



## The paradox of face threats in Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr's speeches



Research article



Published in Nairobi, Kenya by Royallite Global in the, **Nairobi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences**

Volume 4, Issue 4, 2020

© 2020 The Author(s). This article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.

### Article Information

Submitted: 25<sup>th</sup> August 2020

Accepted: 30<sup>th</sup> September 2020

Published: 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2020

Additional information is available at the end of the article



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

ISSN: e-2523-0948; p-2520-4009

To read the paper online, please scan this QR code



### Cosmas Rai Amenorvi

Department of Languages and General Studies, University of Energy and Natural Resources, Ghana

Email: [cosmas.amenorvi@uenr.edu.gh](mailto:cosmas.amenorvi@uenr.edu.gh)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1756-5043>

### Abstract

This paper sought to find out how face-threatening acts are employed as a rhetorical strategy of persuasion to achieve positive effects by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr in their speeches. Using the politeness theory and particularly its face-threatening acts as the theoretical framework, speeches of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr were purposively sampled from Carson and Shepard (2001) and Malcolm (2020, 1990) and analysed with focus on the face threats in these speeches and how they are strategically conveyed to produce the unnatural positive effects of face threats. Findings reveal that both Malcolm and King employ potential face threats in their speeches. However, they employ various rhetorical strategies such as language beauty, self-inclusion, artistic self-contradiction to soften the harshness of their face threats, thereby achieving approval from their audience. Moreover, though Malcolm and King both use face threats as a persuasive tactic in their speeches, they differ markedly in the way they do it; Malcolm is more direct with his face threats while King prefers the indirect style, and it is only Malcolm who uses point blank expletives or insults as face threats in his speeches. This study has two implications: it pushes the boundaries of the politeness theory in supporting the call that face threats can achieve positive effects, it also shows that even before the politeness theory gained ground orators such as Malcolm and King had employed its concept in their speeches, revealing the indelible statuses they have left as two of the world's greatest orators.

**Keywords:** Discourse analysis, face-threatening acts, historical speeches, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr, political discourse, politeness



### How to Cite:

Amenorvi, C. R. (2020). The Paradox of Face Threats in Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr's Speeches. *Nairobi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(4). Retrieved from <https://royalliteglobal.com/njhs/article/view/350>



### Public Interest Statement

Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr are considered two of the world's greatest orators of all time and their speeches still carry the weight they did during the civil rights movements of the 1960s. This study is another revelation of the many rhetorical strategies they employed in their fights for freedom and equality of the human family, emphasising their contribution not only to freedom but also to scholarship.

---

### Introduction

Human speech is one of the most studied subjects in the world and reasonably so because of its phenomenal and dynamic nature. Throughout human history, speeches have been used to build relationships between individuals and nations. They have been used to wage wars and cause the loss of lives. Speeches have been used to suppress a people just as they have been used to awaken a people and to fight for freedom. No wonder that the words of Seneca the Younger "Speech is the index of the mind" are as alive today as they were first spoken. The art of persuasion, rhetoric, has travelled from Ancient Greece all the way to the modern world. Even today the world still values orators now as they were almost worshipped in ancient Greece. Many literary giants like Shakespeare, for example, have demonstrated their love for oratory. Heroes and heroines in Shakespeare's works are usually those who command words to rule the minds of their listeners. Examples of these orators are Hamlet of *Hamlet*, Mark Anthony of *Julius Caesar* and Portia of *The Merchant of Venice*.

In the modern world, the love and passion for good speech still reigns. This is evidenced in the fact that some people make a living as speech writers. The age-old fact that while the what of speeches matters, their how matters sometimes even more than content as audiences are moved by the manner speeches are delivered. One of the major characteristics that defines Barack Obama and contributed to his becoming the president of the United States is his oratorical skills. President Obama would skilfully weave his thoughts and ideas with words with such virtuosity that many bought into his ideas and had him elected twice as president of the United States of America. However, before Barack Obama, America had produced a lot of orators, some of which held high offices of the land such as presidents Lincoln and Roosevelt.

During the civil rights movements of the 1960s in America, America had produced outstanding orators in the persons of two of the most celebrated freedom fighters in America at the time – Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr, usually pitched against each other by people as being opposites, King being considered a non-violent person and Malcolm a fiery figure, the two, no doubt, are among the greatest America's and the world's orators of all time. The popularity of these two historical figures are clearly seen in the body of literature on them, both biographical and scholarly (Malcolm, X. 2020; Assendoh and Alex-Assendoh, 2013;

Lewis 2012; Temkim, 2012; Helfer, 2006; Yousman, 2001; Carson & Shepard, 2001). While speeches of Malcolm and King have attracted attention from scholars as they have been studied through the lenses of various theories, there is no known study of the speeches of either of these historical via the politeness theory. The purpose of the present study is to fill this gap by investigating how Malcolm and King have employed face threatening acts, part of the politeness theory, to achieve positive effects. Erbert and Floyd (2004:267) submit that “empirical research has tended to focus either on the face-threatening or face-supporting properties of communicative behaviours without acknowledging potential covariation between such properties”. The present paper lends support to Erbert and Floyd (2004) that face-threatening acts can produce positive effects with the focus on the speeches of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.

