

## Chapter 5

### The Pragmatics of Feedback

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*The human personality is a sacred thing; one dare not violate it nor infringe its bounds while at the same time the greatest good is in communion with others (Durkheim, 1915:299).*

*Peace over conviction, truce before truth (Kochman, 1984:201).*

*People do powerful things with words (Roberts, 1990:3).*

#### Overview

**This chapter is centrally concerned with a pragmatic account of mitigation in supervisory discourse. The aims are two-fold: to account for the linguistic phenomenon conceptually by viewing it within a theory of social interaction; and to generate a rich and comprehensive description of the range and type of mitigation found in supervisors' language. The first of these aims is the concern of the first section of Ch. 5.**

### 5.1 Conceptual framework

#### 5.1.1 Introduction

The conceptual framework underpinning this inquiry is provided by politeness theory the background to which was outlined in Ch. 3 as part of the description of the pilot study. There it was shown how the mutual concern for face generates and determines the complex equilibrium underpinning interpersonal communication. The notion of criticism as a FTA central to the rights and obligations of supervisors was discussed. Politeness was seen as a strategic or tactical manoeuvre designed to cushion the blow delivered by the FTA. Included there also was a description of the scenario of the conference encounter between supervisor and teacher, and the cargo of face-related concerns that each brings to the meeting.

Within this frame of reference, mitigation was defined as the attempt by speakers to hedge or undercut the full illocutionary force of their own assertions. It is the attempt to take the edge

off the harshness of what is being asserted, to weaken or soften or reduce what is said, to render more 'palatable' the unwelcome content of the message for the addressee. Politeness theory seeks to account for how interactants cope with their interpersonal needs while at the same time negotiating their transactions. This tension is of crucial importance to the present study because at the moment of the delivery of the critical FTA, a conflict of interests emerges between the demands of the message and the needs of the addressee. Speakers seek to resolve this conflict through mitigation<sup>1</sup>.

The main and unsurpassed statement of politeness theory as strategic conflict avoidance remains Brown and Levinson's model (1978). Despite revisions and elaborations (1987, and references contained therein), it has provided 'excellent heuristics' (Kasper, 1990:194) for researchers in language interaction. As well, two other linguists (Lakoff, 1973; 1976; and Leech, 1977; 1983) have significantly contributed to the conceptualisation of politeness as a means of minimising the appearance of conflict. All three sources will be called on in the discussion below.

### 5.1.2 The need for a pragmatic theory of language

Five years before Brown and Levinson's seminal work, Lakoff (1973) had argued a case for pragmatics. She contended that as well as rules of syntax and semantics, which have traditionally provided guidelines of linguistic well-formedness, there ought also to be rules of pragmatic competence. These would allow linguists to account for and predict the pragmatic behaviour of speakers.

In one sense, the domain of pragmatics may be interpreted as the early stage of an attempt to formulate a theory of pragmatic competence. Accordingly, one definition of pragmatics terms it 'the study of the use of language in communication, particularly the relationships between sentences and the contexts and situations in which they are used' (Richards, Platt & Weber, 1985:225). And, similarly, this definition: 'pragmatics, or the study of language use, deals with

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<sup>1</sup> The colloquial language of equivocation (Bavelas, Black, Chovill & Mullett, 1990b:60-61) is itself rich in revealing metaphor. Many items are linked to spatial position and physical movement, suggesting that the communicative situation is a metaphorical 'field' where one may be 'caught' between 'a rock and a hard place', 'on the spot' or 'in a bind'. Verbally agile participants may 'duck', 'dodge', 'shift', 'hedge' or 'skirt' an issue. Evasive language allows one to 'waffle' (from 'waff', to move to and fro); but if escape is not possible, one may 'pussyfoot' or use 'weasel words'.

matters of appropriateness, i.e. the adaptation to situation and interpersonal context' (Parret, Sbisà & Verschueren, 1981:8); or 'situated interpretation' (Van Valin, 1980:214). While difficulties exist in defining the field and its scope, especially in demarcating the boundaries between semantics and pragmatics and in defining terms like 'context' and 'appropriate' (Levinson, 1983), it is largely agreed that pragmatics is to do with how speaker-meaning may (and often does) differ from sentence-meaning i.e. how what is meant is different from what is said; and what rules can be constructed to account for people's ability to decode the meaning of such implicitness (Levinson, 1983). Leech is similarly at pains to demarcate the border-line of semantics and pragmatics: he sees semantics as the study of what a piece of a language means abstracted from its context, while pragmatics 'deals with that meaning as it is interpreted interactively in a given speech situation' (1977:1). Similarly, Weisner (1974:724) says that pragmatics can be found 'at the interface of form and situation'.

Pragmatics, then, has emerged to explain what other areas of linguistics have traditionally ignored or failed to account for satisfactorily. Lakoff (1973) believes that pragmatic 'rules' would help us to iron out the 'lumps in the carpet' left by the inadequacies of traditional grammars in explaining the exigencies of human communication: essentially why people say what they do to other people at certain places and times. A traditional grammatical approach has failed in large part to explain the patterns of natural language, especially interactive spoken language, because it has concerned itself with what is said but has failed to consider what is meant through what is said. Those who concern themselves with various kinds of pragmatic inference claim that the bulk of meaning is unstated: 'the truth-conditional content of an utterance... may be only a small part of its total meaning' (Levinson, 1983:132).

#### 5.1.2.1 Extra-grammatical phenomena

It would seem quite apparent that more than rules of grammar are involved in the formulation of language. Foremost among these extra-grammatical phenomena is the speaker's attitude towards the social context in which the language is occurring. In Lakoff's terms (1973), this attitude toward social context is composed of three considerations: firstly, the speaker's attitude towards the person(s) being communicated with; secondly, their attitude towards the information that they wish to convey; and thirdly their decisions, based on the first and second points, about the effect they wish to achieve via the communicative act (Lakoff, 1973). Contextual variables, then, have a large role in the determination of what is appropriate.

