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The Italian *Bella Figura* – a challenge for politeness theories

Abstract: This paper examines the Italian folk concept of *bella figura* in the framework of politeness-theories and the various binary conceptions it provides for explaining the nature of human communication. *BF* is a culture-specific understanding of self-projection in everyday discourse: It is both, a cognitive concept concerning the "beautiful" embodiment of self, and a performative concept concerning the active "figuring out" of a *bella figura* in order to avoid its contrary, the *brutta figura.* Thus, the *figura*-concept represents a pragmatic principle for acting in line with socially accepted norms setting out a reference frame for judging social endeavours according to a culture-inherent value system. Accordingly, affinities can be assumed between the *figura*-concept and the sociopragmatic core notions 'face' and 'politeness'. A comparison of the *figura*-concept with the respective first- and second-order conceptions of the two, reflects a cultural version of 'impression management' conceiving an image of self which coincides with Goffman's, but not at all with Brown and Levinson's face-concept. This makes it difficult to identify *figura* in relation to politeness. Connections and disconnections are discussed alongside the paradigmatic binary scales and the positive/negative value-attributes. Finally, the findings are verified by comparing the use of the respective expressions as evaluation tools.

Keywords: face; facework; politeness; impression management; identity

1 Introduction

This paper examines the Italian concept of *bella figura* in the framework of pragmatic politeness theories with the aim to examine the binary issues they provide for explaining and investigating human communication processes.

The concept of *bella figura* (henceforth *BF*) is considered the quintessence of *italianità.* It represents a particular art of self-understanding which bears on Italian lifestyle affecting peoples' outer appearance and inner attitude with effects on social practice. The constant concern to make a *bella figura* in order to avoid its contrary,

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the *brutta figura* (henceforth *BrF*), establishes a pragmatic guideline in Italian life. The respective binary expressions *fare bella figura* versus *fare brutta figura* represent acts of evaluation commonly used in everyday language. Hence, *BF* turns out to be a complex norm-oriented principle that is supposed to leave significant traces in social interaction involving communicative behaviour and language use.

Though omnipresent in Italian everyday life, the concept of *BF* has never had much scholarly attention (except in Held 2016, 2022): it seems to be cognitively so inherent in Italian culture that people are unaware of their continuous desire to "make a good figure" by looking and acting properly in any given situation. That this makes life "beautiful" – the famous *bella vita* – at least more beautiful than elsewhere, is rather noticed from outside Italian culture.[1] That is why we owe the attempt to define its nature mostly to travelogues, guidebooks and Internet blogs[2] praising Italians' special sense of life and preventing foreigners from misunderstandings and – worse – from failed business-negotiations and intercultural relations. But most of these folk comments are limited to stereotypical ascriptions considering *BF* as, for example, a "deep-rooted philosophy embedded within Italian people" or "the fundamental trait of the national character", or even deriding it as "Italy's unwritten law" and "the Italian national sport". Clear references to the phenomenology of this slippery concept are missing.

An analysis of Google entries,[3] however, revealed two issues that struck my attention. It is these which justify the focus of this paper, i.e., to introduce the *figura*-concept into the context of politeness research and to question its essence in the lens of the binary assumptions this research has established and vigorously sustained throughout the different epistemological stages.

The issues of interest are:
– the explicit equation of BF as "the Italian face" (e.g., Nardini 1999: 7),
– the frequently mentioned connection of fare BF with "civility" as the respect of social rules and good manners (e.g., Ramos-Ortiz et al. 2020: 2).

The first argument leads me to compare the concept of *BF* with the concept of face; the second to examine its connection with the concept of politeness. My argumentation

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1 The only insights into the concept of *BF* are given in the context of Italian immigration to the USA. See Nardini (1999) and Scannell-Guida (2020).

2 A range of websites have been consulted from 2016 on and exploited in my papers on *BF* (cf. Held 2016, 2022). In the references I list only those which can still be retrieved in December 2023.

3 The last Google search from January 7th, 2pm, returned ca. 44,700,000 entries on "bella figura"; going through 25 pages, there are only a small number of findings concerning the Italian concept itself; the main entries represent labels of business companies and commercial products, or they refer to physical qualities of persons and institutions. Other entries are about Yasmina Reza's play "Bella figura" from 2015. *BF* thus has since long passed into an internationally used trademark keeping, nevertheless, its connotations of *italianità*.

unfolds as follows: after a brief characterization of *BF* as a historically developed, multilayered concept of self-understanding (Section 1), I try to grasp its pragmatic force between 'impression management' and 'relational work' (Section 2). Being both interactional processes where face and politeness are involved, it is worth comparing *figura* with the concept of face (Section 3) and the concept of politeness (Section 4), respectively. Though there is a common metaphorical nucleus in both, the comparison discloses conceptual discrepancies due to the differentiation in first-/second-order notions, on the one hand, and to the unequal positive/negative valences, on the other. The conclusion of these considerations (Section 5) supports arguments for the disentangling of *face* from *politeness* and also for emphasizing the role of folk conceptions – like *BF* – as a useful framework for introspecting both culture-inherent and universal practices of social interaction.