### **Research Questions**

This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How has Malcolm X employed face threats as a rhetorical strategy in his speeches?
2. How has Martin Luther King Jr employed face threats as a rhetorical strategy in his speeches?
3. What differences exist between Malcolm and King in their use of face threats as a rhetorical strategy?

### **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

The theory that serves as the spine for the present study is the politeness and face theory as critiqued by Haugh and Kádár (2014). The specific aspect of the politeness theory that informs this study is the part that involves face threats. Haugh and Kádár (2014:2) submit that “politeness arises through strategies that minimize the threat to face when such an act, which is called a face-threatening act, occurs thereby avoiding conflict”. There are strategies that are employed to reduce face threats and in the absence of those strategies, faces are threatened. Moreover, while the name may be misleading, face-threatening acts are not limited to actions, they involve speech; they are either verbal or non-verbal. Face threats in whatever form are seen as negative which must be altogether avoided or reduced to save the face of people. The present study seeks to context this popular view in the area of the politeness theory; it seeks to identify face-threatening acts in Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr’s speeches to see whether face threats can be employed with positive effects, instead of the naturally anticipated negative effects.

There is no lack of literature on the persons of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr This review discusses some of these works in order to contextualise the present paper. One of those studies is Amenorvi (2018) who studied the use of lexical cohesion and literariness in

Malcolm X's "The Ballot or the Bullet". Amenorvi (2018) employed Halliday and Hasan's (2014) and Hoey's (2014) theory of cohesion, specifically lexical cohesion, to unearth how Malcolm combines lexical cohesion and literariness in his speech to serve the dual purpose of communicating meaning and at the same time serving as cohesive ties. Findings show that Malcolm employs simple and complex lexical structures to achieve cohesion. He also employs rhythm in his speech, thereby combining both linguistic and literary phenomena in the same speech. Amenorvi's (2018) study shows that a lot of work goes into these speeches such as those of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. Malcolm X's "The Ballot or the Bullet" is considered as one of the best speeches in history. For a speech to be able to achieve this status, a lot of rhetorical ingredients play a part in its recipe. Two of those ingredients in Malcolm X's "The Ballot or the Bullet" are his skilful use of lexical cohesion and literariness.

One other work on Malcolm and King's speeches is Sayed (2018). Sayed (2018:1) submits that "in this period, the role of language in the formulation of the Black identity was so crucial, since it is through language that African American leaders started to seek a voice for the oppressed." By "this period", Sayed (2018) is referring to the 1960s where African Americans were engaged in civil and human rights struggle against organised racism and oppression. One-point worth noting from Sayed's (2018) submission is that Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr's speeches had a role to play in the formulation of identity for African Americans because they are two of the popular and influential freedom fighters of the era. This follows that their oratorical skills as well as the content of their speeches connect with the overall culture of African Americans. This is one of the reasons why Malcolm and King have left indelible marks on the pages of history, particularly among African Americans, the world's Black population and all lovers of freedom and justice.

One other important study of the speeches of Malcolm and King is that of Josiah and Oghenerho (2015). They did a pragmatic analysis of King's "I Have a Dream" speech. They sought to identify speech acts and sentence structures that King adopts in his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. They found that King adopts 43 percent of representatives, 40.3 percent are simple sentences; directives make up 22.2 percent; declaratives consists of 20.8 while commissive comprise 11.1 percent of his speech. They conclude that King relies heavily on representatives, directives and declaratives for speech acts on one hand and simple, complex and compound-complex sentences on the other hand. The use of language this way is one of the way King uses to make the "I Have a Dream" speech very instrumental in shaping the vision of the United States of America towards equal rights for all of its citizens.

Ihsan (2018) also studied King's "I Have a Dream" speech via the concept of rhetoric perspective through repetition such as anaphora, epistrophe and epizeuzis. Ihsan (2018) concludes that by use of repetition, King wants to make sure that his audience come to terms with the reality of the repeated parts of his speech. He wants to show that the repeated

portions of his speech go beyond meaning; they must be realised in real life. Repetitions serve a dual role of emphasis and memory aid as they are one of the most used literary devices in speeches (Amenorvi, 2018). The repetitions, therefore, serve as emphasis for the overall will of African Americans to achieve equal rights and justice.

The fact that Malcolm and King's speeches continue to be studied from different angles via different theories, some of which are younger than the speeches themselves reveal that these speeches are no ordinary ones; they deserve these scholarly attentions. The present study is different in a way that it seeks to study these speeches from a completely new angle. Speeches can either be enjoyed or disliked, even hated, by audiences. All depends on content as well as style of the speaker. Understandably, if a speaker attacks his audience by words that are potentially face-threatening such as harsh innuendoes or even expletives, he or she is likely to incur the wrath of his audience and lose them. Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr have sometimes used face-threatening acts in their speeches without turning their audience against them. The present study's purpose, therefore, is to investigate how Malcolm and King employ face threats as a rhetorical strategy to persuade their audiences and move them to take action.