Lakoff is fascinated by the grammaticalization of such variables, the way in which the relations between language and context are linguistically encoded. Only such variables, she argues, can explain the particular appropriateness of 'who wants *any* beans?' compared to 'who wants *some* beans?' (Lakoff, 1969). While the grammar encodes such 'meaning distinctions' (Levinson, 1983:9), the variables that determine such choices between equally accurate grammatical alternatives clearly draw on a domain outside of the grammar, for grammar cannot be called on to explain them. Only an understanding of the social context and people's roles within it affords the explanation for such phenomena<sup>1</sup>. Lakoff claims that there is a need for 'pragmatically sensitive rules' (1973:295) to be incorporated within the grammar to help explain ambiguities that are not resolvable through an examination of the syntactic or semantic elements in an utterance. Resolution lies in 'recourse to an examination of the relationship between the participants... and their situation in the real world' (1973:295).

#### 5.1.2.2 Twin rules of pragmatic competence

In her early work (1972a; 1972b; 1973), R. Lakoff made a primary contribution to the theory of politeness that would later become central to pragmatics. She suggested that there are two fundamental pragmatic rules guiding the choices that language users make about their communications. Each of these she expresses as a dictum or injunction on linguistic behaviour: 'be clear' and 'be polite'.

It is the relationship between the two principles that is of most concern to this study because, as will be seen in the act of giving criticism, there is a peculiar tension between the two imperatives. This tension between competing demands - between language's Scylla and Charybdis (Lakoff, 1973) - contributes to the particular quality and tenor of supervisory talk.

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<sup>1</sup> In R. Lakoff's (1972) example, an English-speaking hostess, offering food to a guest, would be deemed polite in saying 'you must have some of this fruitcake'; familiar with 'you should have some of this fruitcake'; and quite rude with 'you may have some of this fruitcake'.

### 5.1.3 The rules of clarity: Gricean maxims of efficient communication

Lakoff's dictum (1973) 'be clear' derives from the early work of Grice (1967), which has become known as the Gricean maxims. Grice argued (1967; 1975) that the logic of natural conversation could be derived from the assumption that in communicating - indeed, in all rational human behaviour - people adhered to a behavioural dictum which he called the 'Co-operative Principle' (CP): 'make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged (1975:45).

The CP is a set of over-arching assumptions or maxims which guide the conduct of conversation. They are the specific elements by which clear, efficient and co-operative use of language happens. There are four maxims: the maxim of Quality - speak truthfully; the maxim of Quantity - gives as much information as, but not more than, is required; the maxim of Relevance: say things that are relevant; the maxim of Manner: be clear, brief and orderly. Together, they specify what participants in a conversation have to do so as 'to converse in a maximally efficient rational and co-operative way' (Levinson, 1983:102).

Grice's point is not that people always speak in this way, but rather, that there is an overriding assumption that co-operation is being oriented to. Further, it is this assumption that allows people to process meaning in conversation and that explains the coherence of spoken discourse. Thus, in the exchange:

A: Let's go to the movies

B: I have an examination in the morning (Richards et al. 1985:64)

while there are no linguistic properties or surface indicators of textual cohesion (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) linking B's remark with A's, there is nonetheless the assumption of co-operation. This assumption - that an invitation, being the start of an 'adjacency pair' (Garfinkel, 1967; Coulthard, 1985) will be followed by an acceptance or rejection - renders B's utterance discursively meaningful. The two utterances are co-operatively linked via the maxim of Relevance. In the unpacking of meaning through the assumption of the CP, an inferential process - 'conversational implicature' (Grice, 1975:49) - is operating; and along with the maxims, it is central to the processing of meaning in conversation.

A fascinating and central point about the CP is that it is apparently as honoured in the breach as in the observance. The point is that the breach - or 'flouting' as Grice called it - is a crucial part of the meaning. Very often, speakers indicate their underlying co-operativeness by signalling that they are opting out or not conforming to a maxim.

The case of 'but' prefaces (Baker, 1975) illustrates the point. Here the preface acts as a signal of the imminent, apparent flouting<sup>1</sup>: 'I could be wrong, but...' signals a forthcoming flouting of Quality. 'I imagine that you know this already, but...' signals a flouting of Quantity. 'Just to change the subject' signals that Relevance is to be flouted. 'I'm sorry to be vague about this...' signals that Manner is to be flouted (Baker, 1975). Indeed, many such signals, being formulaic and idiomatic, are the very stuff of everyday talk<sup>2</sup>. A speaker may also render a maxim inoperative by signalling its suspension linguistically (Martinich, 1984). Thus, for example, if a speaker begins 'did you hear the one about...', the hearer can safely assume that the maxim of Quality is to be suspended (Leech & Thomas, 1988). Gricean maxims and breaches thereof also underpin the operations of irony and traditional figures of speech, such as metaphor, understatement and rhetorical questions, although disagreements abound as to how they operate (Green, 1989; Grice, 1975; Wilson & Sperber, 1981).

It is important to point out, in passing, that while violations of the Gricean maxims of clarity are evidence of politeness strategies in operation, in fact at a deeper level, Grice is in fact being honoured. It is only because of the assumption of the Co-operative Principle and the orientation towards the maxims that interlocutors are forced into the inferential process that allows them to decode the underlying face-oriented message beneath politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1978:100).

#### 5.1.4 Politeness and clarity: the Lakoff model

Lakoff's model of politeness comprises three rules: don't impose; give options; and be friendly. These dicta operate in different types of situations; and success is largely a function of knowing

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<sup>1</sup> The use of 'apparent' is important here as the speaker is trying to ward off the interpretation that he or she is flouting the maxim (Willing, K., 1993, pers. comm. 16 Nov.).

<sup>2</sup> e.g. 'I'm not at liberty to say any more' (Quantity); 'as you know' (Quantity); 'by the way' (Relevance). Included, too, are the following: 'well', 'oh', 'ah', 'so', 'anyway', 'actually', 'still', 'after all' (Green, 1989; Lakoff, 1973; Levinson, 1983).

which rule is operational. Rule 1, the imperative 'don't impose' is an admonition to steer clear or avoid intruding on other people. It is appropriate to formal situations of power or social asymmetry, where an impersonal distance is to be maintained; and it is the one most conventionally associated with the common denotation of politeness. Rule 2 - 'give options' - is compatible with Rule 1; and has to do with not imposing a speaker's views on a hearer but allowing room for the other's opinion. Rule 3 - 'be friendly' - is about making one's hearer feel good and producing 'camaraderie' (Lakoff, 1973:301); and is characterised by displays of personal interest and solidarity. Lakoff's primary contribution was to show the potential for conflict in language in situations where the rules of clarity and the rules of politeness might be expected to collide. It is this which is of concern to the present study. According to Lakoff, the Gricean rules of clear conversation are operational within what she calls Rule 1 situations, i.e. cases of formality where the polite imperative is 'don't impose'. Indeed, the Gricean rules are viewed as a sub-class of the first politeness rule: 'their purpose is to get the message communicated in the shortest time with the least difficulty: that is, to avoid imposition on the addressee (by wasting his [sic] time with meandering or trivia, or confusing him and making him look bad)' (Lakoff, 1973:303).

