

Responses to Face-Attacking Acts: A Case Study of the Television Series “Ozark”

Nguyen Thi Phuong Nhung

Faculty of Fundamental Sciences, Posts and Telecommunications Institute of Technology, Vietnam

Abstract:

This study investigates response strategies to face-attacking acts in the television series Ozark, drawing on the response framework proposed by Culpeper et al. (2003). The study combines qualitative analysis with descriptive statistics of frequencies and percentages. The findings reveal that the characters employ four main response strategies: defensive countering, offensive countering, acceptance, and not responding (silence). Defensive countering is realized through such sub-strategies as denial, explanation, pleading, and ignoring, while offensive countering includes verbal and physical countering. The occurrence of physical responses demonstrates the multimodal nature of responses to face-attacking acts in the film corpus. The findings contribute to a better understanding of the diversity and context-dependence of response strategies in conflictual interactions.

Key Words: *impoliteness, face, face-attacking act, response strategy*

Date of Submission: 06-07-2026

Date of Acceptance: 21-08-2026

I. Introduction

Face attack is a communicative phenomenon in which speakers use language to damage the hearer's face in order to achieve particular goals. In recent years, research on face attack has become an important area in pragmatics, contributing to a better understanding of how conflict is initiated and develops in interaction. However, face attack is not merely an act produced by the speaker but also an interactional process, in which the recipient's responses directly influence the outcome of the interaction. Thus, examining how recipients respond to face-attacking acts is essential to understanding the dynamics of conflict in communication. Culpeper et al. (2003) propose a model of response options for examining how recipients respond to face-attacking acts. This model is adopted as the main analytical framework in the present study.

This paper investigates response strategies to face-attacking acts in English-language dialogues, using the American television series *Ozark* as the data source. The corpus consists of 123 conversational excerpts containing face-attacking acts. The research addresses the following question:

What strategies do recipients use to respond to face-attacking acts in the dialogue of Ozark?

By examining recipients' responses, this analysis aims to shed light on how characters manage and negotiate conflict following face-attacking acts, and to contribute further empirical evidence to research on face-attacking acts from an interactional perspective.

II. Literature Review

1. Face

The concept of *face* was systematically developed by sociologist Erving Goffman (1967). Goffman defines *face* as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself” based on the way others perceive the line that the individual has taken during a particular interaction. From Goffman's perspective, face is not a fixed possession of an individual but is constructed, maintained, and negotiated through social interaction.

Brown and Levinson (1987) adopt and further develop Goffman's concept of face in their theory of politeness, distinguishing between two basic face wants: positive face, referring to the desire to be appreciated, approved of, and accepted by others, and negative face, referring to the desire to have freedom of action and to be free from imposition. On this basis, Brown and Levinson introduce the concept of the Face-Threatening Act (FTA), referring to acts that have the potential to threaten the positive or negative face of the speaker and/or hearer. They subsequently propose a system of politeness strategies for mitigating the face-threatening effects of such acts.

2. Impoliteness and Face-Attack Strategies

While Brown and Levinson focus primarily on politeness strategies for mitigating face-threatening acts, Culpeper (1996) turns attention to the use of strategies intended to attack or damage the hearer's face. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework, Culpeper proposes five impoliteness superstrategies: Bald on record impoliteness, Positive impoliteness, Negative impoliteness, Sarcasm or Mock politeness, and Withhold politeness. Among these, positive and negative impoliteness comprise a range of output strategies targeting the hearer's positive and negative face, respectively. Strategies to attack positive face include: ignore, snub the other; exclude the other from the activity; disassociate from the other; be disinterested, unconcerned, unsympathetic; use inappropriate identity markers; use obscure or secretive language; seek disagreement; make the other feel uncomfortable; use taboo words; call the other names, etc. Strategies deployed to damage negative face wants include: frighten; condescend, scorn, or ridicule; invade the other's space; explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect; put the other's indebtedness on record, etc.

Building on Culpeper's (1996) framework, Bousfield (2008) applies this taxonomy to naturally occurring interactional data and proposes an additional output strategy, criticizing, defined as expressing disapproval of the hearer, an action or inaction attributed to them, or an entity in which the hearer has invested face.