### **Methodology**

This study is wholly qualitative in that findings are not reduced to numerical bases. The study employs a fully qualitative data which are the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr as collected by Carson and Shepard (2001) and those of Malcolm X's in Malcolm X (2020). The face-threatening parts of these speeches as well as the persuasive strategies embedded in them in achieving positive effects were identified and thoroughly discussed, making the paper fully descriptive.

### **Findings and Discussion**

This section responds to the research questions one after the other. The first question seeks to unearth how Malcolm X employs face threats as a rhetorical tactic of persuasion in his speeches. The second question, like the first, turns attentions on Martin Luther King Jr in how he uses face threats the same way in his speeches. The final question contrasts Malcolm and King in their use of this persuasive tactic. The following section addresses the first question, the second addresses the second question and the third in that order.

### **Malcolm X**

This section focuses on the speeches of Malcolm X and shows how Malcolm employs the act of face-threats as a persuasive strategy to reach the heart of his listeners and to move them to action. We would start with what is arguably considered as Malcolm's best speech – "The

Ballot or the Bullet". Malcolm X delivered "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech in King Solomon Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan on April 12, 1964. This speech is a fiery one that contains even what could be referred to as verbal attacks or insults. Malcolm X, however, uses this natural face-threatening acts strategically to move his listeners to action. Let us look at some examples from "The Ballot or the Bullet":

*Mr. Moderator, Rev. Cleage, brothers and sisters, friends, and I see some enemies.* p328. The part of this opening that obviously raises an eye brow is the "and I see some enemies". This is an opening of a speech and an unusual one at that. It is like meeting someone for the first time and that person says something unpleasant in his introduction. If our face is threatened, we would not naturally want to acquaint ourselves with such a person. However, Malcolm's "and I see some enemies", although prima facie face-threatening, produces a very receptive attitude – this part is immediately followed by loud laughter and applause from the audience, indicating an overwhelming acceptance. Woltsberger (2014), Hosada and Aline and Gilbert (2010) have shown that applause from an audience is indicative of their approval of the content and manner in which a speech is delivered. The laughter and applause to the opening words of Malcolm X's "The Ballot or the Bullet" show that the audience know the kind of speaker in front of them; they know his effective use of fiery style which is potentially face-threatening but effective as a style. Malcolm might be referring to members of the Nation of Islam from whom he broke away and the American white power structure as "enemies". He further explains that the sheer number of his audience suggests that there are some enemies present. In so doing, Malcolm euphemistically reconnects with his audience by pointing out the reason behind his concluding that there are his enemies in the audience. Another potentially face-threatening part of "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech is when Malcolm blames Black people for the bad shape in which their communities are. He says:

But you will let anybody come in and control the economy of your community, control the housing, control the education, control the jobs, control the businesses, under the pretext that you want to integrate. Nah, you're out of your mind. p. 330

Malcolm itemizes some of the wrong decisions the Black communities have been making, from their lack of control of their economy, all the way to their business in the name of integration. All this use of repetition and rhythm builds the way to the potentially face-threatening seal of these words "you're out of your mind". Again, this face-threatening part of his speech receives the approval of applause, making this strategy a very effective one in the hands of Malcolm X. The audience would be very critical of themselves and this can lead to their doing what is expected from them – taking control of their communities. Moreover,

nobody would want to be seen as being out of his or her mind and in trying to disprove Malcolm, they would get into action of doing what Malcolm expects from them. This style is likely a very popular street way of putting words to move people to action and Malcolm might simply be regurgitating his street life rhetoric that connects well with the common people very well. Even though Malcolm says out the outset of his "Ballot or the Bullet" speech that he would not discuss religion, he does so briefly. He says that religion should not prevent Black people from coming together to work towards freedom and justice. He then goes on towards the end to say:

Because if hasn't done anything more for you than it has, you need to forget it anyway, p. 331.

There is no doubt that religion as a subject has been one of the most controversial and most divisive topics among the human family. Malcolm is a Muslim and people know how he condemns Christianity for such ills like colonialism and injustice in the world. And for Malcolm to tell his audience who are largely Christians in a Christian Temple to forget about their religion is naturally face-threatening or even controversial. However, the effect on the audience is different. This potentially divisive face-threatening utterance is well received by the audience with laughter and thunderous applause. The reason is that Malcolm has established himself with this style of rhetorical strategy where the potentially dangerous face-threatening utterance is skilfully manipulated in so far as those to whom it is addressed acknowledge it with approval. This face-threatening style as a persuasive rhetorical strategy is one of the rhetorical skills that define Malcolm X.