#### 5.1.4.1 Co-existence

Accordingly, in some contexts, and formal genres, the dictum 'be clear' co-exists happily with the dictum 'be polite'<sup>1</sup>. There is no conflict between the demands of the transaction (the message) and the demands of the interaction (the participants). In this (almost idealised) scenario, there is a perfect blend of the experiential and the interpersonal.

#### 5.1.4.2 Collision

However, in most spoken interactions, there are considerations demanding that speakers give their attention not only to the message they wish to convey, but also to other elements within the context, primarily the relationship between interlocutors, and within that, the needs of the addressee. In such contexts, to follow the spirit of the Gricean maxims would be to court

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. an academic lecture, a business discussion, an exchange of information in a bureaucratic context, a telephone request for information.

conflict. To pursue clarity would be to bring on a collision with Rule 3 (make your interlocutor feel good about him/herself)<sup>1</sup>.

In the context of supervision where a supervisor may have to transmit an unwelcome message, attention to clarity as per a Rule 1 situation will do little for the supervisee's emotional self. In face-to-face interaction, then, the dictates of the message are only one part of the scenario. People have more to do in interaction than merely to transmit experiential meaning. Thus apparently meaningless particles have 'a deep meaning' (Lakoff, 1973:302): they signal that Rule 1 has collided with Rule, 3, and the latter has won out.

This is especially likely in communications where the speaker is taking into account their attitude towards the social context - especially their assumptions about relationships. Lakoff (1973:296) asserts:

If the speaker's principal aim is to navigate somehow or other among the respective statuses of the participants in the discourse, indicating where each stands in their speaker's estimate, his [sic] aim will be less the achievement of clarity than an expression of politeness, as its opposite.

In other words, the consideration of person-related factors is weighed against the consideration of message-related factors, and the person-option very often wins out. The injunction 'be polite' is therefore superordinate in contexts where relational work is considered important (Held, 1989:168). Lakoff's meta-rule becomes 'be clear, unless there is some reason not to be' (1974a:42); and in the event of a slur on clarity, your interlocutor will unpack your relational message.

It has been suggested that the variables of 'message clarity' and 'addressee needs' intersect in most spoken interactions. This nexus may be noted in marked situations where, for example, the dictum 'be polite' has been deleted from the equation. These are contexts where the conventions of the speech event allow for the (temporary) suspension of normal person-related

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<sup>1</sup> In Lakoff's example, while the sentence 'Nixon is an arch-conservative' may appear in a New York editorial - being a Rule 1 format, allowing one to be formal and clear together - the same opinion expressed by the same person in a face-to-face setting may become 'Nixon is sort of conservative'. Here, the hedge ('sort of') reduces the affective commitment (G. Lakoff, 1972) felt by the speaker to the utterance, not in fact because of a change of opinion about the message, but because of respect for (politeness towards) one's addressee; that is, to promote social harmony and avoid unpleasantness. 'Sort of' is a blurring of clarity in the interests of politeness.



concerns. One such context is the courtroom, with its clearly defined and tradition-bound conventions, permitting lawyers to address witnesses without even minimal attention to the interpersonal. Here message takes complete hegemony over person, as it does, too, in police interrogations, where the facts of the matter are what is at issue, not the feelings of the participants. Such encounters are extreme cases of power asymmetry<sup>1</sup>, where, because of the power differential, there is no injunction (on the powerful) to exhibit respect (for the powerless)<sup>2</sup>.

Levinson (1979) accounted for the specificity of constraints in particular speech situations by positing that the interpretation of Gricean maxims was specific to the particular activity type in operation. In other words, interactants' expectations of the extent to which Gricean maxims are being observed depends on the particular verbal activity in which they are engaged. If the Gricean norms are viewed as 'specifications for some basic unmarked communication context', then deviations are seen as special or marked or, more precisely, activity type-specific (1979:376). In this regard, Pearson writes of the 'markedness model' which posits that speakers' communicative competence includes a 'knowledge of what linguistic devices are relatively marked or unmarked' per situation or context (1988:73). This is not incompatible with Fraser's 'conversational-contract' view (1990a:232) in which participants bring to an interaction an assumptive awareness of complementary sets of rights and obligations within the terms and conditions imposed by institutional settings. In a similar vein, Blum-Kulka argues that politeness systems have their own 'domain-specificity' (1990:261) which gives rise to the way politeness meanings are generated in particular speech events.

In sum, then, for Lakoff, the relationship between clarity and politeness is context-sensitive: sometimes they happily co-exist; more often - because few interactions are of an 'unmixed style' (1973:298) - they collide and speakers seek resolution. In these cases, clarity often gives way to politeness. Indeed, Kochman (1984) makes the case that mainstream (white, middle class) public etiquette is a socio-political extension of interactional politeness. The 'bottom line' is that people generally find it is more important to avoid antagonism than to achieve

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<sup>1</sup> As Willing points out (1993, pers. comm. 16 Nov.), the power is institutional, invested in role.

<sup>2</sup> Other examples may be found in the baldness and clarity of meaning in drill imperatives issued in the military; as well as in a real-world emergency (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Lakoff, 1989) where the mandate to show politeness is lifted by tacit mutual consent - here urgency demands economy, precision and speed, leaving no room for the infringements of these that politeness would create. An interesting case, too, is seen in aviation discourse (Linde, 1988) where the onset of flight problems brings on a decrease in the amount of mitigation.

perfect clarity. This notion is central to the conceptualisation of politeness theory as strategic conflict avoidance.