2 What is *Bella Figura*?

BF is a lay-notion with a two-fold meaning. It refers to the abstract idea of a perfect embodiment, i.e., the literal beautiful figure as the ideal conception of oneself; at the same time, it represents the continuous attempt to "make" *BF* in front of the social world. Hence, it is not only a matter of cognition, but also a matter of performance.

Italian language is the best testimony of this conceptual difference: there is on the one hand, the lexical notion of *BF* in itself; on the other hand, there is the vernacular expression, *fare BF*, which, together with its contrary, *fare BrF*, creates a frequently used pair of complementary idiomatic expressions that reflect an inner-cultural value-system.

Thus, *BF* is a complex concept representing a multileveled frame of reference. Splitting up the different levels – as in Figure 1 – displays a hierarchical, but gradually intertwined scaling.

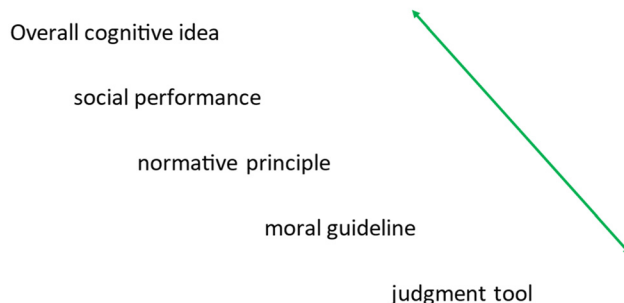The *figura*-concept as a multilevelled frame of reference:

Overall cognitive idea

    social performance

        normative principle

           moral guideline

               judgment tool

Figure 1: Scaling the levels of the *figura*-concept.

Explaining the figure, *BF* is all at once
– an ideal cognitive construct, due to the idea of a "beautiful" embodiment of self that wants to be (visually) perceived or conspicuously noticed according to the "taste" of the community;
– a performative category, figuring out this ideal self-concept in everyday life. As such it emerges in many ways, i.e., by affecting the public space in architecture and lifestyle (and all that Ramos-Ortiz et al. [2020: 2] call "appearance-related services and products"), by influencing personal self-presentation in looks, styling, outfit and poise, by bearing on social behaviour, relational endeavours and conventional rituals, representing in all issues the sense of "beauty" considered innate in Italians (see Gundle 2007);
– a normative principle: "beauty" being the main concern of social presence, it is automatically confronted with the fear of its contrary, "ugliness", so that self-presentation and self-figuration turns into an ethically bound principle of social behaviour;
– a moral guideline: in the end, the duality between a positive and a negative view creates the value system of Italian society. Linked to the binary idiomatic expressions, the *figura*-principle becomes a handy assessment tool for commenting on and judging social behaviour alongside the culturally inherent moral scale.

3 Approximating the pragmatics of *Bella Figura*

Splitting the *figura*-concept into different, but constantly interdependent levels reveals the character of *BF* as a sense-making process which requires "a pragmatic know-how of Italian communication (verbal and non-verbal)" (Scannel Guida 2020: 1). As such, it is likely to deliver a kind of pre-figured frame by which Italians understand and interpret their symbolically mediated, but historically grounded, world.

Interestingly, it is the wording of the idiomatic expression itself that gives us hints to approaching the pragmatic impact of *BF* more precisely. Above all, *fare BF* is a self-oriented, apparently unidirectional attitude. Additionally, having in its core the constant desire to make a perfect impression of oneself, it is a way to socialize by being not only perceived but also acknowledged and appreciated by others, these others, however, are understood as both the wider cultural environment and reflexive judgement of self. *BF* can thus be identified as what Goffman (1959) calls "impression management", covering all mechanisms that concern the dramaturgy of self-presentation: people act out a perfect embodiment of themselves, they literally (per)form the image they want to give themselves as seen through the eyes of the other.

Hence, in Italian culture, mirroring self in the other is not only a self-constituting matter, but it is experienced as a permanent constraint to good relating. Therefore,

BF can also be considered as relational; "relational" understood as relating/connecting with and, consequently, dis-relating/separating from the respective reference group (see Arundale 2010, 2020). But, since members of Italian society typically aspire to display themselves in the public realm, *fare BF* is doubtlessly a reciprocal interplay that is invested in order to keep in balance both the interpersonal constellation and the in-group/out-group-belonging.