Further in "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech, Malcolm urges his listeners to reject second-class citizenship and fight for full citizenship. He further submits that if one accepts that second-class citizen status, "you're nothing but a 20<sup>th</sup> century slave". The context of the civil right movements of the 1960's and the abhorring atrocities of the history of slavery in America make this submission a very face-threatening one. History has shown how African-Americans fought for freedom from slavery. Some have even changed their last names that they believed were the names of the slave masters. One of such persons was Malcolm himself whose X, he says, is a placeholder for his lost African surname. This context projects his "20<sup>th</sup> century slave" as potentially volatile. However, again, this is received with approval. This historical allusion would reinvigorate the spirits of his audience to be determined not to return to slavery. In the light of that, the literal attacks on the dignity of the audience becomes simply an oratorical strategy to move them to action. Finally, in "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech, Malcolm urges Blacks to cast their votes wisely and should not align themselves with any political party. Those who cast their votes to the democrats he says the following:

You put them first and they put you last.  
Because you're a chump! A political chump, p. 336

One needs no scrutiny to tell that the foregoing words to an individual, much less a crowd of audience in a Christian, temple is face-threatening. The word 'chump' as used by Malcolm has overlapping meaning with such word as 'stupid person', 'fool', 'dolt', and 'idiot'. These are outright insults and need no furthering elaboration that they are face-threatening. The response from the audience again is not outbursts of anger but a thunderous laughter and applause to show their approval. Malcolm is able to reach the hearts of the audience in that he prepares their minds right from the beginning that he will tell the truth by employing naked attacks that turn out to connect with his audience and turn these attacks into strategies. Malcolm says that "I will tell you the truth whether you like it or not". The audience, therefore, accept that while these may be difficult to accept because they are face-threatening in nature, they are the truth that would wake them up for action for their own benefits. This deep comprehension on the part of the audience makes it easier for Malcolm to be as blunt as possible in reaching their hearts. This skill of employing face-threatening words as a rhetorical strategy is not a sole possession of "The Ballot or the Bullet", Malcolm employs this strategy in other speeches too. Let us discuss a few. In Malcolm X's "Harlem Freedom Rally" speech in 1960, he says something to his predominately black audience on interracial marriage that could potentially convey a tone of face threat. He says:

Your thirst for integration makes the white man think you only want to marry his daughter. We Muslims who follow Mr. Mohammed don't think God ever intended for black men to marry white women. Mr. Muhammad and his followers are violently opposed to intermarriage, p. 11

While Malcolm is speaking on one of the beliefs of the Nation of Islam, those words would have been euphemized were someone else doing the speaking. These words are face-threatening to white people as they are to Blacks. This speech is four years younger than "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech, revealing that face-threats have been a part of Malcolm's oratorical strategy for a long time. In a debate with Bayard Rustin in November 1960, Malcolm submits that the Black Muslims Movement or the Nation of Islam is a religious organization that seeks to tackle the issue of racism against Blacks from a religious perspective. Bayard Rustin then argues that once the organization deals with politics, it is a political organization. Malcolm X answers him thus:



Any religion that does not take into consideration the freedom and the rights of the black man is the wrong religion, p. 25

Very few speakers would be that straightforward in potentially controversial or face-threatening topics, not Malcolm. We note that Malcolm has not said that any religion that neglects the Black struggle is “a wrong religion” but “the wrong religion”. The use of the definite article shows an unambiguous, unequivocal and categorical manner Malcolm portrays such a religion. This strategy even if not accepted by the audience drives Malcolm’s points forcefully home. Speakers have employed many tools in reaching the hearts of their audience such as conscious diction, literary devices and rhythm. While these two can be found in Malcolm’s speeches, face threats may well define Malcolm’s overriding rhetorical strategy. In 1961, Malcolm X was interviewed by Eleanor Fischer. Fischer asks Malcolm how Blacks can develop themselves separately. In his face-threatening matter-of-fact composure, Malcolm answers:

Well, it’s easy, he’s separate already. The fact that you have Harlem, the fact that you have the Negro ghetto and the so-called Negro slam, he already separate. The fact that he is a second-class citizen is a political separation, p. 38.

From these words we can imagine the facial expressions, the tone of voice and Malcolm’s gestures. Of course, face-threatening acts go beyond words. It is a fact that a serious face and even a usually calm tone of voice can be face-threatening. One thing that stands out and double with Malcolm’s potentially face-threatening words is the profound logic Malcolm uses in answering questions. These logics are face-threatening in themselves because they make the interviewers’ questions too puny for Malcolm’s answers. This tell-it-straight face-threatening Malcolmic rhetorical strategy is very effective in revealing facts in their stark nakedness. And as a rare strategy at that, it is very effective and beats logic about the natural response to face-threatening acts, which is a retaliation or walking out of an interview or a speech.

In a speech on March 24, 1961 in Harvard Law School, Malcolm before a predominant white audience says the following potentially face-threatening words:

The Caucasian slave master has opposed all such leaders in the past, and even today he sanctions and supports only those Negro spokesmen who parrot his doctrines, his ideas or those who accept his so-called “advice” on how our people should carry on our struggle against his 400 years of tyranny, p. 46.

Malcolm's reference to "Caucasian slave master", although the truth in history, would definitely not be received well by his predominant white audience. He mentions "his" Negro leaders who "parrot his doctrines" as well as "400 years of tyranny". These are blunt matter-of-fact statements. The least said about the face-threatening potential of these words, the better. The paradoxical nature of this rhetorical strategy of achieving a positive out of a negative makes this strategy a rare but phenomenal one. One time, Malcolm employs his signature face-threatening rhetorical strategy effectively is during a visit from the FBI in February 4, 1964 when he is officially out of the nation of Islam. The FBI refer to someone who collaborated with them. After learning that he was a Negro Malcolm says:

You wouldn't be a policeman to know that someone is breaking the law. Common sense. If you have a knowledge of the law, you know once you are breaking it. And this man is even violating laws of intelligence, p.58.