### 5.1.5 Politeness and clarity: a trade-off in face - the Brown and Levinson model

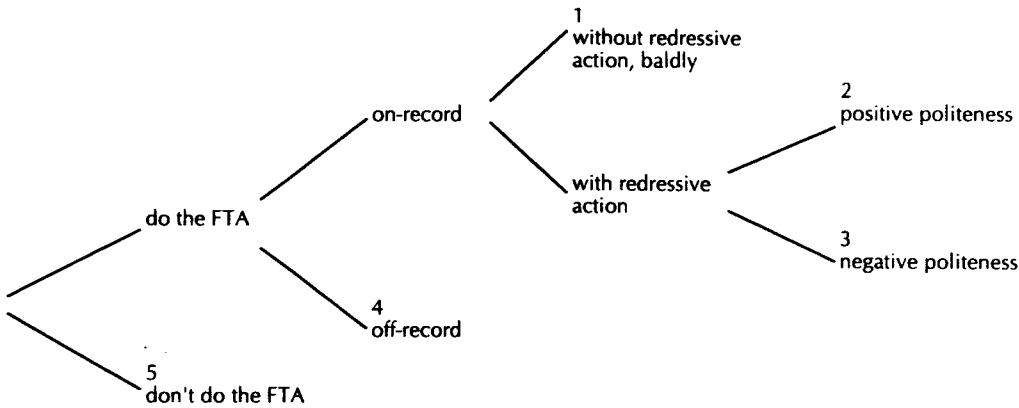
#### 5.1.5.1 Face and redressive action

The speaker's sensitivity to contextual variables, especially the needs of the addressee, was developed and expanded in the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1978), which posited a rational-strategic, pan-cultural model of human interaction. Based on the anthropological notion of face (Durkeim, 1915; Goffman, 1967), Brown and Levinson aimed to demonstrate how interactive co-operation was premised on awareness of 'mutual vulnerability' (1978:66) and, most particularly, how this interconnected with language. They sought to account for what they claimed to be a universal phenomenon - the fact that in language there is an 'abundance of syntactic and lexical apparatus' (1978:99) which cannot be explained by factors of systemic or cognitive distinctions or by factors of psychological processing.

In the last eighteen years, considerable evidence has mounted to suggest that significant cultural constraints exist on the textual realisations of politeness: Blum-Kulka, 1990; Gu, 1990; Ide, 1989; Kasper, 1990; Lebra, 1976; Matsumoto, 1989; Nwoye, 1992; Wierzbicka, 1985. To differing degrees, these express reservations about the notion of face as 'a pancultural human resource (Nwoye, 1992: 311) and posit that 'face is actually found to wear many cultural faces' (Nwoye, 1992:328). For example, Nwoye shows how criticism in Igabo society is interpreted in social norm rather than face terms - that is, in terms of the concern of the individual for group interest rather than for individual rights. Such studies are outside the parameters of the present inquiry, primarily because the concern here is not to confirm, disconfirm or qualify the 'panculturalism' of face, but to apply Brown and Levinson's framework to a particular case of interaction that occurs very much within the cultural constraints of a Western society.

Brown and Levinson's functional model sought to demonstrate that the motivation behind such linguistic 'apparatus' was bound up with the notion of face: politeness is viewed as redressive action undertaken to off-set the potential disruption of FTAs. Their framework outlines the myriad of efforts people make toward the minimisation of face risk. Politeness ensures that

interaction is a co-operative, conflict-free negotiation of 'communicative goods' (Held, 1989:169). It accounts for the fact that the experiential function of language (the encoding of propositional message) is intricately affected by the impact of interpersonal contact. It accounts for why someone might opt for the apparently fumbling, inefficient contortion of 'I don't suppose that you would by any chance be able to lend me some cash, would you?' in preference to the simple, direct, pristine clarity of 'please lend me some money' (Levinson, 1983:274-5).



**Figure 1:** Possible strategies for doing FTAs (Brown & Levinson, 1978:74)

Politeness is interpreted by Brown and Levinson as a trade in face. In any interaction where there is a risk of face threat (one's own or one's interlocutor), the speaker computes the contextual variables. These are: the relative power (P) of speaker over addressee; the social distance (D) separating them; and the weight ('rank') of the imposition (R) involved in the threat. On the basis of this assessment of factors, the speaker chooses a strategy (or a combination of strategies) from a hierarchical range of five possible super-strategies (Fig. 1). The schema allows for intricate sensitivities and shifts in contextual variables: as a change occurs (in P, D or R) the concept of what is an appropriate strategy shifts accordingly.

The higher a speaker's strategic option in the Brown and Levinson hierarchy, the more oblique and obscure the language becomes. At the lowest level, there is an absence of redress as the term 'bald-on-record' conveys. Following the Gricean maxims, the communicative path chosen is the one of greatest clarity and efficiency. Here one might be thought of speaking in a 'briskly Gricean' fashion (Brown & Gilman, 1989:160). From Level 2 to 4, politeness is

increasingly 'a major source of deviation from such rational efficiency and is communicated precisely by that deviation' (Brown & Levinson, 1978:100). By level 4, at the point of being off-record, meaning is operationalised via conversational implicature. Politeness may thus be measured by the infringement of clarity. Holmes (1984:363) writes that politeness strategies flout the maxims

by providing information which, from the point of view of rational, economical and efficient communication in a social vacuum, could be described as over-informative, irrelevant, vague or imprecise. From a pragmatic point of view, however, this information frequently serves an affective function, expressing the speaker's attitude to the addressee.

Clarity of message is sacrificed, increasingly, on the altar of face. Politeness is therefore quite purpose-driven: departure from a Gricean norm 'sacrifices efficiency to accomplish something' (Brown & Gilman, 1989:160). The point is not that every one always speaks Grice-like, but rather that the departures from the maxims are pragmatically meaningful: they are decoded by interlocutors of the same culture/language background as evidence of politeness. The signals then carry meaning as to participants' perceptions of contextual variables. The central tenet of Brown and Levinson's theory is that one 'powerful and pervasive motive for *not* talking maxim-wise is the desire to give some attention to face' (1978:100).

#### 5.1.5.2 Face and the politeness hierarchy: an illustration

The hierarchy may be illustrated by analysing the language options within a particular scenario that hinges on face: a man realises that, having forgotten to bring his wallet to work, he needs to borrow a small amount of money to buy his lunch. Given that the threat is not too great to prevent him from proceeding (Strategy 5), he is left with four options. He assesses his relationship with the person he is going to ask (in terms of P and D) as well as the weight of the imposition (R); and computing these variables, selects his language. Exhibit 5 summarises the strategies available to him to handle the FTA (borrowing money).