Accordingly, the constant concern for a *BF* can be understood as relational work (see Locher and Watts 2005; Watts 2003). Though being apparently individual, the *BF*-concept is a common social practice having its own particular social effects, purposes and motivations. In some way, it bears on "Italian identity" or – as some of the examined internet posts even remark – it effectively *is* the "Italian identity". Tying on identity,[4] *BF* turns out to be exactly as Mendoza-Denton (2002: 475) characterizes this concept as "neither attribute nor possession, but an individual and collective-level process of semiosis". It thus reveals itself as an active, but constantly fluctuating form of negotiation within a larger, but situationally differentiated evaluation frame.

According to these assumptions, *BF* is indeed an identity-constituting concept. It effectuates both a rule-based mindset, which Italians handle automatically when acting in public, and a controlling instance of "right" interactional behaviour. As the latter, it represents a reliable means for evaluating proper social conduct alongside a scale which – in the case of Italian culture – varies between esthetic and ethical benchmarks. Thus, *BF* becomes a highly important metapragmatic tool which – intentionally expressed – gives insight into how a culture manages and measures its social performance, and what the "symbolic" processes which keep it going are.

Having identified its character as self-embodiment that conditions specific social behaviour, *BF* can now be compared with the two sociopragmatic key notions, "face" and "politeness". But this means considering an epistemic problem that has long troubled politeness theory: this is the distinction between the two concepts as first- and second-order notions; the former implying the emic or folk meaning of the term (face1 and politeness1), the latter its etic or scientific conceptualization (face2 and politeness2). To become helpful analytical categories, a more fine-grained differentiation of perspectives is needed, that is the way the notions are effectively understood and thus identified in social interaction varies respectively between the immediate participants, the cultural insiders or cultural outsiders, and – most importantly – the already biased researcher him/herself (see Kádár and Haugh 2013: 81–82).

It will be challenging to scrutinize the interconnection and contradiction of the *figura*-concept with these notional conditions and their analytical affordances.

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4 For work on identity in sociopragmatics, see Locher (2008), Garcès-Conejos Blitvich and Georgakopoulou (2021), Garcès-Conejos Blitvich and Sifianou (2017) and Spencer-Oatey (2007).

4 Exploring the *figura*-concept in relation to face

Lay-comments on *BF* generally refer to face in its two understandings – on the one hand, *BF* is ascribed as the constant desire to have face, to present one's face or, more precisely, to show a good face to an audience and thus is likely to represent the commonsense understanding; on the other hand, overtly stating that *BF* is the "Italian face" (Nardini 1999: 7) refers to the academic term implying a theoretical understanding. However, this is just a first impression; both strands of comparison need further reflection which have to be made in the intersection between semantics and pragmatics.

There is doubtless a legitimate relationship between face and *figura* as they both are

– identity-boundary metaphors of human embodiment,
– dual concepts,
– in close connection with self-presentation,
– and thus related to the construction of self-image. (see Held 2016)

From a semantic point of view, viz. face1 in its physical reference, however, there are notable differences between the two:

As the common expressions *fare BF/BrF* show, *BF* is a culture-immanent lay-concept which is completely transparent to its users. It is a holistic metaphor lexically productive and well-integrated in the Italian language by explicitly referring to the constant ambition to perform the "beautiful figure" according to both esthetic qualities and ethical values; in Italian culture, people literally want to "embody" the *bella figura* by figuring out themselves appropriately to the situation.

Face, on the contrary, is an English term. Though not commonly used in everyday English, at least not as a normative principle, for Anglophones it is nevertheless a comprehensive metaphorical concept. Referring to the most significant part of the human body (face1), the scientific abstraction (face2) can be easily drawn from the "face-to-face"–exposure in social encountering and its consequences on understanding self as a reflexive communication phenomenon. Thus, when relating *BF* to face, a difference has to be made between its affinity to face as a first-order and as a second-order concept, albeit that both are of metaphorical character.

From a pragmatic point of view, the comparison takes only the second-order concepts of face into account. *Figura* can be efficiently distinguished from face in relation to the core understandings of Goffman (1967) and of Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987, hereafter B&L); the first forging face as the presentation of a venerable self-image due to a dramaturgically conceived role-play on a public scene; the latter altering its essence into a binary normative construct which, in any kind of social

encounter, rational persons are constantly defending with correlative binary strate-gies, i.e., the famous positive-/negative-politeness. This duality does not refer to moral values (good vs. bad), but to individual wants in conflict between personal freedom and social affiliation. Whilst in B&L's view interactions thus consist of the constant attempt to comply with both, the positive-face want of being acknowledged and the negative-face want of being unimpeded by the others, in Goffman's view interactions are a ritual roleplay with the aim to maintain a certain interactional order.

