*Journal of Language and Pragmatics Studies,* Volume 5 Number 1 (Apr 2026), p. 57-68
e-issn 2984-6051
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58881/jlps.v3i2
https://jurnal.ympn2.or.id/index.php/JLPS

# Facework and adversarial journalism in Nigerian political interviews

David Oluwatobi Esuola[1], John Okunade[2]

University of Ibadan, NIGERIA[1,2]
[1]email: esuoladavid1@gmail.com
Email: okunadekehindejohn@yahoo.com

**Abstract -** Political interviews are sites where accountability, power, and public identity are negotiated in real time. While studies of Nigerian political discourse have focused on politicians' rhetorical strategies, journalists' role as active face managers has received limited attention. Based on Brown & Levinson's Face Acts Theory (1987), this article analyses how face-threatening, face-saving, and face-repair moves appear in Rufai Oseni's political interviews on Arise TV. Through a qualitative discourse pragmatics approach on eight purposely chosen excerpts, this article demonstrates that face acts not only fulfil a politeness function but also occur within expert identity building and power negotiation. The results show that face-threatening moves in journalistic practices in the Nigerian media context appear to be socially accepted strategies of adversarial accountability. This article adds to political discourse pragmatics literature by arguing in favour of context-sensitive practices in facework, rather than relying on Cook's ideal models developed in Western contexts and adapted to other continents like Africa.

**Keywords:** political interviews; facework; pragmatics; Nigerian media; adversarial journalism

## 1. Introduction

Language is at the heart of political practice, as political processes are largely played out, negotiated, and challenged through public and institutional discourse. The setting of political interviews provides an arena where power relations, institutional roles, and public identities are constantly negotiated in real time. Unlike scripted political speeches, interviews are dialogic, confrontational, and interactionally contingent-a particularly fertile site for investigating pragmatic strategies related to facework, politeness, and conflict management.

Political discourse scholars have variously shown that language operates not only to carry content on political matters but also as a resource in the struggle for legitimizing authority, opposing ideology, and managing public impression. Within this tradition, media discourse has attracted growing interest, especially regarding how journalists mediate political power and hold public office holders accountable. However, much of the existing literature both globally and within the Nigerian context has tended to privilege politicians' linguistic strategies, often treating journalists as neutral facilitators rather than as interactional actors with their own pragmatic agendas.

The aforesaid dearth assumes even more importance within the Nigerian political communications context. The Nigerian broadcast media environment is beset with multilingualism, increased levels of political polarization, and a developing culture of adversarial

*Journal of Language and Pragmatics Studies,* Volume 5 Number 1 (Apr 2026), p. 57-68
e-issn 2984-6051
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58881/jlps.v3i2
https://jurnal.ympn2.or.id/index.php/JLPS

journalism. The Nigerian political interview programs, including The Morning Show aired on Arise Television, are replete with instances of aggressive questioning, interruptions, and challenges that often place primacy upon the active role of the journalist within face negotiation.

Though a considerable number of Nigerian scholars have investigated the analysis of political discourse with stylistic, critical, and pragmatic concerns (Adegoju, 2005; Opeibi, 2009; Alo & Odebunmi, 2010; Akinwotu, 2021) relative attention has been paid to the facework operations of news journalists in radio political interviews. Regarding the analysis of politeness and impoliteness, the attention has remained focused on politicians' self-presentation. Consequently, the interactional dynamics through which journalists deploy face-threatening acts as tools of accountability—and how political actors respond through face-saving and face-repair strategies—remain underexplored.

The selected studies highlight the dynamic relationship between language, media, and culture in contemporary society. One study examines how social media is reshaping mainstream journalism practices, influencing news production and dissemination in Ghana (Acheampong, 2024). Another research discusses the critical role of media in socio-political conflicts, emphasizing ethical challenges and responsibilities faced by journalists (Hassan et al., 2024). A linguistic-focused study analyses the use of adverbs in the Ngor-Okpala dialect of Igbo, contributing to the understanding of regional language structures (Nwachukwu, 2025). Additionally, research on crisis communication in Nigeria reveals how cultural factors significantly shape communication strategies during emergencies (Aruku et al., 2025). Overall, these works demonstrate the interconnectedness of media, language, and cultural contexts in shaping communication practices.

This study addresses this gap by examining the pragmatic deployment of face acts in selected political interviews conducted by Rufai Oseni, a prominent Nigerian broadcast journalist. The work is rooted in Brown and Levinson's "Face Acts Theory of 1987," and it explores the manner in which the face-threatening act, the face-saving act, and the face-repairing act occur when the interviewees and the interviewers make use of the Nigerian broadcast media. In specific, the research aims to respond to the following research questions: (1) What are the ways face-threatening acts are employed by the journalist as interaction strategies of accountability in Nigerian political interviews? What face-saving and face-repair strategies are employed by political actors in response to journalistic confrontation? (2) What do these facework practices reveal about politeness norms and professional identity construction in Nigerian broadcast political discourse?

By foregrounding the journalist as an active face manager, this study contributes to discourse pragmatics and political communication research by offering a context-sensitive account of facework in African broadcast media.

