Face Threatening Acts in *The Glass Castle*: A Pragmatic Study of Dysfunctional Family Communication

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ABSTRACT

Face-threatening acts (FTAs) are verbal actions that can damage a person's self-image, usually occurring in situations of conflict, disagreement, or tension. The research aims to identify the types and strategies of Face Threatening Acts and to examine how these acts reflect dysfunctional communication patterns within the family. The analysis applies Brown and Levinson's politeness theory to classify Face Threatening Acts, Olson's (Circumplex Model to identify dysfunctional communication dimensions, and Cutting and Fordyce's context theory to interpret the communicative situations. This research employed a qualitative descriptive method. The data were taken from selected dialogues in the movie that contain Face Threatening Acts, collected through purposive sampling. The analysis involved classifying the data into types of Face Threatening Acts, which are divided into threats to positive face and threats to negative face. Next, this analysis identifies the strategies used, which are divided into bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record. And relating the findings to dysfunctional family communication dimensions, which are divided into dimensions of cohesion, flexibility, and communication. The results show that out of 70 data points, containing FTAs. Whereas, bald on record is the most dominant communication strategy used in the Walls family's communication in the movie. These findings indicate that FTAs are not only a matter of linguistic choice but also a reflection of deeper relationship problems in the family. The novelty of this research lies in the integration of FTA pragmatic analysis with the dysfunctional family communication model.

Keywords: pragmatics, face-threatening acts, dysfunctional family communication, The Glass Castle

INTRODUCTION

The Glass Castle, a memoir by Jeannette Walls (2005) adapted into a movie in 2017, portrays her difficult childhood in a dysfunctional family led by Rex and Rose Mary Walls. Rex, an alcoholic dreamer, and Rose Mary, an artist prioritizing her freedom, often neglect their children's basic needs. Despite the instability and inconsistent parenting, the family also shows creativity, imagination, and adventurous spirit. These contrasting dynamics make their communication an engaging subject for pragmatic analysis. Pragmatics, the study of how context shapes meaning (Yule, 1996), provides a framework to examine these interactions. Central to this field is Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which highlights "face," or a person's self-image. Face is divided into positive (the need for approval) and

negative (the need for autonomy). When communication threatens either, it is categorized as a Face-Threatening Act (FTA). This research analyzes how FTAs appear in *The Glass Castle* movie and how they reflect the dysfunctional communication patterns within the Walls family. The study aims to show how such acts contribute to cycles of conflict and resilience in troubled family relationships.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This study is based on pragmatics, focusing on how language conveys meaning in context. It applies Brown and Levinson's (1987) Face Threatening Acts theory, Olson's (2000) Circumplex Model of family communication, and Cutting and Fordyce's (2020) context theory to analyze dysfunctional family interactions in *The Glass Castle*.

1. Face Threatening Acts

Brown and Levinson (1987) define Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) as communicative actions that endanger a person's "face" or public self-image. Face consists of two aspects: positive face, the desire to be liked and approved of, and negative face, the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. FTAs occur when speech threatens either of these aspects, such as criticizing (positive face) or giving direct orders (negative face). To manage FTAs, Brown and Levinson propose four strategies:

Bald on Record – direct and unmitigated, often used in urgent or familiar contexts.

Positive Politeness – strategies to satisfy the hearer's need for approval and solidarity, such as showing concern, joking, or offering help.

Negative Politeness – strategies to respect the hearer's autonomy through indirectness, deference, or apologies.

Off Record – highly indirect strategies, such as hints, irony, or rhetorical questions, leaving interpretation to the hearer.

These strategies illustrate how speakers balance efficiency and politeness while negotiating face in social interaction.

2. Dysfunctional Families and Communication

Families can be seen as social units bound by kinship, support, and shared living (Galvin et al., 2015; Allen, 2017). However, they can also become dysfunctional, often leaving children without adequate support and vulnerable to stress or social difficulties (Minullina & Minullina, 2018).

Olson's Circumplex Model (2000) is a widely used framework for understanding family dysfunction, emphasizing three dimensions: cohesion, flexibility, and communication. Cohesion refers to the emotional bond among family members. Both extremes—disengaged (too distant) and enmeshed (overly dependent)—are unbalanced and linked to dysfunction. Flexibility concerns leadership, roles, and rules. Families that are too rigid or too chaotic struggle to adapt, making healthy interaction difficult. Communication functions as a facilitating dimension, determining whether families can maintain balance in cohesion and flexibility. Healthy communication involves clarity, empathy, and mutual respect, while

dysfunctional families often show poor listening, lack of openness, and ineffective problem-solving. Such patterns reinforce cycles of disengagement, enmeshment, rigidity, or chaos.