#### 5.1.5.3 Blending the two models

Despite differences of detail, rough patterns of conceptual similarity can be seen in the models of Lakoff and Brown and Levinson. For example, Lakoff's Rule 3: 'be friendly' corresponds roughly with Brown and Levinson's positive politeness. Likewise, Lakoff's Rule 2 - 'offer

*Strategy 1:* 'on-record, without redressive action, baldly'. Here the speaker foregoes the trade in face, calculating that the act can be performed without redress. He might say: 'damn it, I've forgotten my wallet. Lend me some money, will you?'. There is no attempt to redress the FTA: it is stated clearly ('baldly'); there is no ambiguity about the intention ('on record'); and no counter made to the threat ('without redress'). The only concessions, perhaps, are the tag question 'will you?' (uttered with a falling tone, the hedge is very minimal); and the softening effect of the explanatory warning ('damn it').

*Strategy 2:* Here the speaker chooses to redress his language using positive politeness, i.e. he 'anoints' (Brown & Levinson, 1978:75) the addressee's positive face. He might say: 'look here mate, I've left my wallet at home. Could you help us out with some cash?' Positive politeness operates here through the employment of in-group identity markers (Brown & Levinson, 1978:112), such as the address form 'mate' and the slang word 'cash'. Solidarity is also achieved through the use of the first person plural pronoun ('us') and the imprecise familiarity of the phrasal verb ('help out').

*Strategy 3:* Here the speaker may choose negative politeness in order to show himself regretful of the imposition being made: 'um, John, is there any chance you could lend me a few dollars overnight? I've managed to forget to bring my wallet'. Negative politeness operates through distancing ('could' rather than 'can'); hesitation ('um'); pessimism ('any chance?'); minimisation ('few'; 'overnight'); and admission of bungling ('I've managed to forget').

*Strategy 4:* Here the speaker goes 'off-record', alluding to but not stating the FTA: 'damn it, I've left my wallet at home'. The inference (that the speaker wants to borrow money) can be made via conversational implicature, achieved through flouting the Relevance maxim. The addressee is not imposed on: because no request for money has actually been made, the choice of not hearing is afforded. Likewise, if the addressee reacts unfavourably, the speaker can save his own face by retreating into denial: 'but I wasn't asking you for money; I was just saying I'd forgotten to bring my wallet'. Built into the speaker's indirectness, too, is an opportunity to anoint the addressee's positive face by offering a possibility to be perceived as helpful.

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#### Exhibit 5: Illustration of on-record and off-record strategies

options' corresponds with Brown and Levinson's negative politeness and off-record strategies<sup>1</sup>.

Significantly, both models view the potential for clarity (evidenced in the Gricean maxims) as pitted against politeness (evidenced in infringements of clarity) within a pervasive, interactive tug-of-war. As such, both models contribute to the conceptual framework being offered here: in the context of supervisory discourse, and most especially in the FTA of voicing criticism, there is a tension resulting from a collision of demands - the demands of clarity and the

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<sup>1</sup> There are also important differences, as discussed, for example, by Green, 1989:144-50.

demands of politeness. The typology that is at the heart of the chapter will demonstrate that the resolution of this clash-of-goals is mitigation.

### 5.1.6 Co-operation rescued by politeness: the Leech model

Leech (1977; 1983) posits a similar relationship between the Gricean Co-operative Principle (CP) and what he calls the Politeness Principle (PP). He claims that the two principles are complementary until such time as a 'clash of goals' occurs, at which moment the CP is 'rescued by' the PP (1983:80). Like Lakoff's 'politeness wins' model, and Brown and Levinson's FTA-triggered redressive action, Leech claims that there is trade-off relationship between the CP and the PP i.e. between discursal and social goals. Thus, while the CP has the function of regulating what we say so that it contributes towards an illocutionary or discursal goal (clarity- or message-oriented), the PP has a regulative social role, which, significantly, is 'higher' or more powerful than the CP. The purpose of the PP is 'to maintain the social equilibrium and the friendly relations which enable us to assume that our interlocutors are being co-operative in the first place' (1983:104). Leech argues that, at root, expediency demands that the social role over-ride the communicative: 'unless you are polite to the neighbour, the channel of communication between you will break down, and you will no longer be able to borrow his mower' (1983:82). Indeed so important is the social role that Leech categorises all illocutionary functions according to how they relate to the over-arching social goal of 'establishing and maintaining comity' (1983:104).

### 5.1.7 Politeness as a heuristic device

Brown and Levinson's framework has continued to serve as 'a potent heuristic device' (Aronsson & Rundstrom, 1989:502) in generating qualifications to the formulation of politeness theory. For example, finding the notion of negative face too gross, Lim and Bowers (1991) refine it to 'competence face' (the want to have one's abilities respected) and 'autonomy face' (the want not to be impeded), while positive face is recast as 'fellowship face' (the want to be included). In this paradigm, competence is addressed through approbation (Leech, 1983), characterised by the effort to maximise praise and minimise failure; and autonomy face is addressed by tact (Leech, 1983), characterised by the effort to minimise imposition though creating options, and being tentative and indirect (Lim & Bowers, 1991).

However, notwithstanding the inherent interest of these various developments, they amount to details of difference among interpretations of politeness phenomena. The purpose here is not to be narrowly comparative, but rather to highlight the overwhelming consensus underpinning politeness scholars that clarity and politeness are potentially (though not necessarily) conflictive; and to pursue the notion - through a grounded study - that the discourse bears witness to the struggle.

### 5.1.8 Clarity and politeness in supervisory discourse

#### 5.1.8.1 Competing demands

Applying the concept of politeness to the context of the supervisory conference, it is evident that in situations where the teacher has 'come up well', and all there is to report is good news ('giving' praise as opposed to 'breaking' bad news), then there is no conflict: the supervisor can be clear without being impolite in praising the teacher<sup>1</sup>.

However, praise rarely consumes the whole conference; and nor should one have this expectation. In the context of the practicum - where student teachers are by definition inexperienced; where difficulties are to be expected; where the identification of weaknesses and guidance towards improvement are attributes of the supervisory role - then the potential for tension between clarity and politeness is great. After all, incumbent on the supervisor is the need to identify and analyse discrepancies between 'what is' (present behaviour) and 'what ought to be' (improved behaviour). In Cogan's view, what the student teacher needs of a supervisor 'is a sustained expert program to help him (or her) relinquish... existing behaviour in favour of new behaviour' (1973, cited by Housego & Boldt, 1985:114). In teacher development contexts, the situation is not qualitatively different; indeed it might be argued (Cervi, 1991) that the face factor is more perilous.