For analysis, the study will rely on Face Acts Theory, proffered by Brown and Levinson (1987). Based on Goffman's (1967) concept of face, which is a public image of the individual, the theory proposes that a person's positive face represents the need to be wanted, while the negative face represents the need to have freedom. A threatening act on the communication that may affect the need is called a Face Threatening Act (FTA) and acts of saving that threaten are called face acts.

In political interviews, facework acquires a deeper significance since the actors are constrained by public observation, institutionalized power inequity, and the potential for face damage. The press can employ FTAs to demand sovereignty by way of direct questioning, interruption, and accusation, while politicians employ face-saving techniques like denial, explanation, account, and attack in response.

It must be said, however, that Brown and Levinson's model has been sufficiently critiqued for its claim of universality (Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003; Locher & Watts, 2005). The critics argue that politeness norms vary culturally and contextually and that what passes as polite or impolite conduct depends on local communicative practices and institutional roles. In the light

*Journal of Language and Pragmatics Studies,* Volume 5 Number 1 (Apr 2026), p. 57-68
e-issn 2984-6051
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58881/jlps.v3i2
https://jurnal.ympn2.or.id/index.php/JLPS

of these criticisms, this research uses Face Acts Theory as a heuristic and not as a universal theory. That is, the model serves to identify and describe facework strategies, but one that remains close to the socio-cultural and institutional context of Nigerian broadcast journalism.

By situating face acts within the norms of adversarial media practice, the study demonstrates how face-threatening behaviour may function not as interactional failure but as a professionally sanctioned strategy of accountability.

## 2. Method

The data for this study were drawn from four political interview videos aired on *Arise Television* and subsequently uploaded to the station's official YouTube channel. The interviews feature Rufai Oseni in interaction with prominent Nigerian political actors and aides. The data are publicly available and involve public figures, thereby raising no ethical concerns regarding privacy or consent.

A qualitative research design was adopted, and the data were purposively sampled based on relevance to the study's objectives, the presence of overt interactional confrontation, and the recurrence of facework phenomena. Eight excerpts have been identified for the purposes of analysis. The eight were picked from the four interviews based on the analytical saturation method. This ensured the eight were characteristic of the patterns of face threat, save, and repair.

The video recordings were regularly reviewed and transcribed while taking note of turn-taking patterns, lexical variation, and pragmatics. The procedures considered in this qualitative content analysis were Braun and Clarke's framework on analysing themes in qualitative data in 2006. The steps in this framework included familiarization with the data, coding, identifying themes, and interpretation. The excerpts were subsequently analysed using the tenets of Face Acts Theory to identify patterns of face management and power negotiation in the interactions.

### 2.1 Data analysis

The section presents and discusses the themes discovered in the study. The thematic classifications are face threatening acts, face repair and face-saving acts. Face-Threatening Acts, as suggested by Brown and Levinson (1987), are communicative acts that threaten to damage an individual's public self-image or "face." An FTA takes place when speech or conduct threatens either a person's desire for approval, or positive face, and autonomy, or negative face, in social interaction and communicative exchange.

## 3. Results and Discussion

**Excerpt (1)**

1. LO: RO, stop behaving like you know everything, you are not a spirit, the allegation I made is against Ruben Abati not you
2. RO: But I have a right to speak up for my colleague because we are a team
3. LO: You might have a right but we are not in the zoo because that's how you behave
4. RO: Mr. Olayinka, Mr. Layinka, with due respect, maybe one of these days we'll talk about your own 20 million naira fraud allegations that you had to go to court for. Maybe we'll talk to that. Your own 20 million fraud allegations. Allegations against you too.

The extract between LO and RO is replete with foregrounding and face-threatening acts as conceptualized by Brown and Levinson (1987). Foregrounding in discourse analysis is a concept dealing with bringing into prominence certain linguistic elements to achieve pragmatic or rhetorical effects. In this interchange, both interlocutors strategically foreground utterances that index social power, institutional alignment, and personal defense while simultaneously using face-threatening acts to assert dominance and manage impression.

In line 1, LO's utterance-"RO, stop behaving like you know everything, you are not a spirit, the allegation I made is against Ruben Abati not you"-foregrounds an evaluative stance that directly attacks RO's positive face, that is, his desire to be appreciated and approved of. He

*Journal of Language and Pragmatics Studies,* Volume 5 Number 1 (Apr 2026), p. 57-68
e-issn 2984-6051
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58881/jlps.v3i2
https://jurnal.ympn2.or.id/index.php/JLPS

accuses RO of overstepping bounds and claiming omniscience; he performs an explicit face-threatening act, which diminishes RO's epistemic authority within public discourse. LO does this because he is defending his principal, the minister of the Federal Capital Territory, against an earlier criticism from RO's senior colleague, situating the interaction in a political and institutional power play. When defamed or alleged, politicians usually employ image repair strategies through their media aide like justification, counter accusation or corrective action to restore credibility (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2007). These strategies are deployed to enforce legitimacy or maintain perception (Rawlins, 2008).

