The Pragmatics of Feedback:

A study of mitigation in the supervisory
discourse of TESOL teacher educators

by

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Abstract

This research project investigates the language of supervisory conferences. A grounded theory approach is taken to the analysis of data drawn from teacher educators in TESOL (Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages) in their feedback discussions with teachers following observed lessons.

Supervisory talk is investigated within a linguistic framework of politeness theory: while the supervisory role includes the obligation of criticism, the act of criticism is constrained by the face-to-face encounter of the supervisory conference. A central construct is the notion of fragility: the supervisory conference - an event which is equated with the talk that achieves it - is considered to be inherently fragile. The aim of the project is to investigate the language so as to uncover the source of the fragility.

Findings suggest that the perceived tension derives from a tug-of-war of essential elements: while the supervisory position affords discoursal power (the right to raise and pursue topics, take long turns, drive the discourse etc), the face-threatening nature of the event obliges supervisors to resort to social/strategic skills to protect the teacher's face, as well as their own. The textualisation of this restraint takes the form of linguistic mitigation - devices rooted in syntax and semantics that allow supervisors to undercut the force of their own assertions. Mitigation is posited as the means by which supervisors resolve the clash-of-goals that is central to their role. However, mitigation is risky because it may interfere with message clarity.

The product of the grounded study is a typology of utterance-level mitigation. The typology has three macro-categories (syntactic, semantic and indirectness) and fourteen sub-categories.

The study was triangulated through an ethnographic investigation of supervisory concerns about feedback; and through an experiment designed to gauge teachers' perceptions of variously mitigated supervisory language. Findings from both studies corroborate the central tenet by contributing images of supervision that support the clash-of-goals thesis.

The projected applied outcome is in supervisor training where, it is suggested, strategic training delivered in a framework of politeness theory would reduce the unwitting dependence on mitigation and hence the risk of message distortion.

Suggestions for further research conclude the study.

Certificate

I hereby certify that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

Ruth Wajnryb

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to the memory of my late father, Dr Abraham Wajnryb who took pride in its progress but died before it could be presented.

Abbreviations

Some field-specific abbreviations and acronyms are used through the thesis. These are listed alphabetically below.

AMES   : Adult Migrant English Service
AUL   : Above the Utterance Level
CA   : Conversation Analysis
CI   : Critical Incident
CL   : Critical Linguistics
CP   : the Co-operative Principle
CTEFLA   : Certificate in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language to Adults
EFL   : English as a Foreign Language
ELT   : English Language Teaching
ELICOS   : English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students
ESL   : English as a Second Language
ESOL   : English to Speakers of Other Languages
FTA   : Face-Threatening Act
IFID   : Illocutionary Force Indicating Device
LOTE   : Languages Other Than English
NESB   : Non-English Speaking Background
P-D-R   : Power-Distance-Rank
PP   : the Politeness Principle
RSA/UCLES : Royal Society of the Arts/ University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate
SD   : Supervisory Dialogue
TAFE   : Technical and Further Education
TESOL   : Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
UNSWIL   : University of New South Wales, Institute of Languages

Referencing Procedures

Referencing procedures in this thesis comply with what is known in the School of Education, Macquarie University as the 'old' guidelines, based on the Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS). Where difficulties were encountered, the 'new' guidelines, based on the Publication Manual of the American Psychology Association (APA), were consulted.

Guidelines for the avoidance of sexist pronoun use have been followed, primarily through the use of the plural. Where the requirement of the singular makes this impossible, the generic construct is avoided in favour of male and female usage. At times, 'their' replaces 'his or her' where repeated use of the latter would have been cumbersome. Where the sex of the antecedent is known, the appropriate pronoun is used. Third person reference to the researcher-writer uses the feminine pronoun.

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.

T.S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*