3. Contexts

Cutting and Fordyce (2020) emphasize the role of context in interpreting meaning, since speakers' intentions are not always explicit. They identify three main types:

Situational context – the physical setting of communication, including what speakers see, hear, and experience.

Background knowledge context – shared cultural or personal knowledge that helps interpret references or assumptions.

Co-textual context – the surrounding language within a conversation or text that provides coherence and clarifies meaning.

Several studies have applied Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory to analyze Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) in different contexts. Aydınoğlu (2013) found that male characters in Turkish family discourse used impoliteness more directly to assert power, while females relied on politeness strategies to build harmony. Nasution (2013), in *The Princess Diaries* movies, showed how FTAs shift with changes in power, authority, and emotional ties. Fridolini et al. (2021) revealed that positive politeness dominated in *Little Women*, reflecting intimacy and emotional bonds within family communication, while other strategies marked power and hierarchy. Cahyaningrum (2022) analyzed FTAs in *The Half of It*, showing how the main character both threatened and protected face through criticism, apologies, and subtle strategies. Unlike these studies, the present research offers novelty by focusing specifically on FTAs within dysfunctional family dynamics in *The Glass Castle*, highlighting how conflicts and power imbalances shape communication among family members.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with pragmatic discourse analysis. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory is applied to identify and categorize Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) in The Glass Castle movie. The data are dialogues from The Glass Castle (2017) that contain FTAs, focusing on conversations among family members (Rex, Rose Mary, and the children). The source of data is the official movie transcript, chosen because it portrays dysfunctional family communication rich in face-threatening interactions. Data collection involved watching the film, transcribing dialogues, and identifying FTAs based on Brown and Levinson's framework. Each utterance was coded according to the type of FTA, politeness strategy, and its pragmatic function.

Table 1. Example of Table Coding Data

No	Dialog/Time Code	FTA Type	Communication Strategies	Contexts	Communication Pattern	Explanation
1	Rose : "Do you want me to make food that will be	Positive Face Threat	Bald on Record (non-minimization)	Background knowledge	Cohesion - Disengaged	Jeannette is hungry and seeks her mother's

	finished in a few hours, or do you want me to finish this painting that will last forever?" (00.05.07)					attention, but Rose is more focused on her painting.
2	Jeannette : "Do you think Erma ever did anything to Dad" (01.19.23)	Positive face threat	Negative politeness (question,hedge)	Background knowledge	Communication - Absence of openness	Jeannette suspects that her father was abused by her grandmother
3	Rex : "You can't marry that idiot, you're better than him" (01.30.20)	Positive face threat	Bald on record (non-minimization)	Background knowledge	Communication – Otoriter and lack of empathy	Rex refused and criticized his daughter's decision

The analysis data followed four steps. First, identifying types of FTAs (positive and negative face threats) using Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory. Second, classifying strategies used (bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off record). Third, examining how FTAs reflect dysfunctional family communication through Olson's model (communication, cohesion, flexibility). The last, analyzing context based on Cutting's framework (situational, background knowledge, co-textual).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the analysis of Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) in *The Glass Castle*, using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, Olson's (2000) family communication model, and Cutting and Fordyce's (2020) context theory. The findings address the research questions by identifying FTA types, strategies used, and their reflection of dysfunctional family communication.

1. FINDINGS

The study identified 70 instances of face-threatening acts in *The Glass Castle*. These include 8 positive face threats, 6 negative face threats, and strategies such as 15 bald on record, 12 positive politeness, 6 negative politeness, and 5 off record. Based on Olson's (2000) theory, 4 data reflect cohesion, 3 flexibility, and 11 communication, showing how FTAs contribute to dysfunctional family interaction.

1.1 Types of Face Threatening Acts

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), face-threatening acts consist of threats to positive and negative face. From 14 identified instances in *The Glass Castle*, this study analyzes 9 in detail to illustrate how these threats appear in interactions and the contexts that shape them.

- **Positive Face**

Figure 1. Example of Data Positive Face
(00.32.55 → 00.33.03)

Rex : Got a son in the **Gestapo** and a daughter who **writes gossip**

Jeannette telling her father that Brian succeeded in doing his job for the first time, namely a police, then Rex responds with insults by saying "Got a son in the Gestapo and a daughter who writes gossip" is a threat to Brian and Jeannette's positive face because it belittles Brian's profession as a police officer by calling him **"Gestapo"** and Jeannette's job by calling him **"writes gossip".** Rex rejects his children's need for respect by giving negative judgments without euphemism, so that his threat is clear and deliberate. This is concluded as background knowledge context, because the meaning of the insult can only be understood through shared knowledge, which makes the statement feel very insulting.