3. Responses to Face Attack

Culpeper et al. (2003), in their work *Impoliteness Revisited: With Special Reference to Dynamic and Prosodic Aspects*, revisit Culpeper's (1996) theoretical framework of impoliteness and emphasize the dynamic nature of impoliteness in interaction. The authors argue that impoliteness needs to be examined beyond individual strategies identified at the lexical and grammatical level, and instead situated within extended discourse and interactional context. In the course of interaction, a face-attacking act does not exist in isolation but may be followed by a range of different responses from the recipient.

On this basis, Culpeper et al. (2003) propose a set of response options, thereby offering a framework for examining how recipients respond to face-attacking acts. When confronted with an impoliteness act (face-attacking), recipients have two basic options: to respond or not to respond (remain silent). If they choose to respond, they may either accept the attack by taking responsibility or apologizing (which may increase the damage to their own face), or opt to counter. Countering strategies are classified into two choices: offensive — using impoliteness to retaliate against impoliteness, and defensive — protecting one's own face by deflecting or blocking the attack.

III. Methodology

The data for this study are drawn from the American television series *Ozark* (Netflix, 2017–2022), a crime drama centered on the Byrde family as they become entangled in laundering money for a drug cartel. The series contains a high frequency of conflictual, threatening, and face-attacking interactions, making it a suitable source for examining face-attacking strategies and response strategies in conversational interaction.

The data collection, coding, and analysis process consisted of four steps.

- Step 1 - Script collection: The scripts of *Ozark* were downloaded from <https://sublikescript.com/series/Ozark-5071412>
- Step 2 - Excerpt selection: The researcher watched all episodes and identified conversational excerpts containing conflict and face-attacking acts. For each selected excerpt, information regarding the context, season, episode, and time of occurrence (in minutes) was recorded.
- Step 3 - Data classification: Positive and negative face-attacking strategies were classified according to Culpeper's (1996) framework, supplemented by Bousfield's (2008) criticizing strategy; response strategies to face-attacking acts were classified according to the framework proposed by Culpeper et al. (2003).
- Step 4 - Data analysis: The data were analyzed using a combined qualitative and quantitative approach, in which the quantitative analysis is reflected in the frequency and percentage of occurrence of each strategy, while the qualitative analysis examines specific examples in depth to clarify how the strategies operate within the context of the series.

Following the data collection process, the corpus consisted of 123 conversational excerpts containing face-attacking acts, with 491 occurrences of face-attacking strategies and 294 occurrences of response strategies identified. The lower number of response-strategy occurrences than face-attacking-strategy occurrences can be attributed to the fact that a single turn may contain multiple face-attacking strategies, whereas the recipient may respond to the attack with only one response strategy.

IV. Results and Discussion

Based on the response strategy classification framework proposed by Culpeper et al. (2003), the response instances identified in the corpus were classified into four main strategy groups: silence (not responding), acceptance, defensive countering, and offensive countering. The frequency and percentage of occurrence for each strategy are presented in detail in Table 1.

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Silence	39	13.3
Acceptance	27	9.2
Offensive countering	108	36.7
Defensive countering	120	40.8
Total	294	100

Table 1. Response strategies to face-attacking acts

The results show a clear difference in the distribution of response strategies. Defensive countering was the most frequently employed strategy, accounting for 40.8%, followed by offensive countering with 36.7%. Together, these two strategies represented 77.5% of all responses, indicating a clear tendency for characters in the series to respond actively to face attacks, either by defending themselves through justification and explanation or by counterattacking the other party. In contrast, the two less active response strategies, silence and acceptance, accounted for considerably smaller proportions, at 13.3% and 9.2%, respectively.

The following sections provide an analysis of each response strategy, presented in descending order of frequency, using illustrative examples drawn from the corpus.

1. Defensive Countering

Defensive countering was realized through four sub-strategies - denial, explanation, ignoring, and pleading - as presented in Table 2.

Sub-strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Denial	41	34.2
Explanation	48	40
Ignoring	15	12.5
Pleading	16	13.3
Total	120	100

Table 2. Sub-strategies of defensive countering in response to face-attacking acts

Explanation was the most frequently employed sub-strategy, accounting for 40.0%, followed by denial at 34.2%. Pleading and ignoring occurred at lower frequencies, at 13.3% and 12.5% respectively. These sub-strategies are examined in detail through conversational examples in the following section.