RO's response in line 2-"But I have a right to speak up for my colleague because we are a team"-foregrounds a defense strategy which appeals to collective identity and institutional solidarity. By invoking team membership, RO tactically reclaims his positive face and frames his participation as legitimate rather than intrusive. However, LO's subsequent response in line 3-"You might have a right but we are not in the zoo because that's how you behave"-escalates the conflict through a metaphorical insult which constitutes a bald-on-record FTA. The zoological metaphor deprives RO of human decorum and rationality, thus threatening both his positive and negative face wants-his need for respect and autonomy. In line 4, RO engages in damage control through hedging-"Mr. Olayinka, with due respect…" being a marker of deference that briefly mollifies the exchange. However, the subsequent clause-"maybe one of these days we'll talk about your own 20 million naira fraud allegations"-restores this confrontational tenor, this time through counter-attack. By invoking LO's purported past misconduct, RO restores his agency through retaliatory face-threatening acts, bringing to the fore an ethical vulnerability of his interlocutor. Overall, this exchange represents how foregrounding and FTAs function as discursive tools through which political actors negotiate power, identity, and moral authority in mediated interactions.

**Excerpt (2):**

1. LO: And that is why I say, go and do a two- or three-weeks course in journalism so that you will know. You will not come to a TV station to begin to talk like you are a lawyer you should also begin to act like the human being that you are supposed to be, Stop behaving like you know everything. Is it not you that you studied Animal Anatomy
2. RO: What is wrong in studying Animal Anatomy. Can you show us your own certificate for the school you went to?
3. LO: Go and be doing documentary on animals
4. LO: Go and be doing documentary on animal and stop talking to human being, let responsible person coordinate this programme and not you
5. RO: Lere, I am not an animal, you should retract your statement and show us your certificate
6. LO: I want to listen to human being

The exchange between LO and RO is characterized by heavy face-threatening acts, therefore acting as strategies of power assertion and identity negotiation within the mediated political context. Based on Brown and Levinson's 1987 Politeness Theory, face is defined as every individual's public self-image, which comes in two varieties: positive face, or the desire for approval, and negative face, or the desire for autonomy. Each of these interlocutors in this interaction performs and counters FTAs to project authority, defend credibility, and undermine the other's social standing.

In line 1, LO's utterance-"go and do a two- or three-weeks course in journalism so that you will know. Stop behaving like you know everything. Is it not you that you studied Animal Anatomy"-constitutes a direct positive face threat. This comment undermines RO's professional competence and intellectual credibility in suggesting that his background disqualifies him from journalistic authority. The sarcastic reference to Animal Anatomy foregrounds an ad hominem attack that publicly delegitimizes RO's epistemic rights. LO also threatens RO's negative face by

*Journal of Language and Pragmatics Studies,* Volume 5 Number 1 (Apr 2026), p. 57-68
e-issn 2984-6051
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58881/jlps.v3i2
https://jurnal.ympn2.or.id/index.php/JLPS

instructing him to undertake a remedial journalism course that imposes a corrective action stripping RO of agency.

RO's utterance in line 2, "*What is wrong in studying Animal Anatomy. Can you show us your own certificate for the school you went to*?", serves as a counter-FTA. RO reproaches LO's academic qualifications to return the attack and thus to restore the balance of face. Here, a principle of reciprocal politeness violation is enacted; namely, one mitigates the damage to one's face by returning an equal affront. RO's utterance also shows a shift from the defensive to the offensive politeness strategy in that RO challenges LO's epistemic authority and moral legitimacy.

LO escalates the confrontation in lines 3 and 4—"*Go and be doing documentary on animals… stop talking to human beings*". These utterances are bald-on-record FTAs, maximizing imposition without redressive intent. Animal metaphor is a discursive dehumanization strategy that symbolically excludes RO from rational human discourse. By insisting that "responsible persons" should coordinate the programme, LO reinforces a hierarchy of moral and professional worth that positions RO as inferior and unworthy of the communicative space. In line 5, RO's "I am not an animal, you should retract your statement and show us your certificate" is a face-restoring act: he is reclaiming both his human and professional dignity. The requirement that one ought to retract functions as a metapragmatic challenge to LO's insult. However, LO reiterates the earlier dehumanization in his final line: "I want to listen to human being", as the culmination of this face aggression. Overall, this interaction highlights how FTAs act as rhetorical weapons in political talk, where norms of politeness are gratuitously violated in proactive marks of dominance, which undermine opponents and perform the self's ideological superiority.

**Excerpt (3):**

1. OR: Rufai, you need to be able to control yourself so that when someone is talking, you allow them to talk, that is how it is going to work. I talk you listen, and you talk I listen.
2. RO: Reno, I thought you are done talking. All these games you are trying to play that that is how I talk, I won't fall for that. I am a journalist, and I am doing my job
3. OR: you must learn to respect your host, allow me speak

The interaction between OR and RO takes place within the broader controversy surrounding the authenticity of the Nigerian President's certificate from Chicago State University. Within this context, the emotional tenor of the exchange can be heightened, while the two interlocutors can engage in a subtle yet escalating negotiation of face and power relations, marked by competing claims to authority and conversational control. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's 1987 FTA Theory, the interaction provides a clear illustration of how both positive and negative face needs can come under strategic contestation in a tense media encounter.