- **Negative Face**

Figure 2. Example of Data Negative Face
(00.24.25 → 00.24.30)

Rex : Now, **sink or swim!**

Rex suddenly throws Jeannette into the pool and gives her an extreme choice of **"sink or swim"** which demands immediate action without consent or preparation. This is a threat to Jeannette's negative face because it forces and limits her freedom to refuse or avoid a situation she doesn't want. The context of this dialogue is a situational context, because Rex's words were spoken in the immediate situation at the time of the incident, namely, the sudden moment when Rex forces her to learn to swim in a surprising and stressful way.

1.2 Face Threatening Act Strategies

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), speakers use strategies such as bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record to achieve communication goals based on relationship and context. From 38 identified strategies in *The Glass Castle*, 16 are analyzed in detail to show how they appear in the Walls family's interactions.

- **Bald on Record**

Figure 3. Example of Data Bald on Record
(01.34.58 → 01.35.00)

Rex : Your mom and I did everything we could for you, okay? We looked after you, and it was a happy family!
Jeannette : **Bullshit! We did it!**

Jeannette's father assures her that he cares about his children, but Jeannette denies this by saying, "Bullshit! We did it!" This statement is a bold on-record strategy because Jeannette rejects her father's statement directly and harshly without reducing the threat to her father's face. The word **"Bullshit!"** indicates a frontal rejection, while **"We did it!"** emphasizes that they are looking out for themselves, not their parents. The context of this dialogue is background knowledge, knowing the background of their conflict-filled relationship and their unhappy childhood.

- **Positive Politeness**

Figure 4. Example of Data Positive Politeness
(00.20.17 → 00.20.20)

Jeannette : Dad, **i'm sorry about Erma.**

The phrase **"Dad... I'm sorry about Erma"** is a form of positive politeness strategy because Jeannette shows empathy and concern for her father's feelings about Erma's death. This statement aims to maintain a good relationship and reduce emotional tension between them.

This analysis is concluded as situational context, because it is a moment of grief and Jeannette is trying to comfort her sad father.

- **Negative Politeness**

Figure 5. Example of Data Negative Politeness
(00.46.54 → 00.47.04)

Jeannette : **Do you think... You could maybe** stop drinking?

Jeannette asking her father to stop drinking alcohol by saying, "Do you think... You could maybe stop drinking?" This is a strategy of negative politeness, because Jeannette conveys her request indirectly and carefully to reduce the threat to her father's face. The phrase **"Do you think... You could maybe"** is a hedge that shows hesitation and gives her father room to refuse. This strategy respects her father's freedom while expressing concern about his drinking habits. This dialogue is consistent with the background knowledge context, as it is known that her father frequently drinks alcohol and the impact this has on the family.

- **Off Record**

Figure 6. Example of Data Off Record
(00.33.22 → 00.33.24)

Rex : **So how long is this phase gonna last?**

Re doubting Jeannette's relationship with her boyfriend by saying, **"So how long is this phase gonna last?".** This sentence is an off-the-record strategy because Rex conveys his sarcasm indirectly in the form of a rhetorical question. This statement forces Jeannette to interpret her father's intentions herself. This analysis is concluded as background knowledge context, as its meaning is clear if one knows about their tense relationship and Rex's tendency to belittle Jeannette's life choices.

1.3 FTAs Reflect Dysfunctional Family Communication

This section examines how Face Threatening Acts reflect dysfunctional communication in the Walls family through Olson's Circumplex Model (2000), focusing on cohesion, flexibility, and communication. Of 18 identified cases, 10 are analyzed in detail, showing how strategies like bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record often worsen emotional distance, unclear rules, and poor communication.

- **By Revealing Emotional Disconnection (Cohesion)**

Figure 7. Example of Data By Revealing Emotional Disconnection (Cohesion)
(01.34.49 → 01.34.53)

Jeannette : I still don't understand why you followed us here.
Rose: We wanted to be a family again.
Jeannette: **We were never a family,** Mom. We were a nightmare.

The phrase "We were never a family, Mom. We were a nightmare" is a bald on record strategy, because it is spoken bluntly and without refinement. This statement reflects a low level of cohesion (disengaged), because it shows a lack of emotional attachment between Jeannette and her mother. This statement directly rejects her mother's view that they can become a family again, while also emphasizing the distance that has long existed in their relationship. The sentence **"We were never a family"** is clear evidence of a threat to her mother's face while also illustrating the weakness of their emotional bond. The utterance is conveyed using the co-textual context.