Both conceptions conceive social encounters as a negotiation of selves emerging particularly in situations of threat and conflict – according to Goffman, it is to prevent critical incidents, according to B&L, it rather is to reduce the danger of the famous face-threatening acts by correlating the calculated imposition with the respective communicative effort. In the end, what people are doing when relating in communication is trying to care for a reciprocal well-being. As this is a culturally learned effort, it is regarded as deliberate work rightly called by Goffman facework; yet, calling it politeness, as B&L do, is intriguing. It not only opens the dilemma between the first-/second-order notion, but touches on a culturally embedded, value-related concept stirring up the hot debate among pragmaticians ever since B&L's connected face and politeness under the universality claim.

So, positing the *figura*-concept within the sociopragmatic framework leads automatically to the intersection of arguments concerned with face, on the one hand, and politeness, on the other; both point out problems which, in comparison with *BF*, can be dismantled in the wake of different epistemic visions.

Specifically, introspecting the pragmatic nature of *BF*, it is striking how Goffman's famous definition of face can be adopted without any significant changes. In Goffman's own words (1967: 5), we can rather say that *BF* (as the Italian face!) is "the positive social value" Italians claim for themselves by constantly caring to present "an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes". When Goffman at the beginning of his paper *On face-work* (1967) defines face as "an image that others may share as when a person makes a good showing for (…) himself", he puts the focus on "showing". And in fact, Italians like to "show" themselves (cf. Barzini 1964/2008). They "demonstrate" what they are with the constant ambition to make a good figure and to avoid a bad figure. The *figura*-principle thus adequately represents the line "others assume [a person] has taken during a particular contact". Understanding the line as acting out "a pattern of verbal and non-verbal acts by which [a person] expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself", Goffman links the cognitive conception of face to its manifesta-tion "in [the] world of social encounters" (Goffman 1967: 5). Could there be a better fitting definition of the *figura*-concept?

Thus, *BF* coincides perfectly with Goffman's conception of face and its expression in facework. With Goffman, we are not told what these "approved social attributes" are

and how they may be (non-)verbally expressed, but in Italian culture his observations get a clearer profile: by trying to *fare BF*, Italians are constantly committed to this line turning social encounters into a shared performance of a "beautiful figuring out" of the involved selves. Originating in humanism where self-awareness was definitely discovered, this concerned primarily the outer self, the *bella apparenza*, that is, look and poise. Over time, it changed into an inner attitude that constituted an ethically bound behaviour accordingly evaluated as good or right. Originally deriving from its esthetic nature, *BF* is namely a question of visual demonstration, in Goffman's (1967: 13) terms of self-perceptiveness; it concerns a self that envisions and reproduces itself through the others' perception and veneration.

Whilst face is rather a concept that is emotionally evolved in the ongoing interaction, *figura* is the noticeable compliance with a line; it influences public behaviour like a binding rule. What distinguishes the two concepts is the value-attribution, values understood within a system of positive versus negative poles: *BF* is bound to moral values, whilst face is bound to interactional values. So, stating that *BF* is the "Italian face" is understandable in Goffman's terms. We now turn to investigating whether and how it applies in B&L's terms.

5 Exploring the *figura*-concept in relation to politeness

B&L's definition of face as "the public self-image that every member (of a society) wants to claim for himself, consisting in two related aspects" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61), i.e., the famous positive and negative face and the claims to be constantly respected in communication, brings politeness into play. Considering it as a conflict-avoidance behaviour that keeps social relating generally well-going, the two authors have basically created the famous second-order conception of politeness2. However, filling it up with the various redressive strategies that prevent the two face-aspects from disregard has caused the still ongoing debate on their cross-cultural validity and, in consequence, on the understanding of the notion from an intercultural angle. What B&L identify as positive and negative politeness strategies in their famous list (see Brown and Levinson 1987: 101–227) is interpreted by mingling both conceptions, the culture-inherent politeness1 and the abstract politeness2; the one coming from the recognition of vertical power-relations, the other directed to the interactional recognition of individual wants. Yet, none of these matches the *BF*-principle, though there are several strategies mentioned in B&L's list that coincide with *fare BF/BrF* and the respective evaluative acts they represent.

So, what is in the end the relationship between the *figura*-concept and politeness? If we agree in recognizing in *BF* "the Italian face", a certain connection with politeness cannot be denied: regarding *BF* as a face-preserving attitude in general is in accordance with the general lay notion, which tends to emphasise consideration for others; regarding its prevailing self-concern, however, is against it. So, defining *BF* in terms of politeness depends on the values this principle implies in the respective culture. That is why the two concepts have to be critically revisited taking into account the binary issues assigned to them.

Figure 2 illustrates what binaries – between a negative and a positive pole – are of interest to place the *figura*-concept in a complex model of human communication and to evaluate their significance in relation to the norms and values they convey. Taking relational work as the super-ordinate frame allows us to show the different parts *BF* and politeness occupy therein:

At first glance, we notice that the validity of the binary issues differs notably according to whether social interaction is regarded as (im)politeness or more generally as relational work. Though both tend to recognize and justify right versus wrong behaviour, they work on different levels, concern different normative categories, and thus imply different discursive evaluations. Following Figure 2, we argue what understanding of politeness is needed to be in accordance or disaccordance with the *figura*-concept which is ranged in the centre of the binary scale.