* Explanation

Explanation is employed when the recipient of a face attack provides reasons, information to clarify or justify their actions or views. By providing additional information, the recipient attempts to protect their image and position in the interaction. An example is as follows:

Excerpt 1: Context: Ruth returns home and discovers that her two uncles, Russ and Boyd, have used the money she stole from Marty to buy some cats. She points a gun at them.

Ruth: *The fucking kitty cats in the cage. I told you not to touch that fucking money.*

Boyd: *They're not kitty cats. They're bobcats. Tell her, Russ.*

Russ: *You'd be surprised, the market for exotic pets. Look online. They're all over this area. Make a hundred times what we've spent with the cats.*

(Season 1, episode 3, 53:33-54:05)

The utterance produced by Ruth contains two positive face-attacking strategies: using taboo language “fucking” to convey anger and criticizing, by reiterating her previous warning that had been violated, thereby implying disapproval of her uncles’ action. Faced with this attack, Russ responds through explanation. He provides a rationale to justify his decision by pointing to the profit potential of the exotic-pet market and estimating the substantially higher profits that could be made compared with the amount invested. This response shows Russ attempting to shift the focus of the interaction from “having done something wrong” to “having made a profitable decision”, thereby mitigating the perceived seriousness of his violation.

* Denial

Denial is used when the recipient directly rejects the content, accusation, or attribution raised in the face-attacking act. Through denial, the speaker seeks to reject responsibility or the validity of the interlocutor's assertion.

Excerpt 2: Context: Mason, a pastor, kidnaps Wendy because he believes she was involved in his son being taken away by the police.

Mason: *You know what's going on! You're the one that did it!*

Wendy: *What do you mean?*

Mason: *And now you got the guts to lie to me when I can take your fucking face off?*

Wendy: ***I'm not lying.***

Mason: *You threatened me. You told me not to take my son to the police, then you had him taken from his father!*

Wendy: ***I don't know anything about this. Mason!***

(Season 2, episode 7, 15:51-16:10)

Mason attacks Wendy's face by accusing her of lying, while also using taboo language and a threat in the utterance "*And now you got the guts to lie to me when I can take your fucking face off?*" In response to the face-attacking act, Wendy replies: "*I'm not lying*" to directly reject Mason's accusation of lying. Mason then continues to attack Wendy's face with another accusation, claiming that she was the one who threatened him and caused his son to be taken away. Wendy again responds with "*I don't know anything about this*" to reject any involvement in the matter attributed to her by Mason. Wendy's repeated use of denial in response to two distinct accusations within the same exchange reflects the consistency with which she chooses to defend her position.

* Pleading

Pleading is a defensive sub-strategy used when the person being attacked expresses supplication, entreaty, or an urgent request for the interlocutor to stop the face-attacking act or de-escalate the confrontation. Through this strategy, the speaker seeks to defuse the conflictual situation and protect themselves against the threat to their face.

Excerpt 3: Context: Jacob brings a boy home with the intention of adopting him, but Darlene does not agree.

Darlene: *Why you bringing some kid into our kitchen?*

Jacob: *He's a foster child, and I thought that... if he likes us and we like him, then maybe he might be...*

Darlene: *Our heir? No, I want a baby boy, someone we can mold.*

Jacob: *We're gonna try this boy out, Darlene. So, please... keep an open mind, please?*

(Season 2, episode 5, 17:44-18:17)

Darlene displays a disagreement strategy by rejecting Jacob's intention to adopt the boy. By directly denying his proposal and asserting a preference contrary to his wishes, she threatens Jacob's positive face. In response to this act, Jacob attempts to persuade Darlene: "*We're gonna try this boy out, Darlene. So, please... keep an open mind, please?*" The repeated use of "*please*" together with the request to "*keep an open mind*" shows Jacob pleading with Darlene to lessen her opposition and give the boy a chance.

* Ignoring

By this sub-strategy, the recipient responds verbally to a face attack but deliberately avoids addressing, resolving, or refuting its content. Instead, the recipient shifts the focus of the interaction or disregards the issue raised by the other party. Avoiding direct engagement with the face attack may help reduce the likelihood of further conflict escalation.

Excerpt 4: Context: Wendy learns that Jonah brought a gun to threaten Helen. Jonah walks out while Wendy is questioning him.

