs without obstruction, is also subtly threatened from below, excerpt:

Arthur : "Who knows? … if you could ask the doctor to increase my medication."
Therapist : "… you are on…different medications. Surely, they must be doing something."

The first line shows that Arthur was utilizing his right to self-determination. He tentatively asked the therapist to consider increasing his medication, but the therapist refused Arthur by saying, *"… you are on seven different medications". The* therapist's assertion is classified as an on-record FTA with a redressive strategy.

In the second scene, which is on a bus, Arthur's positive face is directly rejected. Below is the excerpt:

The woman   : "…stop bothering my kid?"
Arthur   : "I was not... I was…"
The woman   : "Just stop."

When Arthur playfully interacts with a child, the mother responds by asking him to stop annoying her kid. Arthur tries to explain that he did not, but the mother curtly replies, *"Just stop." The woman explicitly attacks Arthur's positive face, which is the need to be appreciated. There is no* redressive strategy to soften her words. Hoyt, Arthur's boss, aggressively fires him in the third scene. His utterances are stated below.

Hoyt   : "That is bullshit…What…clown carries a fuck…gun? … You are … a liar. You're fired!"

The above line obviously violates Arthur's positive face. The entire words coming out of Hoyt are cursing. Not even a single word gives appreciation or shows sympathy. Hence, it violates Arthur's positive face. As *the utterance is direct, clear, and has no mitigation, it is classified as bald without redress.* The fourth scene takes place on the subway. Here, a group of men confront Arthur by saying.

Men   : "What's so funny, asshole? … You think that's fucking funny?"

From the above excerpt, the assertion is clear, mocking Arthur for his involuntary laughs. Moreover, a bald on record FTA to Arthur's positive face is claimed as the spoken lack of moderation and objected to Arthur's sense of being loved.
During the live show, Murray plays a clip of Arthur's failed comedy and jokes from the line:

Murray   : "... Here is a guy who thinks if you…keep laughing, it'll…make you funny."

The statements of Murray are a public on-record FTA**.** Without redress, He mocked Arthur's performance and self-worth in front of his audiences. The ridicule targets Arthur's positive face by attacking his desire to be seen as funny and worthy of attention.
In the last context, Arthur enters Sophie's apartment uninvited, which is intrusive and disrupts her private space and ongoing activity, caring for her sleeping child.

Sophie   : "You are in the wrong apartment... I…need you to leave…Please."

Sophie's request to Arthur indicates a threat to Arthur's positive face, as the sense of being loved is rejected. Further, the word 'please' is a strategy from Sophie to soften her request or called known as redressive action.

DISCUSSION
Social and Contextual Dynamics of Face-Threatening Acts
Sociopragmatics emphasizes the surrounding social contexts to obtain the real meaning (Dewi and Pratiwi, 2025). To this extent, this paper will examine the social and contextual environment where the FTAs occur. In these six scenes, the FTAs do not occur in isolation but are part of larger power-structured relationships. During the therapy session, the therapist has power over Arthur, and this is an institutional role. The rejection that occurs is the description of the cultural norm within clinical practices, where professional judgment may supersede personal autonomy, particularly for the

mentally ill.

A stranger triggered the impetuous rejection by a woman on the bus. Moreover, the stranger relations in the social places usually happen in the areas in which the city regulations of privacy and mistrust result in harsh and uncompromising dialogue. Her words are not the only reasons why Arthur has a positive face that is compromised by the social assumptions about acceptable conduct in public. The refusal of Arthur to be kind portrays the culture of distance existing in contemporary urban areas, where the presence of visible strangers all the time creates anxiety, diminishes trust, and decreases the desire to communicate empathetically (Unal, 2023). These city processes become normalized and habitual to avoidance and harsh, defensive interactions, making even non-confrontational interactions face-threatening.

The scene of firing is a clear example of the hierarchical power relations at the workplace, where the boss has the dominant power and does not need to be polite or mitigated. According to the research done on The Ramsay Kitchen Nightmares, the workplace discourse is usually asymmetrical. In this conversation, superiors are more powerful and freer with their language use, particularly in giving orders and making verdicts (Dajem & Alyousef, 2020). This hegemony is manifested in the direct and harsh Mood structure. A language that has a high level of modality and unhedged evaluative statements to claim control. This language also exposes subordinates to verbal assaults, which reflect their vulnerable work status and inability to react or even bargain.