What is significant is Watts' (2003) recognition that social practice actually takes place between two cornerstones, politeness versus impoliteness. These consist of consciously realized actions, the one positively marked, the other negatively marked.
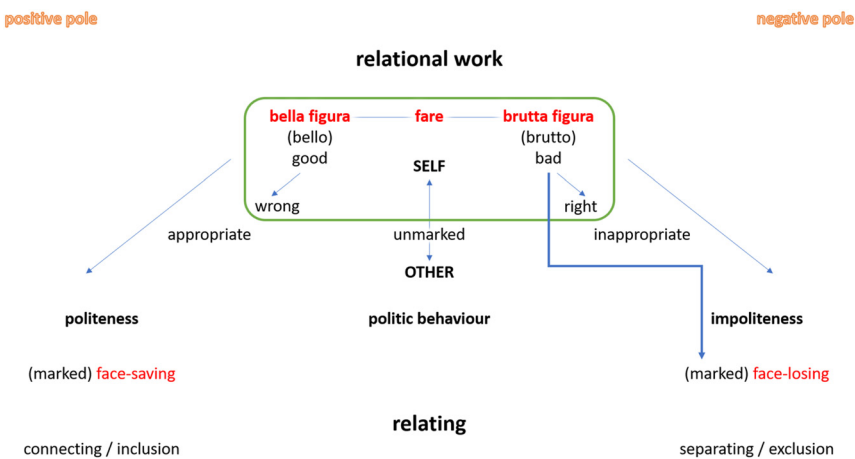

Figure 2: *BF* in the lens of the sociopragmatic binaries.

If and how they are recognized is evidenced in the reactions participants manifest in the ongoing interaction. For Watts politeness and impoliteness are intentionally set benchmarks of behaviour; however in between there is a span of neutral, socially expected forms termed "politic behaviour". These forms are normally unmarked and are regarded as appropriately applied in the given situation. With that, Watts (2003) established pragmatic appropriateness as an important category of assessment which is independent of the observer's (im)politeness2-marking.

And in fact, as a major part of the investigated lay comments associate *BF* with, for example "having good manners, upholding social class, following codes of conduct, or showing appreciation, respect and civility" (Nardini 1999: 10), they sustain Watts' concept of politic behaviour. When Italians "make a good figure", they act according to the culturally acquired knowledge, they do – verbally or non-verbally – what is conventionally expected in the situation. Interestingly, most of the times, this behaviour is noticed only when disrupted.

So, it is not enough to reduce *BF* simply to appropriate behaviour. There are always norms and values at stake, so a further distinction on a positive-negative scale is necessary. But the crucial point is that the binary terms positive versus negative overlap and create confusion: whilst in regard to *BF* the polarity refers to ethical values implying a culture-inherent qualitative judgement; in pragmatics it concerns the double-aspects regulating interpersonal communication as a combination of positive versus negative rites. The problem is that both binary views are to some extent connected to the conception of politeness. So, it is firstly the term politeness itself that complicates the situation generating automatically an overlap of the value-bound commonsense-conception politeness1 and the value-free generalization politeness2. Secondly, it is the politeness2-bound splitting of face into positive versus negative wants that creates confusion by intertwining the ethical with the technical understanding. Yet leaving the term politeness out of the discussion is not easy, because both understandings are somehow in connection with the twofold *figura*-principle and the line it constitutes to distinguish right from wrong behaviour.

I have argued that *BF* is originally tied to an aesthetic code, beauty versus ugliness. Through time this turned into an ethical code, viz., what is beautiful becomes good, what is ugly becomes bad;[5] it thus can also be labeled as right or wrong. Therefore, *BF* is a first-order concept regarding collectively accepted norms and rules. It relies on appropriately enacted forms of comportment; however, there are no clear instructions for a specific use of speech acts, language patterns or formulae. What the concept provides is a value-driven frame of behaviour which, in the end, is

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5 If there are translations of *BF* in other linguacultures, they never render the adjective *bella* in its literal sense of 'beautiful'; it is always translated with 'good': e.g., *to cut a good figure*, fr. *faire bonne figure*, pt. *fazer boa figura*, etc.

individually executed, suffice it to be considered as "right" or "appropriate" in the given situation. Yet, what is "right" implies automatically its contrary, the "wrong", thus referring to the basic binary conception between a positive and a negative end. Though being a culturally biased worldview, this duality differs considerably between *figura* in regard to face and therefore in regard to (im)politeness, the one being morally influenced, the others being theoretically established, but when effectively enacted nevertheless both are oriented to underlying value-systems. What these value-systems are like, can be found out by looking at the respective idiomatic expressions and their use as judgmental acts.