The voicing of criticism, therefore, is a quintessential example of conflict between the referential and relational functions of language (Linde, 1988). On the one hand, there is a demand for clarity, emerging from the supervisor's instructive role. On the other hand, there is pressure on the supervisor to attend to the face needs of the teacher (c.f. the trend towards

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to suggest that praise-giving is itself uncomplicated (Farson, 1963). See also App. 21.

'humanistic supervision', outlined in Ch. 2) The pressure to avoid defensiveness, show empathy and undercut certainty manifests itself in politeness behaviour.

### 5.1.8.2 Language as a shared modality<sup>1</sup>

It is easy to overlook the fact that the modality through which Cogan's 'expert program' is to be conveyed and the modality through which affective concern is displayed is the same: language. It is in the language itself that supervisors have to steer their course, navigating judiciously between a teacher's face wants and his or her need for fair assessment. It is all too easy to pull too greatly to one side and either obscure the message or offend the teacher!

The complexity of the endeavour is rendered greater when one takes into account that no hard and fast rules exist regarding offence. While there may be broad agreement within a culture about such matters, there is also enormous lee-way: people vary greatly in their estimation of what is appropriate behaviour. For example, two members of the same culture may differ on what kinds of facts are 'inviolably private' (Green, 1989:140). Similarly, research on interrupting (Tannen, 1984) highlights how particular behaviour may be perceived in different and culture-specific ways.

Furthermore, users of a language do not always choose to adhere to the prevailing 'mores' (Levinson, 1983:25) about what is appropriate: a person, for example, may choose to be slightly (or even outrageously) non-conformist. People may in fact have an 'idio-pragmatic' identity - a pragmatic fingerprint (Crichton, J., 1992, pers. comm. 2 Oct.) that is to culture's pragmatic mores as idiolect is to dialect (c.f. Thomas' 'pragmlect' 1983:95; Lakoff's 'idiolects for politeness', 1974a:26). What offends one teacher may not bother a second. However, supervisors are generally assigned to teachers for administrative and logistical expediency, not interpersonal compatibility. As well, the relationship is deprived of the time that would allow people to become acquainted and accommodate each other. Thus, to push a metaphor to its limit, not only do supervisors have to navigate a difficult course between the rock of offending and the rock of obscuring; they are hampered by the fact that their journey is largely uncharted.

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<sup>1</sup> The use of 'modality' here (meaning channel, or communicative means) is not to be confused with discussions of linguistic modality (meaning the textual evidence of a user's viewpoint on the propositional content of a message or on the relational link between interlocutors).



The result of the conflict between the person-oriented pressure and the message-oriented pressure is mitigation. Mitigation provides the linguistic means by which the supervisor can send the message yet still attend to face. Mitigation realises the blend of message/face compromise in the text of the conference.

#### 5.1.8.3 Mitigation: slurs on Gricean clarity

While the benefit of mitigation is that it allows a clash-of-goals to be avoided, it does so at a potential cost. Modifying their own illocutionary force entails supervisors in undercutting the clarity of their critical message. Evidence of this takes the form of violations of the rules of clarity. Every instance of mitigation, as Ch. 5 will detail, is in fact a compromise on clarity (Table 3). As Quality, Quantity, Manner and Relevance are breached, so is the message distorted in a particular direction, such as tautology, imprecision, obscurity, or irrelevance. In discussing conflicting goals in discourse, Bavelas et al. (1990a:137) refer to 'equivocal truths' as 'true statements that have been "softened" to avoid clarity'. For Kasher (1986:110) the clash between clarity and politeness is expressed as 'a tension within rationality itself', involving a negative correlation between achieving one's ends efficiently and at minimal cost.

The modification of the illocutionary force exerts a pull in competing directions. While the FTA carries the propositional message (the criticism), the mitigation operates as damage-control - variously exerted prior to, concurrent with or following delivery of the FTA (Bayraktaroglu, 1991). Mitigation amounts to the very human wish to 'attempt to achieve certain desirable effects while avoiding undesirable side-effects' (Hickey, 1991:371). What results is a particular kind of 'social choreography' (Aronsson & Satterlund-Larsson, 1987:1). A delicate process, it is by no means unusual: 'Janus, looking as he did merely in two directions, was no extremist by normal human standards' (Hickey, 1991:371).

#### 5.1.8.4 Mitigation and message distortion

The sacrifice of clarity to politeness in supervisory conferences is not, of course, mandatory. As Brown and Levinson's P-D-R construct shows, great lee-way exists in how an individual computes the contextual variables. In fact, the scales may tip the other way, favouring clarity over politeness. That this incurs certain affective outcomes is echoed many times over in respondents' reactions to simulated hypo-mitigation (see Ch. 7). The central notion, then, is one of competing concerns in a tug-of-war of multiple goals, and herein rests the potential for

	Code	Sub-class of Mitigation	Quality	Quantity	Relevance	Manner	Commentary
SYNTACTIC	1	tense shift					In shifting tense, the speaker breaches the specification to be truthful and avoid obscurity.
	2	aspect shift					Choosing the durative aspect, the speaker blurs the truth and compromises precision.
	3	negating					Negative constructions violate the truth maxim, say more than is necessary and reduce lucidity by complicating the processing of meaning.
	4	interrogatives					The interrogative may be less relevant or more obscure than unmarked choice and may involve more being said than is necessary.
	5	modal verbs					The speaker's modalising violates the Quantity maxim as well as the specification to avoid ambiguity.
	6	clause structure					Subordination and hypothetical clauses blur the truth, bury and distance propositions respectively, leading to non-essential information and obscurity.
	7	person shift					Person shifting can blur the truth, provide more or less information than is required, and render meaning imprecise and therefore obscure.
SEMANTIC	8	qualm indicators					Qualm indicators mean that more is said than is confidently believed, and it is said in a non-concise and disorderly manner.
	9	asides					Asides drag on the propositional truth of an utterance, carry more information than is necessary, including what might be irrelevant, obscure and rambling.
	10	lexical hedges					Words are chosen because they are less fully 'loaded' than an unmarked choice, and violate the specification to be truthful and perspicuous.
	11	hedging modifiers					Hedging through modifiers makes the speaker less than truthful, tautological, as well as violating the specification to be brief and avoid obscurity.
INDIRECT	12	conventionally indirect					The conventionally indirect path is less economical, relevant and clear than directly explicit language.
	13	implicitly indirect					Unconventionally or implicitly indirect is a further step away from explicitness, violating truth content, informational load, relevance and manner.
	14	ambivalent					The decision to be ambivalent makes the speaker say less than the truth, less than is needed; he/she violates Relevance and is less than lucid.