The subway conflict is a demonstration of group and social power. Arthur laughs extraordinarily, and this irritates three men. The three young men are a symbol of a rich individual, which is manifested in their dressing: an ironed shirt, a blazer, and a tie. Arthur, on the contrary, is a representative of the poor. The men dared by numbers and social rank to go to Arthur and tell him,...what's so fucking funny? The passage indicates that the men mock Arthur without his redress. They do it boldly, as the dominance of classes and groups can deprive them of the necessity of politeness (Amalia et al., 2023; Lestari and Sembodo, 2019). Added the stuttering of the speech of Arthur when he attempted to explain his condition, which shows that he experienced communication apprehension. It occurred because Arthur felt anxious during the situation in the context of the conversation, where three men are swarming (Oktaviani, Pransiska, and Hamdan, 2024)

Politeness strategies can be used to examine the relationship between power and social interaction in Murray's live show. Murray demonstrates his strength by overturning the efforts of Arthur to be humorous through a bald-on-record politeness approach that is characterized by bluntness and face-threatening behaviors. Murray is the host of a highly popular television program known as Live with Murray Franklin. Therefore, He is a mirror image of a socially and financially strong person. The more social the character, the more they tend to employ bald-on-record politeness, which is straightforward and commanding, to dominate the less privileged. Similar to the results of Amalia, Indah, and Bahtiar (2023), bald-on-record politeness, direct and authoritative, is often used by characters with high social status, who need to show their dominance over lower-status characters.

From a sociopragmatic perspective, Sophie's rejection of Arthur is embedded in the neighbor–stranger relationship characteristic of urban settings, where interactions are shaped by cultural distance, suspicion, and strong privacy norms. Contemporary urban life, as Unal (2023) argues, fosters a culture of distance in which even proximate relationships, such as those between neighbors, are maintained through detachment, thereby weakening communicative solidarity. In this context, Arthur's uninvited presence constitutes a competing action trajectory that disrupts Sophie's ongoing engagement of caring for her child, rendering his intrusion ill-timed and socially inappropriate. As Chalfoun, Ross, and Stivers (2024) note, the use of *please* in requests typically marks the speaker's awareness that the request intrudes upon the recipient's current activity. Sophie's utterance, therefore, reflects her orientation to the delicacy of the situation while simultaneously asserting her situational authority within her own home. Importantly, rather than de-escalating the face threat, the

inclusion of *please* functions as a form of mitigated control that reinforces power asymmetry, aligning with findings by Murphy and De Felice that *please* in American English can index the speaker's right to impose limits. Consequently, Sophie's rejection does not diminish the face-threatening act toward Arthur's positive face but instead accentuates his positioning as an intruder lacking social entitlement. This asymmetry is further intensified by the later revelation that the relationship exists only in Arthur's imagination, a narrative disclosure that catastrophically undermines his sense of social belonging and exacerbates the erosion of his positive face.

Psychological and Emotional Consequences of Face-Threatening Acts
The successive FTAs that are aimed at Arthur add up to an ever gradual psychological degradation, which works in a familiar chain, which starts at the linguistic level and ends in the complete fragmentation of identity. On the micro level, face-based harm is experienced when the positive face of Arthur is assaulted on several occasions by ridicule, dismissal, and devaluation. These linguistic wounds destroy his inner self-esteem by refusing his human need to be approved, recognized, and validated by others. According to Sifianou and Tzanne (2021), the recurring threats to positive face have a direct negative impact on self-esteem because they question the socially constructed identity of a person. These insults create humiliation, insecurity, and emotional erosion in the case of Arthur.

Nevertheless, linguistic injury is not the only factor that leads to psychological deterioration. As the FTAs of Arthur escalate in various encounters, they move to the level of face-based harm (immediate linguistic attacks) to ostracism-based harm (larger patterns of social exclusion). Whereas face-based harm influences self-image during certain interaction instances, ostracism-based harm influences the basic needs of belonging, autonomy, and meaningful social presence. Ren, Wesselmann, and Williams (2017) state that the four fundamental needs that are at risk due to persistent ostracism are control, self-esteem, belonging, and meaningful existence. Hence, it causes a more profound and enduring psychological trauma than solitary linguistic crimes.

In Arthur, verbal degradations of the micro-level, e.g., being mocked by strangers, humiliated by a TV host, or rejected by Sophie, cause emotional damage. When these experiences are recurrent and unrepaired, they become chronic invalidation, and this increases his feelings of helplessness and loss of agency. It is consistent with the chronic social exclusion model, specifically, the stage of resignation of Williams (2009), in which the long-term lack of belonging leads to the development of deep alienation, lack of value, and depression (Riva et al., 2016).