In fact, considering something as right or wrong, is an act of evaluation. Normally evaluation is dependent of the cultural value context. According to Watts' discursive view, evaluating is more precisely intended as a reactive move encapsulated in interaction. Accordingly, *fare BF* as an expression that refers to a social practice has a twofold function: it is per se a situationally adequate normative move and, at the same time, the evaluation of it so that, thanks to the frequent use of the binary expressions, it reveals itself as a most valuable metapragmatic tool. Thus, singling out the occurrences of *fare BF/BrF* in Italian discourse opens analysts the way to interconnect the respective interactional moves, to individuate the various cases as well as the type of judgements they evoke. Hence, in contrast to expressions like *save/lose face* or *be (im)polite*, BF allows us to establish a benchmark for measuring pragmatic appropriacy in everyday interaction. Having sufficient data, one can then tease out what – according to the moral order – is felt as good versus bad in Italian society, and what is judged as right or wrong according to the image one is expected to project in the community of practice.

The face-deriving expressions, however, depend merely on the politeness2-conception. Though having a metaphorical content too, the expressions save/lose face (and further paraphrases like threaten, defend, manage, etc. face) have a technical status; first of all, they are semi-figurative idioms basically referring to – what I call – "discursive struggling" (see Held 2021) in that they are depicting communication as a "battle" which one can win or lose. As such, they are understandable, but nevertheless hardly used in everyday discourse; in many languages other than English, there are not even equivalences with a comparable physical reference (see Yu 2001). The reason is that people are not conscious of their face, not even when they are normally interacting, that is, they do neither speak about it, nor comment on it. Thus, face-expressions only represent viable means for analysts in search of crucial moments where face is at stake "showing" itself in interaction.

Despite this different status, both the *figura*- and the face-expressions can be considered as metacommunicative tools. They represent per se acts of evaluation explicitly commenting on ongoing or previously committed actions and their role according to the culturally established lines. The *figura*-expressions refer to qualities,

the face-expressions to interactional matters. Meaning and use of these expressions are nevertheless witnessing the assumption that both *figura* and face are constantly involved in interaction. According to the face-constituting theory (see Arundale 1999, 2009) we may say that both are constitutive of and constituted in interaction – interaction considered as a process of reciprocal evaluation and recognition: the one implies the attribution of positive versus negative values; the other the acknowl-edgment as a positive or a negative member of the community. So – as illustrated in Figure 2 – saving face is not only considered a positive communicative act, it also has positive consequences on social relating as it favours connection and affiliation; threatening face – normally resulting in face loss – on the other hand, is considered a negative communicative act which has negative consequences for social relations as it leads to disconnection and separation.[6] But though the terms positive versus negative apply to our objects of comparison, viz., *fare BF/BrF* on the one hand, and to save face/to lose face on the other, they do not cope at all with B&L's distinction of positive versus negative face and thus can by no means be conceived in terms of politeness and impoliteness.

Thus, looking at the various binary distinctions in comparison with the *figura*-concept affirms the demand which in recent sociopragmatic theory has long been raised, i.e., to disentangle face from politeness (Haugh 2013) treating it further on as a conception of its own right (cf. also Bargiela Chiappini and Haugh 2009; Haugh and Bargiela-Chiappini 2010; O'Driscoll 2017).

That face and politeness are per se incompatible concepts can be argued in the lens of the comparison with *BF*. Comparing the three terms with each other under the performative aspect we get the following picture (see also O'Driscoll 2011): face we have (e.g., it can be saved or lost by the others' intervention) – *figura* we make (*fare BF/BrF*) (aiming at a "good impression") – politeness we do (in B&L's sense by responding to face-wants and thus saving face reciprocally). Hence, face-saving seems to be the quintessence of all. Yet the picture changes when we take impo-liteness into account: interestingly, *fare BrF* seems to be equal to lose face – but is it also impolite?

This needs an example; let us assume that the three expressions are used as evaluating comments on an action committed by a female person, e.g., on the one hand, a promise that she has kept deserving praise, on the other hand, a promise that she has broken deserving reproach:

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6 In O'Driscoll (2017) we find a list of dichotomies that show how other scholars work out this differentiation in relation to face and its dual sides. It was brought into play mainly by Arundale (2006, 2009) who, examining locus and negotiation of face in interaction, created the concepts of "connectness" versus "separateness". This was one of the main findings to release face from politeness.

In the first case one can approve saying:

> *(Lei) ha fatto (una) bella figura* 'She has made a good figure'

but probably not:

> *She (has) saved her face* (?)

and never:

> *She was polite**

However, saying the same about myself, seems to be quite impossible for all:

> *(Io) ho fatto una bella figura* ('I have made a good figure')

> *I have saved my face**

> *I was polite* (?)