In line 1, OR's utterance "Rufai, you need to be able to control yourself so that when someone is talking, you allow them to talk…"—represents an overt negative face threat. By issuing prescriptive instructions, OR imposes some order of behavioural expectations that delimit RO conversational freedom. The utterance "I talk you listen, and you talk I listen" further entrenches a hierarchical dynamic whereby OR is the guardian of procedural decorum. Implicitly, this also threatens RO's positive face, implying an absence of professional etiquette and self-discipline.

RO's line 2 response, "Reno, I thought you are done talking… I won't fall for that. I am a journalist, and I am doing my job," is a counter-FTA that seeks to restore autonomy and defend professional identity. With the declarative "I am a journalist", RO reinstates his legitimacy and epistemic authority and resists the attempt of OR to dominate the interaction. His response simultaneously operates as a defensive and assertive strategy balancing politeness with self-affirmation.

Line 3's OR concluding remark, "You must learn to respect your host, allow me speak", reinstates the previous power imbalance through a bald-on-record FTA. The imperative "must learn" presupposes deficiency thus framing RO as disrespectful and inexperienced. Overall, the

*Journal of Language and Pragmatics Studies,* Volume 5 Number 1 (Apr 2026), p. 57-68
e-issn 2984-6051
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58881/jlps.v3i2
https://jurnal.ympn2.or.id/index.php/JLPS

exchange demonstrates how conversational control and politeness become discursive arenas for power negotiation where FTAs operate as an instrument of dominance and resistance in mediated political discourse.

**Excerpt (4):**

1. RO: After you have gone to report me to the president, I am not beholden to you, I am a journalist and I will do my job
2. DU: You are too small for me to report you to the president
3. RO: There are facts that you reported me
4. DU: You are too small, who are you to report you
5. RO: It is a known fact that you reported me
6. DU: Rufai, I can only address you, I don't have your time

The interaction is between a journalist, RO, and the Federal Minister of Works, DU, whose ministry is responsible for road construction projects in Nigeria. It discusses a coastal road project said to be shrouded in secrecy, especially about its financial figures and technicalities. Gracing the airwaves, the minister is supposed to clear the air on these issues as a way of enlightening the public. The discussion soon becomes one of power contestation, credibility, and professional identity.

Seen from the perspective of Brown and Levinson's (1987) Face-Threatening Acts (FTA) Theory, the conversation presents a contrast between positive face wants of respect and appreciation on one hand and negative face wants of freedom and no imposition on the other. Both interlocutors make use of FTAs and counter-FTAs in attempts at exerting authority, salvaging integrity, and negotiating perceived disrespect within the politically charged atmosphere.

In line 1, RO's utterance—"After you have gone to report me to the president, I am not beholden to you, I am a journalist and I will do my job"—highlights face defense and the assertion of autonomy. With the expression "not beholden," RO shields his negative face from hierarchical subordination to DU's political position. This is a positive face-restoring act in the form of an assertive clause, which reestablishes his professional credibility and independence. The embedded accusation, however, does threaten DU's positive face, implying moral compromise.

DU's second move in line 2-"You are too small for me to report you to the president"-is a bald-on-record FTA that aims to degrade RO's social and professional value. The phrase "too small" is a status-denigrating strategy that depletes RO of his self-esteem and institutional relevance. RO's insistence in lines 3 and 5-"There are facts that you reported me… It is a known fact that you reported me"-exhibits face resistance; he insists on epistemic authority and moral legitimacy despite DU's attempt at his discrediting. In line 4, DU repeats the insult, "You are too small, who are you to report you", that ramps up the impoliteness; in line 6, "Rufai, I can only address you, I don't have your time", he performs a dismissive exit strategy which reaffirms dominance through disengagement. Overall, this exchange shows how in the context of mediated political discourse, FTAs are used strategically to do dominance, resistance, and identity negotiation.

**Excerpt (5):**

1. AF: When your station reached out to me for this interview, I specifically complained about you
2. RO: You cant teach me my job
3. AF: I know you are good at attack, but I am also good at it if you want it. I know where you are and the party you are supporting
4. AF: If you give me one, I will give it back to you
5. RO: Let me finish, Mr Fayose
6. AF: Congratulations for doing your job, if you get personal with me, I will give it to you. Oseni can't insult my personality on a live television and watch it go free

*Journal of Language and Pragmatics Studies,* Volume 5 Number 1 (Apr 2026), p. 57-68
e-issn 2984-6051
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58881/jlps.v3i2
https://jurnal.ympn2.or.id/index.php/JLPS

The discussion between AF and RO is based on two politically hot topics dominating the national debate. Firstly, RO confronts AF with the accusation of anti-party activity, more precisely en bloc voting for another party's candidate. Secondly, the discussion describes the accusations that AF, previously charged with perpetrating electoral violence himself, now presents himself as a proponent of free and fair elections. In such a context, this interaction becomes a site of power contestation and personal defense.