Malcolm is speaking before FBI agents, part of the agencies that have the mandate to enforce the law. Malcolm's use of "common sense" as a pause without any further explanation, telling these to agents of FBI status is definitely face-threatening. If one listens to the audio of the FBI agents with Malcolm, one would realize that Malcolm maintains a very calm and inviting tone of voice devoid of any harshness. However, at the same time, his words speak all the face-threatening part of this encounter. The replies from the FBI agents were equally devoid of harshness, that this strategy in question has become synonymous with Malcolm insofar as all his audience know what to expect if they come face to face with him. The final example of Malcolm face-threatening persuasive strategy we would discuss in this paper is in Malcolm's speech "A Declaration of Independence" on March 12, 1964. Malcolm concludes that speech by these words:

We should be peaceful, law-abiding but the time has come for the American Negro to fight back in self-defence whenever and wherever he is being unjustly and unlawfully attacked. If the government thinks I am wrong for saying this, then let the government start doing its job, p. 72.

Malcolm X threatens the face of the government as well as Black people. To the former, he logically weaves his threat to warrant the government to prove him wrong, thereby ending in doing the right thing. To the latter, Malcolm submits that even though blacks need to maintain peace, "the time has come" for them to defend themselves. These two groups at the receiving ends of Malcolm's threats would have no choice but to try to disprove Malcolm and end up doing what Malcolm expects from them. The foregoing examples have shown that Malcolm's

use of face-threats as a rhetorical strategy is very effective. It is reasonable to conclude that this strategy is very rare and that Malcolm X could be one of its best proponents ever if not the best.

### **Martin Luther King Jr.**

Like Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr. also employs face-threats as a rhetorical strategy in his speeches. The goal is not to threaten or scare his audience as it naturally is but to persuade them to take action on the part of African Americans to fight for their rights and on the part of the United States government and its racist Whites to soften their stands and unite with Blacks. Let us start our discussion on Martin Luther King Jr's most famous speech "I Have a Dream". This speech was delivered on August 28, 1963 in which Dr. King called on the people and the United States government to end racism in the United States. It was delivered to an audience of 250,000 civil right supporters comprising both Blacks and Whites. Let us discuss the face-threatening parts of the I have a dream speech. One part of the speech reads:

But we refuse that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation, p. 60.

This part is addressed to the United States government. King could have used the everyday and more polite wording 'we do not believe...' He, however, chooses to use the more face-threatening wording 'we refuse to believe'. These natural face-threats have not received any natural negative feedback because the audience respond with thunderous applause. Even today, King is known largely the world over by this speech. It is loved by many people who listen to it. This means that notwithstanding the naturally face-threatening parts of the speech, all these parts have been well received because of the efficacy of the face-threatening rhetorical strategy used by King. One thing that makes this strategy work is that it goes beyond just words to encompass the whole speech art of gestures, tone of voice, personal composure, enthusiasm, warmth and the like. The audience are able to combine all these forces together to decode that the speaker means well and his words are not attacks of any sort. Another example of words that could be considered as face threats in the "I Have a Dream" speech are as follows:

There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwind of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges, p. 61.

These are very categorical words. Reference is made to "no rest", "no tranquility", "revolt" and

“shake the foundations”. These are no doubt forceful words. However, even today, they carry a peaceful note. How is King able to push forward words clearly face-threatening words to move his audience to action? One strategy he uses is that right after such face threats, he employs words that serve as a cooling effect on the fierier ones uttered earlier. For example, after the foregoing face-threats, Dr. King says the following:

But there is something else that I must say to my people, who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice: in the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds....we must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence, p. 61.

We notice the cooling effect of the above words on the earlier fiery ones. From the conjunction “but”, we note a contrast from the same speaker who utters the face threats before this. King, therefore, brings more force into the face-threats earlier by admonishing African Americans to be law abiding and not be “guilty of wrongful deeds” including “physical violence”. The foregoing can also be considered as face-threatening to the African American section of his audience, especially that they are the ones who are victims of America’s injustice. Using this face-threats against a people on whose side King is, is a strategy that goes to fortify and convince his audience, particularly the American government, that he is for justice as he shows respect for the laws of the country. King’s use of face-threats cuts across most of his speeches. Another is the “Eulogy for the Young Victims of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing”. This incident brought a gloomy effect on the Black communities across America. After his usual calm introduction, Dr. King utters the following words:

They have something to say to every minister of the Gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained-glass windows. They have something to say to every politician who has fed his constituents with the stale bread of hatred and the spoilt meat of racism. They have something to say to a federal government that has compromised with the undemocratic practices of Southern Dixiecrats and the blatant hypocrisy of right-wing northern Republicans, p. 69