Though the reactions represent positive evaluations, the equation does not work; last but not least, because ego-enhancement is generally against the traditional principles of *politeness*.

    In the second case, substituting positive with negative evaluations, however, there is more concordance between the three reactions, regardless of whom they are predicate:

> *(Lei) ha fatto una brutta figura* 'She has made a bad figure'

> *(Io) ho fatto una brutta figura* 'I have made a bad figure'

> *She has lost her face. – I have lost my face*

Even possible, yet with a very different effect:

> *She was impolite – I was impolite* (?)

What we see from this example is that "making" a *BrF* can be seen as equal to lose face, disregarding both the social expectations and the respective face-wants. It obviously causes face-loss. So, if there is a pragmatic correspondence, it is rather *ex negativo* (see the bold arrow in Figure 2). But qualifying something as polite or impolite is crucial: it needs the recognition of self and its management according to both general norms and cultural values. The traditional politeness1-principle is always relevant: drawn from former social hierarchy it consists of increasing other-

face and lowering self-face. Thus, politeness hinders saying something positive of oneself; if so, it causes face-loss. The *figura*-principle, however, does not: in Italian society, it is culture-conforming to enhance self-face; representing a good self-image, projecting it positively in social interaction is consistent with the expectations of the community. So, enhancing self-face, appreciating one-self does not have negative consequences; quite the contrary, it is a positive issue, it favours the "belonging aspects" (O'Driscoll 2017: 106).

6 Conclusions

In this paper we have discussed the culture-specific concept of *BF* in comparison with the abstract concept of face, on the one hand, and politeness, on the other, with the aim to check out if sociopragmatic theories are able to introspect the explanatory force they have for comprehending human communication. Since the *figura*-concept has never been an object of sociopragmatic research, scrutinizing its nature and use proves how meaningful it is to confront second-order conceptions with – when they exist – first-order conceptions and thus to challenge universal claims or assumptions against cultural interpretations. In fact, the metaphorical notion of *BF* represents – together with its opposite the *BrF* – not only a pragmatic guideline for managing the self-image in everyday life; it also sets out culture-specific benchmarks to measure and judge social behaviour between right and wrong and thus is reciprocally projected in social encountering. Given these properties, the *figura*-concept shows commonalities with and differences from the two key sociopragmatic notions, face and politeness. A comparison of *BF* with the two notions – both as first- and second-order concepts – sets out some interesting findings that lead to a threefold conclusion.

6.1 Analytical conclusions

As a performative category, the concept of *BF* is viable only in relation to *BrF*. Accordingly, it covers only one part of the pragmatic principle that guides Italian everyday life within a culture-specific frame of evaluation. What this frame is like and how it is respected in social practice is metaphorically conveyed by the expressions *fare BF/fare BrF*. These expressions are commonly used in Italian discourse for judging whether or not the enacted image was in line with the culturally accepted norms of behaviour. As such, they are themselves acts of evaluation which serve analysts as metapragmatic tools of assessment. Singling out their occurrences in everyday discourse leads to the identification of the referred matters and sets out prototypical contexts of use. Thus, by means of the binary expressions *fare BF/BrF*

researchers can detect what Italians think to be good or bad behaviour. The *figura*-concept, however, does not cover behaviour judged as good or bad in general. Rather, it refers to the projection of how the behaviour would be judged by the others in the moment of its performance. Thus, the metaphorical expressions to "make a good or bad figure", indicate that self-image is an (intentionally given) impression, insofar as it is something that is projected through the eyes of the others; viz., Italians are always concerned to present an image of themselves consistent with the evaluation others would have for themselves in the same moment. This multileveled character of *BF* and the evaluative principle it sets out makes it difficult both for sociopragmatic frameworks to explain it and also for it to be grasped in empirical data.

6.2 Epistemological conclusions

Notwithstanding these diversities, comparing the *figura*-concept with the face- and politeness-conceptions – as we did in this paper – delivers interesting insights into the relationship between first-order and second-order concepts. On the one hand, there are evident connections between *BF* and face that can be convincingly disclosed in terms of Goffman's conception of face. Understanding face as "the positive social value" that is acted out in everyday life in order to "show" always the best image of oneself, is perfectly compatible with *BF*. Therefore, *BF* can be understood as the culture-specific version of Goffman's impression management and its manifestation in daily discourse. On the other hand, *BF* is only one part of a principle, that, together with its opposite the *BrF*, amounts to evaluation within a binary system. As such, it seems to approach B&L's dual face construction; an impression which, as discussed in this paper, can be decisively discarded in relation to both the positive versus negative value-attribution and the respective verbal outcome.