Analysed through Brown and Levinson's 1987 Face-Threatening Acts Theory, the exchange is indicative of deliberate strategic facework and overt hostility that characterizes mediated political interviews. Both interlocutors alternately attack and defend positive face-the need for approval and respect-and negative face-the need for autonomy and freedom from imposition-by using direct insults, reciprocal threats, and conditional retaliation to negotiate professional credibility and moral authority.

AF's opening statement-"When your station reached out to me for this interview, I specifically complained about you"-is a pre-emptive FTA, setting an adversarial tone even before substantive discussion gets underway. This publicly delegitimizes RO's credibility and undermines his positive face, framing him as an objectionable interviewer. In response, RO's curt defense- "You can't teach me my job"-constitutes an explicit negative-face assertion. It rejects external interference, reclaims professional autonomy, and subtly challenges AF's authority to judge him.

AF escalates in lines 3 and 4 with conditional threats-"I know you are good at attack… I know where you are and the party you are supporting. If you give me one, I will give it back to you." These statements are bald-on-record FTAs with minimal redressive effort. By invoking personal and political knowledge, AF threatens both RO's reputation and his independence, turning the conversation into a power-laden confrontation.

RO's interruption- "Let me finish, Mr. Fayose" is a face-restoring act that asserts procedural rights and reclaims conversational control. AF's concluding remark-"Congratulations for doing your job… if you get personal with me, I will give it to you. Oseni can't insult my personality on live television and watch it go free" combines ironic politeness with retributive threats, softening and then intensifying the face assault. Overall, the exchange exemplifies how FTAs in political discourse are deliberate strategies of dominance, resistance, and identity negotiation, where civility is often sacrificed for rhetorical power.

**Face Repair**

Face repair refers to the communication strategies an individual employs to reinstate or protect their social image after a face-threatening act. Developing from Goffman's theory of facework in 1967, it involves using politeness, apologies, justification, or mitigation to rebuild interpersonal harmony and preserve mutual respect in interaction.

**Excerpt (6):**

1. RO: Can we talk about the 20 million naira allegation against you
2. LO: That 20 million allegations, I went to court. I went to court myself and the case was struck out, dismissed. The case was dismissed. If I knew that you were going to talk about it, I will bring the court judgment
3. RO: Okay

The sensitive issue of the fraud allegation against LO of 20 million naira makes up the interaction between RO and LO. The exchange offers a compelling instance of how FSAs operate within a potentially face-threatening context. Borrowing from Goffman's 1967 concept of facework and Brown and Levinson's 1987 politeness theory, face-saving acts are communicative strategies employed to maintain or restore one's social image when it is under threat.

In line 1, RO's question- "Can we talk about the 20 million naira allegation against you"- is a potentially face-threatening act in that it brings up an issue that can damage LO's good public image and moral credibility. In this case, however, the use of the modal verb "can" by RO reduces the degree of imposition; the question sounds like a request rather than an accusation. Such

*Journal of Language and Pragmatics Studies,* Volume 5 Number 1 (Apr 2026), p. 57-68
e-issn 2984-6051
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58881/jlps.v3i2
https://jurnal.ympn2.or.id/index.php/JLPS

linguistic mitigation is, therefore, an off-record politeness strategy that allows LO to respond without being confronted right away.

LO's response in line 2"That 20 million allegations, I went to court… the case was struck out, dismissed" is a very strong face-saving act in restoring both his positive face and moral integrity. In this instance, he takes back credibility and shows transparency by emphasizing that he willingly went to court and that the case was dismissed. The emphasis in "the case was dismissed" reinforces his innocence; it is as if he is repairing damage to his reputation. To add to this, he says, "If I knew that you were going to talk about it, I would bring the court judgment"; he supports his argument with a pre-emptive justification, where he indicates preparedness and accountability.

RO's final utterance, "Okay," is an acknowledging and thus discourse-closing act that maintains conversational harmony for both participants. In this brief but emotionally-laden exchange, face-saving acts are used as a resource for the social task at hand-public-image management, the reduction of embarrassing situations, and the maintenance of professional decorum in journalistic interviews.

**Excerpt (7):**

1. RO: You yourself have been captured on tape where you are encouraging electoral violence and we all remember that experience
2. AF: Can I just correct you there, I take exception that to the statement that you aid I encouraged electoral violence, although I was captured on tape but I wasn't encouraging violence
3. AF: You as a journalist is not equally living above board

This interaction between RO and AF illustrates the strategic use of FSAs to manage one's public image during a politically sensitive interview. Based on Goffman's theory of facework and Brown and Levinson's politeness model, FSAs are communicative strategies employed by individuals to defend, restore, or maintain their social "face" after a potential or actual FTA.

In line 1, RO's statement itself a strong positive face threat was directly challenging AF's moral credibility and political integrity: "You yourself have been captured on tape where you are encouraging electoral violence". In this case, the positive face threat is strengthened by the reference to public evidence, "captured on tape", which implies guilt and public disapproval. By leveling this accusation, AF is forced into a defensive posture in which face-saving to repair breached social esteem becomes necessary.