Table 3: Mitigation as evidenced in breaches of the Gricean maxims

volatile outcomes. The evidence of profusely mitigated language drawn from this grounded study of TESOL supervisors, suggests that at least in the contextual variables of *this* speech community, supervisors prefer to let the scale tip toward politeness. Why this might be so is explored in the conclusion to Ch. 6.

What seems to be suggested is that clarity and politeness are poles at the ends of a continuum: clarity is distinguished by highly unmitigated language, politeness by highly mitigated language. It seems, too, that there are potential dangers at either end of the continuum: hyper-mitigation may lead to a distortion of message in the direction of less gravity; hypo-mitigation may lead to a distortion of message in the direction of greater gravity. There may be a danger here that the teacher emerging from a highly mitigated conference may be insufficiently aware of the gravity of the criticism; while a teacher emerging from a hypo-mitigated conference may be needlessly oppressed by an (over)-perception of the gravity of the criticisms. Issues pertaining to perception of mitigation will be explored in Ch. 7.

#### 5.1.8.5 Discourse genre and the reconciliation of elements

The literature on politeness theory suggests that the balance of clarity-politeness achieved in an interaction is a function of the discourse type in which participants are engaged (Ervin-Tripp, 1976)<sup>1</sup>. Accordingly, discourse types may be mapped onto a continuum where the extremes would be marked 'transactional' or 'informational' and 'interpersonal' or 'interactional'. In discourse characterised by a high task focus, the need for clarity and efficiency of communication is primary e.g. Holmqvist and Andersen's (1987) talk exchange in a car repair shop; Lakoff's (1989) academic lectures. At the other end of the continuum is 'affiliative' talk (Holmes, 1993:92) which has as its primary goal the maintenance of friction-free social relationships e.g. casual conversation (Good, 1979; Nofsinger, 1991).

It would seem that most types of discourse require their users to reconcile, to different degrees, the principles of 'accessibility' (making one's contribution understandable) and 'acceptability' (making one's contribution conform to appropriate social conventions) (Bublitz, 1992:561). Thus even in talk given over largely to a high task focus, it would be usual to expect aspects of it to have a social function: e.g. phatic communion (Laver, 1981; Malinowski, 1923);

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<sup>1</sup> Beyond the parameters of this study, there is the more recent notion that the Gricean view is Western and culture-specific, and not universal, as thought earlier (Lakoff, 1984).

discourse openings and closings (Kasper, 1990); and pre-sequences (Bayraktaroglu, 1991). Craig, Tracy and Spisak contend that because 'all situations involve some degree of tension between co-operation and antagonism', messages often contain 'a complicated tangle of support and attack' (1986:463).

That the allocation onto the continuum of a particular discourse type is by no means facile is shown in research involving analyses of particular discourse types - e.g. research in medical settings by Maseide (1981), Conte (1981), and Aronsson and Satterlund-Larsson (1987). Deserving special mention is Lakoff's (1989) treatment of courtroom discourse and therapeutic discourse, both of which have conflict as an intrinsic element. She shows how these particular discourse types resolve the balance of clarity and politeness in unique ways.

Supervisory discourse, too, is an instance of a certain generic discourse type: institutional unequal encounter with a high task focus and intrinsic conflict potential arising from face threat. While, as Lakoff (1989) suggests, courtroom discourse resolves its conflict through a highly public formality, and therapeutic discourse resolves its conflict through an informal intimacy, it might be said that supervisory discourse resolves its clash-of-goals through mitigation. Cherry's empirical study (1988), following Leech (1983), demonstrates how the deliberate flouting of politeness maxims can be exploited as a rhetorical strategy. Such discourse-specific resolutions of intrinsic conflicts corroborate caveats in the literature (Aronsson & Rundstrom, 1989; Kasper, 1990) that politeness models are more successful in achieving descriptive and explanatory adequacy when they are confined in range to specific, well-defined contexts. Hence the choice of a relatively homogenous group of supervisors as sources of data in this grounded study.

## Overview

**This first part of Ch. 5 has aimed to establish a conceptual framework through which patterns of mitigation in the grounded study will make sense. It is timely at the start of the next section to review the research picture on mitigation. Following this, there is an overview of four premises that broadly govern the approach taken to language in this inquiry. The typology of mitigation follows, providing the 'heart' of the thesis: it is composed of three sub-sections, each of which is devoted to one of the typology's macro-classes. The last section concludes the chapter, and holds over to Ch. 8 the discussion of the findings on mitigation as they pertain to the research question outlined in Ch. 1.**

## 5.2 Critical review of mitigation

While mitigation is recognised as an important factor in communication (Labov & Fanshel, 1977), it is an area largely lacking detailed empirical investigation (Linde, 1988). This section includes a brief review of how mitigation has been treated in the literature.

### 5.2.1 Perlocution and illocution

An early paper on mitigation (Fraser, 1980) interpreted the phenomenon in terms of its perlocution (Austin, 1962) - utterances seen from the point of view of their consequences (Hudson, 1975). The bearer of bad tidings, seeking a more palatable means of reporting unwelcome news, mitigates in order 'to bring about a consequent psychological effect within the hearer' (Fraser, 1980:349). Holmes' (1984) work built on Fraser's by linking mitigation to illocutionary force. She claimed that the softening effect ('attenuation'), and its converse ('boosting'), were strategies for modifying the illocutionary force of accompanying speech acts. These strategies were then interpreted in terms of how they affected the speaker-hearer relationship - by increasing solidarity or the converse, social distance. In the case of criticising, termed a 'negatively affective speech act' (Holmes, 1984:349), attenuation serves to increase solidarity.