Nevertheless, some connections with politeness are identified, but they concern only the part of politeness1 which Watts 2003 termed politic behaviour: this regards the culturally expected forms of social conduct, but leaves apart the fact that *BF* does not objectively adhere to this order, but is an intersubjective projection. Thus, neither first-order, nor second-order politeness frameworks can be applied to the *figura*-concept – neither value-attribution, nor communicative practice, nor metacommunicative evaluation coincide. The only salient – but very small – intersection between the three concepts – *figura*, face and politeness – is when social expectations are not met. The finding that *BrF* is equal to face-loss and sometimes can even be evaluated as impoliteness proves that negative feelings relate to human psychology in general and thus do not need to be culture-specifically interpreted.

Finding out that nevertheless there are some relevant relations between *figura* and face, but hardly any with politeness, in both first-order and second-order

versions, leads me to follow the suggestion recently made in sociopragmatic de-bates (cf. among others, Haugh 2013; O'Driscoll 2017) to disentangle face from politeness. Not only is the term *politeness* unclear as it mingles the historical with the abstract understanding; it also confuses theoretical conceptualisations with cultural interpretation and empirical outcome. Abandoning the term politeness, face can be handled as a second-order notion in its own right. This implies a return to Goffman's pre-politeness comprehension of face as an omnipresent property of human communication that, however, needs protection and veneration. To make these mutually addressed processes comprehensible he set out the term facework. Defined as "the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face" (Goffman 1967: 12), facework is a handy metaphorical conception, but released from any normative frame.[7]

That is why politeness-independent scholarship on face is not concerned with linguistic problems searching for language forms that save face(s) from threat and harm but instead attempts to set up sociopsychological frameworks (see Hopkins 2015; Ting-Toomey 1994). It considers face a culturally bound self-issue often emerging in intercultural encounters according to divergent face-concerns and face-sensitivities which often lead to misunderstanding or pragmatic failure.

In Italian culture these concerns and sensitivities are in fact particular and thus can easily be misunderstood – from both the intercultural angle and the epistemological viewpoint: Italian face-concerns and face-sensitivities are directed to self-face; caring for self, managing primarily self is regarded as a positive value for social relating. In politeness theory, however, focussing on self is an underestimated issue (see Chen 2001). General face-theories – regardless of politeness-norms – revalue its social role as a culture-specific issue: they distinguish self-centred cultures from other-centred cultures, look for differences between autonomy face and collective face, and single out indi-vidual versus collective face-concerns according to their effects on facework.

The question remains whether these culturally driven face-theories offer an appropriate frame to effectively explain the *figura*-concept. Considering that Italians accommodate their self-image to others' self-image (and so on) is rather definable in terms of a collective face, thereby confounding the self-centred view and underlining that *BF* is nevertheless a relational category.

6.3 Cultural conclusions

The concept of *BF* can be considered – according to Arundale's (2013) question – as "the best metaphor" for representing Italy's social culture and the face Italians

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7 E.g. see Tracy's (1990) dialectic assumption "No face without facework" and vice-versa!

present therein. A good self-awareness is the cornerstone of functioning social relations and self-esteem is highly valued.[8] Hence, Italians are constantly engaged to play out an image of themselves – an image that they think to be the best version of themselves in the eyes of the society. Always dependent on what the others think of them, Italians understand their social life as a process of mutually projected self-evaluations. The good impression they constantly want to make is the expression of the culturally acquired behaviour-frame reflected in the *figura*-concept: the binary expressions *fare bella figura* versus *fare brutta figura* represent a social code which involves mutual judgement within a value-scale comprising a positive and a negative end. The concept of *BF*, however, is bound to the positive side – conceived as the ideal embodiment of a social individual. Its quintessential point of reference is *bellezza* 'beauty'.

Accordingly, Italians tend to "figure out" a "beautiful" image of themselves by cultivating both a *bella apparenza* (cf. Burke's [1987] concept of "perspicuous consumption") and good social behaviour in order to be perceived according to their place in society and evaluated within the current moral order.

Thus, the principle constituted by *BF/BrF* is an ideal first-order concept that allows us to introspect not only a particular cultural mindset, but namely its interpretation as the specific social philosophy of Mediterranean cultures. In Mediterranean cultures, often defined as positive-politeness-cultures due to social warmth and proximity (e.g., Hickey and Stewart 2005), it is the outside living which determines the special role of socializing: gathering daily in *piazza* favours a continuous projection of oneself in a public but closely related scene. So, caring for good looking and a conspicuous behaviour evokes self-affirmation and social affiliation; it warrants mutual perception and attention. Attentiveness (see Fukushima 2005) is the key to understanding why the constant care to "cut a good figure" makes Italian social life simply "beautiful".

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8 Paternoster (2021) goes so far as to call it "self-love" and sees it – against the traditional politeness1-rules – as a positive social value.

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