AF's immediate response in line 2, "Can I just correct you there, I take exception to the statement that you said I encouraged electoral violence…", is a calculated face-saving act. Here, the phrase "Can I just correct you" is a politeness strategy signaling restraint and reason rather than confrontation. In saying "I take exception", AF clearly indicates displeasure without loss of composure, moral high ground, or association with the said act. His explanation, "Although I was captured on tape, but I wasn't encouraging violence", is thus an explanatory defense, in which the context of the accusation is reframed to preserve positive face and political image.

In line 3, AF's counter-claim, "You as a journalist are not equally living above board", is both a face-saving and retaliatory act. In shifting the accusation to RO's professional conduct, AF tries toward equal moral standing, attempting to reduce the asymmetry of accusation. He does so by saving his face while undermining RO's credibility.

Overall, the exchange serves to illustrate how political figures use FSAs to bargain over accusations, defend moral legitimacy, and maintain their composure under the limelight of public scrutiny.

**Face Saving Acts**

The Face-Saving Acts are the communicative strategies of individuals to save or restore their social image after the occurrence of any potential or actual face threat. Based on the ideas of Goffman (1967) and Brown and Levinson (1987), FSAs maintain dignity, reduce conflict, and preserve harmony during interaction.

*Journal of Language and Pragmatics Studies,* Volume 5 Number 1 (Apr 2026), p. 57-68
e-issn 2984-6051
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58881/jlps.v3i2
https://jurnal.ympn2.or.id/index.php/JLPS

**Excerpt (8):**

1. DU: You don't understand anything, I am a professor in this field
2. RO: What university gave you professorship in engineering
3. DU: I am a professor in practice
4. RO: Okay
5. DU: Rufai does not know what he is saying, this guy makes me laugh because he doesn't know what he is saying
6. RO: What about the cost per kilometer of the one you are on currently
7. DU: These are elementary questions and it makes no sense, if I have to teach Rufai my job, he will pay

The exchange between DU and RO provides an excellent example of FSAs in action as interlocutors negotiate credibility, expertise, and reputational risk. Drawing on Goffman's 1967 facework and Brown and Levinson's 1987 politeness framework, FSAs in this case serve to reinforce positive and negative face through the assertion of authority, reframing, minimization, and strategic disengagement. DU's opening-"You don't understand anything, I am a professor in this field"-is principally an assertive FSA aimed at restoring and enhancing his positive face (desire to be respected). By invoking the title "professor," DU projects institutional legitimacy and expertise to counter any implied incompetence. This claim functions as reputational repair: it reframes his interlocutor as ignorant while simultaneously pre-empting further challenges to DU's competence.

RO's immediate challenge-"What university gave you professorship in engineering"-is a fact-checking FSA that undermines DU's repair attempt. Whereas in the previous sequence, he escalated with insult, here RO asks for evidence, thereby shifting the burden of proof to DU and threatening DU's positive face by suggesting the title may be dubious. This is also a strategic move in face-management: it subtly converts an ad personal claim into an empirical one and thus enables RO to attack the credibility of DU indirectly. DU's response-"I am a professor in practice"-is a reframing FSA designed to save face without providing documentary evidence. By qualifying his professorship as "in practice," DU both broadens the meaning of expertise and deflects the strict institutional standard RO invoked. The hedged claim mitigates the direct loss of face while still sustaining authority.

DU's subsequent comments--making fun of RO ("this guy makes me laugh…") and calling questions "elementary"--are defensive FSAs that double as face-threatening moves. They seek to neutralize the challenge by belittling the questioner and thereby restore DU's positive face by denigrating the challenger. The closing threat--"if I have to teach Rufai my job, he will pay"--combines intimidation with a face-protective logic: positioning DU as both superior and in control.

RO's curt "Okay" and the direct question about the cost per kilometer serve here as restraint and recalibration calm FSAs that redirect the exchange to technical specifics, thereby exposing any empirical vulnerabilities in DU's claims. Conclusively, this exchange proves that FSAs are not always conciliatory; they can be assertive, reframing, or even aggressive, but their central aim stays the same-to maintain or restore an acceptable social image and to manage asymmetries of expertise and power in public discourse.

### 3.2 Discussion

This section discusses the implications of the findings in relation to existing scholarship on facework, political interviews, and media discourse. By situating the observed facework practices within broader theoretical debates, the discussion highlights how Nigerian broadcast political interviews challenge conventional assumptions about politeness, neutrality, and journalistic conduct.

The analysis demonstrates that face-threatening acts in Nigerian political interviews are not interactional aberrations but professionally sanctioned resources for accountability journalism. This finding aligns with international studies on adversarial interviewing, which

*Journal of Language and Pragmatics Studies,* Volume 5 Number 1 (Apr 2026), p. 57-68
e-issn 2984-6051
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58881/jlps.v3i2
https://jurnal.ympn2.or.id/index.php/JLPS

identify confrontation as a normative feature of political interviews rather than a violation of communicative etiquette (Clayman & Heritage, 2002). However, the Nigerian context intensifies this adversariality due to heightened public distrust of political elites and the media's perceived responsibility to act as a watchdog.