These are very direct, straight-forward, face-threatening words, notwithstanding their beauty. King is direct about specific people; he mentions “every minister of the gospel”, “every politician”, “a federal government”. He mentions that politicians feed their people with the “stale bread of hatred” and “the spoilt meat of racism”. The descriptive language King employs in condemning racism and hatred no doubt will hit perpetrators of these ills. The words directed to the federal government are equally direct; there is nothing euphemistic or

unequivocal about them. King uses “undemocratic practices” for southern Dixiecrats and “blatant hypocrisy” for right-wing northern Republicans. These words are self-evident face-threatening ones. Like those of the “I Have a Dream” speech, this eulogy is a very touching one. One reason that makes this otherwise fiery speech very appealing to listen to is the mood, the tone and the beautiful language in which it is delivered. America is mourning the death of three children. The audience and well-meaning people are all in a gloomy mood. Some may be filled with hatred and retaliation. King’s words capture the general mood of America at the time. In such a context, these direct and potentially face-threatening words are then understood as genuine truths. In the same face-threatening words, therefore, the audience sense no threats at all.

Another speech in which King employs face-threats as a persuasive strategy is his “Acceptance Address for the Nobel Peace Prize”. He employs face threats in such a remarkable style that one would hardly see any harshness in his words at all. This speech was delivered in Oslo, Norway on 10 December 1964, a year after his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. Some of the face-threatening lines in ‘I Have a Dream’ find their way into Dr. King’s Nobel Acceptance Speech. He says:

I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of nuclear annihilation, p. 76.

The foregoing is just one of the many I-refuse-to type of submissions from King in his Nobel Acceptance Speech. While the words themselves carry some level of harshness or face-threats in them, their manner of delivery, Dr. King’s composure, tone of voice and overall attitude on stage roll these words into rather touching or face-mitigating ones. King maintains a calm atmosphere throughout this speech. His voice projects a solemn but serious atmosphere and the audience are married into the same sober mood. Besides, the artistry of King’s language is so beautiful to listen to insofar as his content as well as how the content is conveyed draws attention away from any threats that his words could carry. The imagery and the repetitive use of some phrases create rhythm which appeal to the audience and reduce these face threats to an effective persuasive strategy. We also find some face threats in King’s address at the conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery March. This speech was delivered in Montgomery, Alabama, on 25 March 1965. John Lewis describes this speech as “in the canon of powerful emotion charged speeches by Dr. King”. Kings says:

They told us we wouldn’t get here. There were those who said that we would get here only Over their dead bodies but all the world today knows that we are here and we are standing before the forces of power in the state of Alabama

saying, "we ain't goin' let nobody turn us around", p. 83.

How does King turn these natural face-threats into acceptable rhetoric? One strategy he uses is emotion to effectively to turn potential face threats into moving submissions that connect with not only his audience but anyone who reads his speeches even without his voice; his diction carries some power of emotions in them. Another strategy Kings employs is to connect to the common culture of the audience, particularly, his African-American audience. For example, King's reference to one of the popular Old Negro Spirituals "Free at last" at the end of his popular "I Have a Dream" speech beautifully connects with his African-American audience.

Another historical Martin Luther King's speech in which he employs potential face – threats woven beautifully into a rhetoric strategy is his "Beyond Vietnam". This speech was delivered at Riverside Church in New York in 1967. In the speech King opposes America's involvement in the conflict in Vietnam. The atmosphere in the 1960's was a very tense one and it was very unpopular and even dangerous to speak against America's involvement in the war in Vietnam. In his usual calm dignified manner, King encourages America to stop her involvement in the war. Some of the ways he did these could be seen as face threats. Let us discuss a few examples. Just after some introductory words, King says:

Some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the might have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak, p. 96.

By "breaking the silence", King means speaking against America's involvement in the Vietnam war. He refers to the call to speak on such unpopular platforms as an "agony." but says that they "must speak". This part may be considered potentially face-threatening because King is blunt in calling speaking the truth about America "agony". This face-threat is reduced into a persuasive strategy in the lines that follow immediately. King employs repetition of the words "we must speak" thereby creating rhythm. Amenorvi (2018) submits that repetition by means of rhythm can also serve as a memory aid to invoke audience to pay attention to the part of a speech that matters most. By this "we-must-speak" repetition, therefore, King draws the attention of America to what lies ahead and at the same time maneuvering his potential threats into persuasive strategy. King continues in his "Beyond Vietnam" speech:

As I have walked among the desperate, rejected, and angry young men, I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems... but they asked, and rightly so, "what about Vietnam?" They asked if our own nation

wasn't using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government, p. 98.

Within the context of that era as stated earlier, the foregoing is very touching but direct face threats to the American government. Revealing that the "oppressed in the ghetto" question the wisdom in non-violence when America is involved in violence itself is a face threat in that the paradox of the situation would only show American as hypocritical for endorsing King's non-violent tactic at home but employing violence abroad. Perhaps the most direct and face-threatening part of the foregoing quote from "Beyond Vietnam" is King's reference to America as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today". These are raw, undiluted straightforward words that are without a doubt face-threatening, considering the volatile era in which these are uttered. How has King turned these threats into persuasive rhetoric? King employs the cooling effect. Within the very same construction, King refers to "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today" as "my own government". By referring to the American government of the time against which he speaks as "my own government", King is saying in the way that he is still part of America and to an extent is responsible for America's mistakes. People who are shocked at the initial part of King's reference to America's violence would experience the cooling effect or face-mitigating effect the moment King puts himself as part of the very government he condemns. By "my own government" King is saying indirectly that he still has faith in America. Further in the speech, King's faith in America is confirmed when he refers to the popular African American poet, Langston Hughes, whose words he quotes in his speech:

O, yes I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath –  
America will be! p. 99.