Wendy: *You're not leaving this fucking house!*

Jonah: *... I know you can't stop me.*

Wendy: *Bullshit, I can't! You're grounded.*

Jonah: ***... I have a key. You don't need to stay up.***

(Season 4, episode 1, 43:45-44:04)

Wendy attempts to control Jonah's actions through the utterances "*You're not leaving this fucking house!*" and "*You're grounded.*" These impositions restrict Jonah's freedom of action and thereby threaten his negative face. Although Jonah has previously resisted by stating "*You can't stop me*", when Wendy continues to assert her control, Jonah responds "*I have a key. You don't need to stay up.*" Rather than directly addressing or engaging with the face-threatening imposition, Jonah ignores the attack and shifts the focus to the fact that he has a key and can return home on his own. In this context, ignoring functions to avoid direct confrontation and maintain Jonah's autonomy, thereby limiting Wendy's ability to continue controlling his actions.

2. Offensive countering

Offensive countering is a response strategy in which the recipient responds in a confrontational manner by attacking the other party's face in return. To reflect the multimodal nature of the data, offensive countering is

further divided into two sub-strategies: verbal counter-attack and physical counter-attack. The statistical results are presented in Table 3.

Sub-strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Verbal counter-attack	97	89.8
Physical counter-attack	11	10.2
Total	108	100

Table 3. Sub-strategies of offensive countering in response to face-attacking acts

In *Ozark*, when opting for offensive countering in response to face-attacking acts, characters predominantly relied on verbal means (89.8%) rather than physical action (10.2%). Nevertheless, the occurrence of 11 instances of physical counter-attack indicates that conflict in the corpus was not always resolved at the verbal level alone, but at times escalated into direct confrontational action.

* *Verbal counter-attack*

This is a sub-strategy in which the person being attacked directly responds to the face-attacking act with a confrontational linguistic behavior, such as criticizing, insulting, using taboo language, threatening, or employing other face-attacking strategies.

Excerpt 5: Context: Wendy needs to persuade Foreman to vote in favor of building the casino in Mousiri. Wendy uses a video clip of Foreman’s husband having an affair with a woman at the club to achieve her goal.

Foreman: *I should call the state police. This is extortion.*

Wendy: *Yes, it is. **But if you call the authorities, it just goes public.***

(Season 2, episode 2, 37:49-38:31)

Foreman responds to Wendy’s blackmail by threatening to report her to the police. In response, Wendy issues a threatening warning that if Foreman uses law enforcement, information about her husband’s affair will be made public. Thus, rather than backing down in the face of Foreman’s threat, Wendy retaliates with a counter-threat, thereby putting Foreman in a position of having to weigh the consequences of acting against her. Accordingly, Wendy’s response is classified as verbal counter-attack, specifically a threat, a negative face-attacking strategy.

* *Physical counter-attack*

Excerpt 6: Context: Del is the representative of the cartel for whom Marty is laundering money. Marty succeeds in persuading Del to cooperate with the Snell family in building the casino.

Del: *Only Marty Byrde can move to Missouri... and somehow convince me to partner with a bunch of rednecks.*

Darlene: *I'm sorry. What was that?*

Del: *I said only Marty Byrde...can somehow convince me... to partner with a bunch of red...*

[gunshot]

(Season 1, episode 10, 57:48-58:07)

Del makes an insulting remark about the Snell family by referring to them as “a bunch of rednecks”. This derogatory label carries a demeaning connotation and can be regarded as a positive face attack. Darlene initially responds with a question asking Del to clarify his remark. However, rather than retracting or modifying his statement, Del deliberately repeats the insulting expression “...to partner with a bunch of red ...”. Darlene then shoots Del. This response is not verbal but takes the form of a direct physical action in response to Del’s face attack. In this context, the shooting directly retaliates against Del’s insult and his demeaning treatment of Darlene and her family. This case demonstrates that, in *Ozark*, responses to face-attacking acts are not limited to verbal countering but, in situations involving severe conflict, may also be realized through physical action.

3. Silence

Silence (not responding) is a response strategy in which the person being attacked does not provide a verbal response following the interlocutor’s face-attacking act. However, silence does not carry a fixed meaning and must be interpreted in relation to the interactional context. In the *Ozark* corpus, the most prominent meaning conveyed by silence is an implicit acceptance of the face-attacking act, as illustrated in the following example:

Excerpt 7: Context: Wendy tries to stop Jonah from leaving home to go to Ruth’s place. Marty, her husband, is also present during this argument.