Unlike ordinary conversation, where politeness is often equated with mitigation and deference, the data show that journalistic professionalism is indexed through directness, insistence, and epistemic challenge. Rufai Oseni's bald-on-record FTAs function to publicly test political claims, restrict evasive manoeuvres, and re-centre the interaction on issues of public accountability. In this sense, face-threatening behaviour becomes a marker of journalistic integrity rather than interpersonal hostility.

While Brown and Levinson's (1987) Face Acts Theory provides a useful analytical vocabulary for identifying facework strategies, the findings underscore the limitations of its universalist assumptions. The model predicts that speakers will generally seek to minimize face threats, yet the Nigerian broadcast data reveal systematic and strategic amplification of face threats by journalists. This apparent contradiction can only be resolved by recognising the role of institutional norms and interactional goals in shaping politeness behaviour.

Consistent with critiques by Watts (2003) and Locher and Watts (2005), the study shows that politeness is not an inherent property of linguistic forms but an evaluative judgement grounded in context. What might be interpreted as impolite or aggressive in everyday interaction is recontextualised as legitimate and even expected within adversarial political interviews. Thus, the study supports a discursive and context-sensitive approach to politeness, where face-threatening acts are evaluated relative to institutional roles and communicative purposes.

The findings further illuminate how facework mediates power relations between journalists and political actors. Although politicians typically occupy positions of structural power, the interactional design of the interview temporarily redistributes authority to the journalist, who controls turn allocation, topic progression, and epistemic framing. Through FTAs, journalists symbolically invert power relations by placing political actors in defensive positions, thereby enacting public accountability.

Political actors' reliance on face-repair and face-saving strategies reflects their awareness of reputational vulnerability under conditions of media scrutiny. Appeals to legality, expertise, and institutional validation function as attempts to reassert authority and moral legitimacy. However, the frequent failure of these strategies to neutralise journalistic confrontation suggests that accountability interviews operate under interactional rules that privilege public interest over individual face concerns.

By foregrounding African broadcast media, this study extends political interview research beyond its traditional Euro-American focus. The findings demonstrate that adversarial journalism in Nigeria is shaped by local socio-political histories, media cultures, and expectations of public accountability. Consequently, models of political discourse derived from Western contexts must be adapted rather than uncritically applied to African media environments.

The study also challenges deficit-oriented views of African media discourse that interpret confrontation as unprofessional or chaotic. Instead, Nigerian political interviews emerge as structured, rule-governed interactions in which facework is strategically mobilised to serve democratic functions.

## 4. Conclusion

This study has examined facework practices in Nigerian political interviews, focusing on how journalists and political actors strategically deploy face-threatening, face-saving, and face-repair acts within adversarial broadcast encounters. By foregrounding the journalist as an active interactional agent rather than a neutral mediator, the study demonstrates that face-threatening

behaviour in Nigerian political interviews functions as a professionally sanctioned mechanism for public accountability rather than a breakdown of politeness norms.

The analysis reveals that journalists' use of direct confrontation, epistemic challenge, and interactional control constitutes a form of institutional facework aligned with the watchdog role of the media. In response, political actors engage in complex face-repair and face-saving strategies aimed at restoring credibility, reasserting authority, and managing reputational risk under public scrutiny. These interactional dynamics highlight the centrality of facework to power negotiation and professional identity construction in mediated political discourse.

Theoretically, the study contributes to pragmatics and political discourse analysis by demonstrating the contextual limits of universalist politeness models. While Brown and Levinson's Face Acts Theory remains analytically useful, the findings underscore the need for context-sensitive interpretations of facework that account for institutional roles, communicative goals, and socio-cultural norms. Politeness in adversarial political interviews, as shown in this study, cannot be reduced to linguistic mitigation but must be understood in relation to accountability-driven interactional practices.

Empirically, the study extends political interview research to African broadcast media, challenging Eurocentric dominance in the field and illustrating how Nigerian media discourse offers valuable insights into the relationship between language, power, and democracy. By reframing confrontation as a normative and productive feature of journalistic practice, the study counters deficit-oriented perspectives on African media communication.

Future research may build on this study by incorporating comparative analyses across media platforms, languages, or national contexts, as well as by integrating multimodal features such as prosody, gesture, and visual framing. Such work would further illuminate how facework operates across diverse political communication ecologies.

## References

Acheampong, R. (2024). Impact of social media on mainstream journalism in Ghana. *Journal of Language, Literature, Social and Cultural Studies*, *2*(1), 20–30. https://doi.org/10.58881/jllscs.v2i1.144

Adegoju, A. (2005). A stylistic study of the speeches of selected Nigerian political leaders. *Journal of Political Discourse Studies, 3*(2), 45–62.

Adegoju, A., & Oyeleye, L. (2011). Stylistic and pragmatic variation in Nigerian political discourse. *Language, Discourse & Society, 1*(1), 40–56.

Ademilokun, M. (2020). Discourse strategies in Nigerian online political communication. *African Journal of Communication, 6*(1), 25–44.

Ademilokun, M., & Olateju, M. (2016). Multimodal discourse analysis of selected political posters in Nigeria's 2015 elections. *Communication Studies, 4*(2), 21–38.