Most importantly, the path of Arthur does not end with the resignation. The Behavioural Approach System (BAS) theory states that highly sensitive individuals can also become aggressive when constant rejection is perceived as aggression (Rajchert and Winiewski, 2016). The shift in social pain to aggressive redefinition of self in the case of Arthur is triggered by the chronic ostracism, depriving Arthur of the regulatory mechanisms that normally inhibit violent reactions. FTAs, then, are not merely interpersonal injuries, but they are stimuli that cause BAS-driven retaliatory drives to be aroused, particularly when Arthur feels that social norms are no longer defending or legitimizing him.

This is also supported by the study of retaliatory aggression, which demonstrates that unrelenting threats of being faced may encourage people to re-establish control by being oppositional or violent (Chen, 2015). The FTAs Arthur does not only erode his self-concept but also sets him up to counter-aggression to re-establish agency. Therefore, his ultimate metamorphosis into the Joker is the psychological conclusion of a chain reaction.

In addition to the interpretation of the findings, this study also makes a number of theoretical contributions to the sociopragmatics field. To begin with, it furthers the face theory in that it shows that repeated positive face violations result in identity erosion, which, in its turn, causes psychological fragmentation. Although the framework of Brown and Levinson explains the immediate effects of FTAs

on the interpersonal level, this research builds on their model by demonstrating how linguistic damage can lead to more socio-psychological disintegration when embedded in the patterns of chronic marginalization. Second, the discussion shows a distinct sociopragmatic trend where micro-level FTAs are always in agreement with macro-levels of power, hierarchy of classes, and urban disconnection. This indicates that FTAs in film stories are not just the results of personal interaction but the outcomes of bigger social forces that govern dignity, autonomy, and belonging. Lastly, Joker is a particularly relevant example of sociopragmatic analysis because the protagonist in the movie is a victim of identity breakdown, not only caused by pathology but also by the cumulative marginalization of communicative practices. The story in the film is a prescient account of the sociopragmatic effects of exclusion, and the film is therefore a valuable case study of how language, power, and social context interrelate to influence psychological outcomes. In this way, the study expands the range of sociopragmatic research by demonstrating the integration of facework and social stigma to create a path of emotional breakdown.

CONCLUSION

This paper shows that the metamorphosis of Arthur Fleck into the Joker can be best explained as a sociopragmatic path that is influenced by continuous face-threatening actions (FTAs) that increasingly undermine his sense of value, belonging, and agency. The analysis based on the framework by Brown and Levinson (1987) showed that the positive face of Arthur is constantly infringed by ridicule, humiliation, and social dismissal, whereas the negative face is compromised in institutional settings, including therapy. These micro-level offenses are always in line with macro-level social formations such as urban detachment, workplace hierarchy, institutional authority, and inequality by classes, which demonstrates that linguistic harm cannot be separated from the larger patterns of marginalization.

In addition to the interpretation of the findings, this study has a number of important scholarly contributions. First, it develops face theory by demonstrating that repeated positive-face infractions compound, resulting in not only temporary interpersonal harm, but also permanent psychological disintegration. It builds on the model of Brown and Levinson that only explains short-term pragmatic consequences, demonstrating that chronic FTAs may develop into more profound socio-psychological disorders when integrated into perpetual exclusion. Second, the researcher recognizes a distinctive sociopragmatic pattern where FTAs in cinematic speech are the initiators of narrative identity breakdown, which shows how linguistic interactions influence the character trajectories in a manner that has not been thoroughly examined in sociopragmatics. Third, the combination of sociopragmatics with the theories of ostracism and behavioral activation provides the study with the possibility to relate the micro-level linguistic strategies to the psychological and narrative development, and the field of sociopragmatic inquiry is extended to the sphere of filmic representation and character psychology. Joker, therefore, becomes a valuable example, as it shows that communicative marginalization preconditions emotional resignation and retaliatory aggression.

The results also indicate some gaps that could be filled in future research. One of the limitations is that the study concentrates on one character in one cultural situation; comparative studies across films or across cultures can reveal how various narrative situations contribute to the development and interpretation of FTAs. The other gap is the emotional processes between FTAs, ostracism, and identity fragmentation; future research may utilize multimodal analysis or psychological discourse to explain these transitions further. Also, as the analysis is based on the framework of Brown and Levinson to a large extent, future research can include other or non-Western theories of face to investigate the role of cultural norms in mediating the effects of repeated face threats. By sealing these gaps, future studies will be able to enhance our knowledge on how language, social context, and psychological processes influence each other to create identity, dignity, and human resilience.

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