This reference to Hughes puts King's "my own government" in perspective. Notwithstanding the ills of America against its Black citizens and against countries abroad like Vietnam; America will change, King says indirectly. This skillful use of words and the employment of intertextuality have made potentially face threats into moving and spellbinding delivery which turns face threats into a persuasive strategy. Let us turn our attention to King's last speech "I've Been to the Mountaintop" which was delivered in Memphis, Tennessee on April 3, 1968.

Giving the introduction to this speech, Andrew Young says, "he spoke without notes and seemingly without thoughts as he poured forth a powerful stream-of-consciousness narrative before a standing-room crowd of eleven thousand people". These words suggest that King was full of emotion even as he spends a lot of time talking about his mortality that came to be seen like prophesy. Like the speeches discussed earlier, King's "I've Been to the Mountaintop" too has employed face threats as a rhetorical strategy. He says amidst loud applause:

All we say to America is to be true to what you said on paper. If I live in China and Russia, or any totalitarian country, maybe I could understand some of these illegal injunctions, p. 142.

The foregoing are potential face threats to the American government of the time. By telling America to be true to what it says on paper, King is saying that America does not respect its own laws. By comparing America to China and Russia of the time is even more face-threatening. The rivalry among the totalitarian countries such as China and Russia with America is not unknown and there is no way America would be happy to be compared to these countries like that as King does. But once again, King drives these seemingly harsh words home persuasively. The following quote explains this strategy:

But somewhere I read of the freedom of assembly. Somewhere I read of the freedom of speech. Somewhere I read of the freedom of press. Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is the right to protest for right. And so just a I say we ain't going to let dogs or water hoses turn us around, we ain't going to let any injunction turn us around, p.142.

Right from the potentially attacking words, King plunges into his usual rhythm of the cooling effect of face-mitigating words. We can see the rhythm in somewhere-I-read reference to the American constitution that justifies the freedom of speech, press and protest. His reference to the American constitution in this way sinks the truth that whatever America's Black citizens are doing protesting for right is their constitutional right and that these laws are themselves American. King goes on towards the end of the quote to refer to some of the injustices perpetrated against Blacks such as the use of fire hoses and dogs against them. By referring to these atrocities and accusing America of not honouring its own laws, King is appealing to the conscience of the nation in order to end the racism that African Americans suffer.



### Malcolm X versus Martin Luther King

Let us now turn our attention to the differences in the ways Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr employ face threats as a rhetorical tactic in their speeches. One major way that Malcolm differs from King in his (Malcolm's) use of face threats is that Malcolm is very direct with his words while King takes the more indirect way. This difference manifests clearly in the most popular speech of each speaker: "The Ballot or the Bullet" for Malcolm X and "I Have a Dream" for Martin Luther King Jr. For example, in the very introduction of Malcolm X's "The Ballot or the Bullet", Malcolm X says:

...and I see some enemies. This Afternoon we want to talk about the ballot or the bullet. The ballot or the bullet explains itself, p. 328.

In the very introductory part of his speech, Malcolm refers uneuphemistically to his "enemies". This face threat is very direct without mincing words. In the very introductory part of the speech we have the phrase that has become the name of the speech – the ballot or the bullet. Another straightforwardness we see in this introduction is his saying that the words "the ballot or the bullet" need no explanation for they are self-explanatory. This directness permeates Malcolm X's speeches. As we discussed earlier, King employs face threats, but indirectly. Even though King employs such statements as "we refuse to believe...", "there would never be rest nor tranquility in America" and "we can never be satisfied", these are softer and indirect face threats. One reason why these words are indirect face threats is the manner in which they were delivered. Martin employs repetition to emphasize these face threats. And these repetitions produce rhythm which makes these face threats beautiful to listen to, thereby reducing the seriousness that these face threats carry. They certainly are and King's use of softer face threats give his speeches identity and make his speeches unique much as Malcolm's direct face threats are his style that gives him an identity. This is one major way Malcolm and King differ from each other as regards the use of face threats a rhetorical strategy. Another way that Malcolm and King differ from each other in the use of face threats as a rhetorical tactic is that Malcolm's directness goes to the point of using expletives or insults on his audience while King does not employ expletives. Let us discuss how Malcolm uses expletives or insults as a rhetorical strategy. From "The Ballot or the Bullet", Malcolm X addresses his black audience of that time:

White man won't even patronize you. And he is not wrong. He's got sense enough to look out for himself. You the one who don't have sense enough to look out for yourself, p. 329.

Malcolm's directness as we see above goes insofar as he uses words that could be insulting as in telling his audience that they do not have sense enough to look out for themselves. This directness clearly separates Malcolm from King as a rhetorical strategy. As we have stressed earlier, this strategy when considered *prima facie* would be thought of as attacking and face-threatening. However, it turns out to be very effective as shown by the reactions from the audiences. For example, after Malcolm utters these words, he receives uproarious applause and laughter from the audience because they get the point that he means well and that these attacking words are but a persuasive strategy.