Akinrinlola, A., Eze, C., & Okoro, D. (2025). Speech acts and identity negotiation in Nigerian political communication. *Journal of Pragmatics and Discourse Studies, 9*(1), 22–39.

Akinwotu, S. A. (2013). A speech act analysis of selected political speeches of President Goodluck Jonathan. *International Journal of English Linguistics, 3*(3), 46–58.

Akinwotu, S. A. (2021). A pragma-discursive study of presidential and gubernatorial speeches during the EndSARS protest in Nigeria. *Journal of Pragmatics and Discourse Studies, 5*(2), 44–63.

Alo, M. A. (2006). A critical discourse analysis of political discourse in the Nigerian print media. *Journal of Linguistic Studies, 8*(2), 1–20.

Alo, M. A., & Odebunmi, A. (2010). Deixis and presupposition in inaugural speeches of selected Nigerian presidents. *Language, Society and Culture, 30*, 123–132.

Aruku, K. J., Ikangkang , J., Utsu, C. U., & Emuru, L. E. (2025). Cultural influences on crisis communication strategies in Nigeria. *Journal of Language, Literature, Social and Cultural Studies*, *3*(2), 158–166. https://doi.org/10.58881/jllscs.v3i2.350

Beard, A. (2000). *The language of politics*. Routledge.

Benoit, W. L. (1995). *Accounts, excuses, and apologies: A theory of image restoration strategies*. State University of New York Press.

Bouvier, G., & Machin, D. (2021). The visual politics of social media: Power and participation. *Discourse & Communication, 15*(2), 157–174.
Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.
Cap, P., & Okulska, U. (2018). *Analyzing genres in political communication: Theory and practice*. John Benjamins.
Charteris-Black, J. (2011). *Politicians and rhetoric: The persuasive power of metaphor* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
Chilton, P. (2004). *Analysing political discourse: Theory and practice*. Routledge.
Chilton, P. (2017). *Language, space and mind: The conceptual geometry of linguistic meaning*. Cambridge University Press.
Chilton, P., & Schäffner, C. (2002). *Politics as text and talk: Analytic approaches to political discourse*. John Benjamins.
Coombs, W. T. (2007). Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of situational crisis communication theory. *Corporate Reputation Review, 10*(3), 163–176.
Demata, M. (2019). A great and beautiful wall: Donald Trump's discursive construction of the US–Mexico border. *Discourse & Society, 30*(3), 263–284.
Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.
Fairclough, N. (2016). *Language and power* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior*. Anchor Books.
Hassan, J. T., Baba, D., Ibrahim, A. A., & Elisha, J. D. (2024). Media's role, challenges, and ethics in journalism amid socio-political conflicts in contemporary society. *Journal of Language, Literature, Social and Cultural Studies*, *2*(1), 46–58. https://doi.org/10.58881/jllscs.v2i1.151
Ilie, C. (2019). Pragmatics and rhetoric in political discourse: From speeches to debates. *Journal of Language and Politics, 18*(4), 509–526.
KhosraviNik, M. (2022). Social media discourse, (dis)information and populism. *Critical Discourse Studies, 19*(2), 113–131.
Lakoff, G. (2004). *Don't think of an elephant!* Chelsea Green.
Lazar, M. M. (2018). *Feminist critical discourse analysis*. Palgrave Macmillan.
Nwachukwu, E. L. (2025). The use of adverbs in Ngor-Okpala dialect of Igbo . *Journal of Language, Literature, Social and Cultural Studies*, *3*(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.58881/jllscs.v3i1.217
Odebunmi, A. (2017a). Politeness and impoliteness strategies in Nigerian political interviews. *Journal of Language and Discourse Studies, 11*(1), 12–34.
Odebunmi, A. (2017b). Pragmatics of political interviews and media discourse in Nigeria. *Ibadan Journal of English Studies, 13*(1), 55–73.
Opeibi, B. O. (2009). *Discourse, politics and the 1993 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria*. Cuvillier Verlag.
Oyeleye, L. (2013). Pragmatic features of televised political debates in Nigeria. *African Journal of Communication, 5*(2), 55–68.
Rawlins, B. (2008). Give the emperor a mirror: Toward developing a stakeholder measurement of organizational transparency. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 21*(1), 71–99.
Reisigl, M. (2020). Argumentation and ideology in political discourse. *Critical Discourse Studies, 17*(3), 245–263.
Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (2001). *Discourse and discrimination: Rhetorics of racism and antisemitism*. Routledge.
Taiwo, R. (2007). Language, ideology and power relations in Nigerian newspaper headlines. *Nebula, 4*(1), 218–245.
van Dijk, T. A. (1997). *Discourse as social interaction*. Sage.
van Dijk, T. A. (2018). *Discourse and knowledge: A sociocognitive approach*. Cambridge University Press.
Wodak, R. (2009). *The discourse of politics in action: Politics as usual*. Palgrave Macmillan.
Wodak, R. (2021). *The politics of fear: The shameless normalization of far-right discourse* (2nd ed.). Sage.
Zappavigna, M. (2018). *Searchable talk: Hashtags and social media metadiscourse*. Bloomsbury Academic.