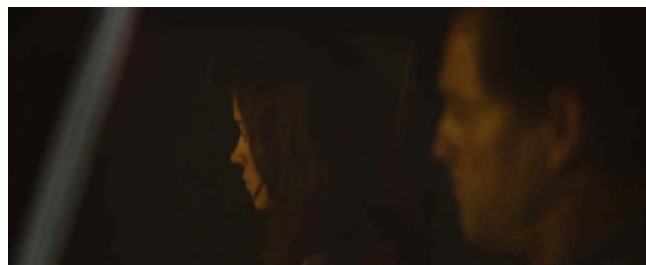- **By Exhibiting Rigidity and Inadaptability (Flexibility)**

Figure 8. Example of Data By Exhibiting Ridigity and Inadaptability (Flexibility)
(01.28.02 → 01.28.04)

Jeannette : I am moving to New York and **there is nothing you can do about it.**

Jeannette is feeling upset and angry with her father. She had always planned to go to New York, but her father did not agree with it. Jeannette confirmed her decision by saying, "I am moving to New York and there is nothing you can do about it". This statement uses the bald on record strategy, as it is said directly without any softening. This FTA reflects a rigid pattern of flexibility, meaning a decision that is inflexible and leaves no room for compromise with her father. Jeannette asserts that her decision is final, even though her father disagrees. The phrase **"there is nothing you can do about it"** emphasizes her unwillingness to change and highlights the low flexibility in their relationship. The context of this dialogue is situational, as it is spoken in a tense and emotionally charged atmosphere.

- **By Demonstrating Ineffective Interaction (Communication)**

Figure 9. Example of Data By Demonstrating Ineffective Interaction (Communication)
(01.05.46 → 01.05.49)

Jeannette : Dad, we were just protecting ourselves. Erma was grabbing his...
Rex : **Shut up! I don't wanna hear** another damn word about whatever did or didn't happen!

Jeannette is trying to explain to her father about her grandmother's mistreatment of Brian, but Rex responds with the sentence "Shut up! I don't wanna hear another damn word about whatever did or didn't happen!". This sentence is a bald on record strategy, because it is delivered directly and in a harsh tone. This FTA reflects the dimension of communication, as it shows poor communication when Rex interrupts the conversation and does not give Jeannette a chance to explain the situation. The words **"Shut up"** and **"I don't wanna hear"** are forms of communication interruption that lower the quality of family interaction by using co-textual context. This attitude hinders problem-solving and reinforces dysfunctional communication patterns.

2. DISCUSSION

The analysis of *The Glass Castle* shows that Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) significantly shape dysfunctional family communication. From 70 identified FTAs, 9 were analyzed in detail (5 positive face threats and 4 negative face threats), illustrating how family members often disregard approval or autonomy needs. Based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory, these threats appear through both direct and indirect speech that harms relationships. The findings also reveal the use of four strategies: bald on record (most frequent), positive and negative politeness (less frequent), and off record (least frequent). This suggests the Walls family relies heavily on direct, confrontational styles with minimal mitigation, reflecting patterns noted in earlier studies of dysfunctional families. Through Olson's (2000) Circumplex Model, FTAs highlight disengaged cohesion, chaotic flexibility, and weak communication, such as emotional distance, inconsistent authority, poor listening, and frequent interruptions. These results confirm that imbalance in cohesion, adaptability, and

communication perpetuates relational conflict, supporting Cutting and Fordyce's (2020) view of context shaping meaning in interaction.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study demonstrates that Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) function not only as linguistic phenomena but also as reflections of relational dysfunction in family communication. Analysis of The Glass Castle reveals that FTAs—manifested through threats to positive and negative face—are predominantly realized through overt strategies, indicating direct and confrontational interaction patterns in the Walls family. By combining Brown and Levinson's politeness framework with Olson's Circumplex Model, this study highlights the intersection between pragmatic strategies and the dysfunctional family dimensions of cohesion, flexibility, and communication. These findings confirm that language serves as a powerful medium for revealing and amplifying relational tensions, making FTAs an important indicator of broader psychosocial dynamics in family discourse.

SUGESTION
For future research, this study can be done as:
1. Comparative Studies – examining FTAs in diverse cross-cultural or cross--generational family contexts to uncover cultural variations in linguistic and relational strategies.
2. Genre Expansion – comparing FTAs in literary texts, live-action films, or real-world family interactions to test the framework's applicability across discursive domains.

Through these approaches, future research can enrich the study of pragmatics and discourse analysis, while also offering practical insights into the role of language in forming, maintaining, or repairing family relationships.

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