Malcolm continues to wake blacks up with such direct expletives as 'chump', 'coward', 'a political chump' and goes on to say "I know you don't like me saying that, but I'm not the kind of person who comes here to say what you like. I'm going to tell you the truth, whether you like it or not". Even Malcolm knows that his words are face-threatening, even more so his direct expletives like 'chump' and 'coward'. His audience, however, understand him and cherish him for his fight on their behalf. In all these insults or attacks are but a rhetorical strategy. As said earlier, even though Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. employ face threats in their speeches as a rhetorical or persuasive tactic, Malcolm X is more direct in this quest while Dr. King is a little indirect. In addition, only Malcolm X extends his directness to include expletives while Dr. King is not characteristic of that style.

## Conclusion

This study set out to unearth how Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. have employed face threats, not as a way of attacking their audience, but as a rhetorical persuasive strategy. It came out that both historical figures rely on face threats as a persuasive tactic in a number of their speeches. They successfully connect with their audience then as they do today through the preservation of their speeches. While both parties employed the strategy effectively, Malcolm is more direct even to the point of using expletives or insults to move his audience to action while King is more indirect and hardly employs expletives. These differences notwithstanding, Malcolm and King are two of the world's greatest orators. The implication of this study is that it has given a novel face to the politeness theory and its face threatening acts. Face-threatening acts are usually cast in the negative that must be avoided in order to keep relationships and maintain the positive face of one's listeners. The present study has, however, revealed that face threats have a positive side too, thereby extending the boundary of the politeness theory. There arises, therefore, the question as to whether face-mitigating acts could also have their unnatural negative effects on people. Further studies could investigate this phenomenon.

**Funding:** This research was funded by Royallite 360 Research initiative.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no potential conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

### **Author Biography**

Cosmas Rai Amenorvi is a Lecturer of English and Academic Writing and Communication Skills at the Department of Languages and General Studies of the University of Energy and Natural Resources, Sunyani, Ghana. He has been teaching and investigating English, Linguistics, Literature and Communication for more than fourteen years. He couples as a poet, novelist, language expert, speech writer, and proof-reader. His research interests are in the areas of English Phonology, Sociolinguistics, Semantics, Literary Criticism, Discourse Analysis, Contact Linguistics and Youth Language.

**References**

- Amenorvi, C. R. (2018). Lexical Cohesion and Literariness in Malcolm X's. *The Journal of Applied Linguistics and Applied Literature: Dynamics and Advances*, 6(1), 27-37.
- Assensoh, A. B., & Alex-Assensoh, Y. M. (2013). *Malcolm X: A Biography: A Biography*. Greenwood.
- Carson, C., & Shepard, K. (2001). *A call to conscience: the landmark speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* Grand Central Publishing.
- Erbert, L. A., & Floyd, K. (2004). Affectionate expressions as face-threatening acts: Receiver assessments. *Communication studies*, 55(2), 254-270.
- Frady, M. (2005). *Martin Luther King, Jr: A Life*. Penguin.
- Gilbert, R. (2001). Joyful Noise: Reflections on Applause. *Southwest Review*, 86(1), 13-33.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Hasan, R. (2014). *Cohesion in English*. Routledge.
- Helfer, A. (2006). *Malcolm X: a graphic biography*. Macmillan.
- Hoey, M. (2014). Words and their neighbours. In *the Oxford handbook of the word*.
- Hosoda, Y., & Aline, D. (2010). Teacher deployment of applause in interactional assessments of L2 learners. *Pragmatics & Language Learning*, 12, 255-276.
- Ihsan, M. D. (2018). Repetition Values on Martin Luther King Jr. Speech. *JEES (Journal of English Educators Society)*, 3(2), 178-188.
- Josiah, U. E., & Oghenerho, G. (2015). Pragmatic Analyses of Martin Luther King (Jr)'s Speech: "I Have a Dream"--An Introspective Prognosis. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(17), 43-52.
- Kádár, D. Z., & Haugh, M. (2013). *Understanding politeness*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kirk, J. A. (2004). State of the Art: Martin Luther King, Jr. *Journal of American Studies*, 38(2), 329-347.
- Lewis, D. L. (2012). *King: A biography*. University of Illinois Press.
- Malcolm, X. (2020). *The end of white world supremacy: four speeches*. Simon and Schuster.
- Sayed, Y. H. (2018). *Language and Racial Identity in Selected Speeches by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King A Critical Discourse Analysis* (Doctoral dissertation).
- Temkin, M. (2012). From Black Revolution to "Radical Humanism": Malcolm X between Biography and International History. *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 3(2), 267-288.
- Wolfsberger, J. (2014). A weekly dose of applause! *Writing Groups for Doctoral Education and Beyond: Innovations, practice and theory*, 177-189.
- Yousman, B. (2001). Who owns identity? Malcolm X, representation, and the struggle over meaning. *Communication Quarterly*, 49(1), 1-18.