Wendy: *Jonah, drop it! Just... Just hear me. You're angry about Ben? So am I. But you know who you should be angry at?*

Marty: *I don't think this is helping.*

Wendy: *Stay the fuck out of this! You got it. She's the one. She's the one who let him out of the hospital when she knew he wasn't well. She's the one who put him in harm's way. ... (speaking to Jonah)*

(Marty remains silent.)

(Season 4, episode 3, 19:32-20:42)

Marty intervenes as Wendy tries to stop Jonah from leaving home, and Wendy responds with the utterance "*Stay the fuck out of this!*" Wendy directly excludes Marty from the ongoing interaction between herself and Jonah. In response to this face-attacking act, Marty offers no verbal reply and remains silent. In this context, Marty's silence is classified as not responding, since he neither directly refutes, explains, nor counters Wendy's act of excluding him from the interaction. This lack of response can be interpreted as a way of restraining his reaction and avoiding further escalation of the conflict.

4. Acceptance

Acceptance occurs when the recipient accepts the face-attacking act rather than resisting or countering it. The person being attacked may take responsibility for the behavior and offer an apology. In this way, the recipient acknowledges the act or responsibility attributed to them by the interlocutor, thereby accepting the face-attacking act, even though this may simultaneously increase the damage to their own face.

Excerpt 8: Context: Jonah receives money from a schoolmate to help him complete an assignment but fails to fulfill his commitment.

Jonah's friend: *Is this how you run a business? You take people's money and flake?*

Jonah: *Oh, crap. Look, I'm... so sorry. We, uh, had a death in the family.*

Jonah's friend: *What the fuck's that?*

Jonah: *It's your money back.*

Jonah's friend: *I'm failing that class because of you, dipshit.*

Jonah: *And I'll give you 50% discount on the next one.*

(Season 2, episode 6, 34:38-35:00)

Jonah's friend criticizes him for taking the money without completing the work, holding Jonah responsible for failing to fulfill his commitment and thereby producing a face-attacking act. Rather than denying the accusation or countering the attack, Jonah immediately acknowledges the problem and apologizes: "*Oh, crap. Look, I'm... so sorry.*" He also returns the money he received, further demonstrating his acceptance of responsibility for failing to complete the task. When his friend continues to blame him by saying "*I'm failing that class because of you, dipshit,*" Jonah offers "*I'll give you 50% discount on the next one.*" These responses indicate that Jonah accepts the face attack. In this context, acceptance serves as a means of managing the conflict and maintaining the interpersonal relationship, although it may simultaneously increase the face damage to the recipient himself.

V. Conclusion

This study examines response strategies to face-attacking acts in *Ozark*, based on the framework proposed by Culpeper et al. (2003). The findings reveal that characters employed a diverse range of response strategies, among which defensive countering and offensive countering were the most prominent. A notable finding is that responses were realized not only through verbal means but also through action, particularly in instances of offensive countering. The inclusion of physical counter-attack as a sub-strategy suggests that the classification framework requires a degree of flexibility when applied to filmic data, where interaction is simultaneously conveyed through language and action.

This study draws solely on data from a single television series, *Ozark*, and its findings therefore cannot be generalized to other types of communication. Future research could expand the corpus and compare filmic data with naturally occurring conversational data to validate and further develop the classification system for response strategies.

References

- [1]. Bousfield, D. (2008), *Impoliteness in interaction*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam.
- [2]. Brown P., & Levinson. S. C. (1987), *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*, Cambridge University Press.
- [3]. Culpeper, J. (1996). Towards an Anatomy of Impoliteness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 25, 349-367
- [4]. Culpeper, J., Bousfield D., & Wichmann, A. (2003). Impoliteness revisited: With special reference to dynamic and prosodic aspects. *Journal of Pragmatics*. Vol. 35: 1545-1579.
- [5]. Culpeper, J. (2005). Impoliteness and entertainment in the television quiz show: The Weakest Link. *Journal of Politeness Research: Language, Behaviour, Culture* 1: 35- 72
- [6]. Goffman, E. (1967), *Interactional ritual: Essays on face-to-face behaviour*, Pantheon Books, New York.
- [7]. Grice, H. P. (1975), *Logic and conversation, syntax and semantics, speech act*, New York: Academic Press.
- [8]. Searle J. (1969), *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*, Cambridge University Press.