### 5.2.2 The mitigation-aggravation continuum

In Labov and Fanshel's (1977) linguistic study of psychotherapy, the notion of mitigation appears as a means by which a speaker can reduce the offensive threat of a speech act, notably requests. They argue that the degree of mitigation or aggravation associated with a speech act is linked to the particular pre-condition invoked by the speaker to make clear their illocutionary intent. References to speaker needs ('I need some help') and hearer abilities ('can you help me?') are more mitigating than reference to speaker rights (as implicated in imperative directives) and hearer's obligations (e.g. 'you should/ought'). Applying this to the supervision context, it is clear why supervisors rarely issue directives or make reference to the teacher's obligations. The work of McLaughlin, Cody and O'Hair (1983) combines notions from Brown and Levinson (1978) and Labov and Fanshel (1977) to examine the language of 'account behaviour' within the context of managing 'failure events'. Here the speech acts of excuses and concessions are deemed more mitigating than justifications and refusals because

the former threaten the speaker's face, the latter, the hearer's. The mitigation-aggravation dimension is employed by Benoit and Benoit (1990) in their research into opening utterances of conflict episodes. They argue that not only does the opening offer a first clue to the nature of the conflict; it also influences its course. The notion of mitigation appears, too, in a recent work by Gervasio (1987) which analyses techniques of assertiveness training as speech acts to understand how they are received by hearers in interactional contexts. A different perspective is offered by Sheldon's (1992) gender-based study which explores mitigation as a self-assertive strategy used by girls in conflict interactions.

Of major relevance is Linde's (1988) empirical investigation of mitigation in aviation discourse which was conceived within a framework of communicative effectiveness. Using statistical verification of interactional consequences of patterns of mitigation, Linde's focus is essentially pragmatic: she examines the notion of success in interaction and correlates this both to linguistic patterns and contextual variables. The research findings are two-fold: mitigation is linked to relational harmony but also to message risk. Linde's findings focus on 'the real-world dangers of excessive mitigation' (1988:379), and as such, empirically corroborate the conceptual framework governing the present study.

### 5.2.3 Stretches of talk

Of interest, too, is Bayraktaroglu's (1991) treatment of mitigation over stretches of talk. Arguing for a dynamic concept of politeness in which participants avoid or rectify face threat through exerted damage control over sequences of talk, Bayraktaroglu's central concept is 'interactional balance', derived from Goffman's 'ritual disequilibrium' (1972b:328). For Bayraktaroglu, however, the FTA is too limited and too static; he finds empirical support for the larger more dynamic concept of 'balance' in preference organisation - i.e. systematic features in the design of turns over stretches of talk. Bayraktaroglu draws on Atkinson and Drew (1979) and Heritage (1989) who themselves built a bridge between face considerations and preference organisation. Bayraktaroglu concludes that conversation is constantly monitored by participants for 'changes in established face values' (1991:30); when these are unavoidable, efforts are expended to rectify the interactional imbalance. There is both a close link and an important distinction between this work and the present study: both are concerned with how speakers seek to redress threats to face; however, while Bayraktaroglu focuses on how the redress operates across stretches of talk, the focus of the present study is on the operation of redressive strategies at the utterance level.

Held (1989), too, is concerned with supportive acts across stretches of talk. Here the focus is on 'maximisation' (c.f. Holmes' 'boosting', 1984), which is linked to its inverse ('minimisation') in being a function of affect. Held contends that speakers use maximisation strategies (e.g. 'I really do need the book') much as they use mitigation - in anticipation of the other's face wants and so as to influence in a positive way the turn of events as the discourse unfolds.

#### 5.2.4 Multiple goals

Recent communication studies have sought a marriage of discourse concerns and goal theory (Tracy & Coupland, 1990a). A study which deals with the potential discourse clash of politeness and clarity is by Tracy and Eisenberg (1990/1991) who conceive of criticism as requiring attention to multiple goals - clarity and face attention - and investigate these as linked to the variables of status, gender and race. Their findings suggest that for the paradigm of competing clarity/face attention to operate, a distinction must be made between the addressee's positive and negative face wants. Specifically, they found that clarity and positive face wants do not endanger one another, but rather are positively related; but that clarity competes with the negative face wants of the addressee.

The present inquiry into mitigation has not systematically distinguished between politeness addressed to positive and negative face (but see App. 20). The claim is that the critical FTA in teacher supervision is a threat to both faces -the hearer's self-image and freedom to act unimpeded are both under threat. This is because criticism, being negative, undermines the teacher's positive self-image; and, being a request to improve performance, impedes their autonomy. As the discussion of mitigation in the typology will reveal, supervisors engage in 'multiple kinds of face work' (Lim & Bowers, 1991:448) to achieve their goals. As a very large amount of this is addressed to negative face, Tracy and Eisenberg's study (1990/1991) would therefore lend support to the notion that such communication is problematic - or in the terms of the research question, 'fragile'.

#### 5.2.5 Written genres

While this inquiry is centrally concerned with face-to-face spoken encounter, mitigation is clearly not confined to speech contexts. Lakoff refers to the deliberate 'false start' device (1975:315) that writers can use to good and intentional effect. Swales' work in academic

genres led him to refer to the use of various rhetorical hedging devices as a 'long standing and widespread' convention 'both for projecting honesty, modesty and proper caution in self-reports, and for diplomatically creating research space in areas heavily populated by other researchers' (1991:175). Comparably, Myers' work (1989) in scientific writing shows the influence of politeness conventions in a supposedly 'objective' genre. Also within written genres, in McKenzie's (1992) critical investigation of 'euphemism as idiom' in school reporting, the notion of mitigation, though not termed such, is paramount in the patterns of teacher's writing which are consistently evasive, imprecise, floral and tangential. Cherry's (1988) empirical study of politeness in written persuasion explored mitigation vis-a-vis the variable of power in the writer-addressee relationship.

### 5.3 A set of premises

#### Overview

**Before proceeding to a step-by-step analysis of the multiple constituent parts of the typology, the stage will be set by outlining four elements which each influence the way the language has been approached in the investigation.**

#### 5.3.1 Language as motivated pattern, interpreted pragmatically

This inquiry rests on the analysis of patterns drawn from the language data. Central, then, is the assumption that language use is purposeful and amenable to analysis.

Halliday writes of language as 'patterned activity' (1976:56), remarking that language does not happen involuntarily, 'outside' of ourselves. That everything is motivated, nothing accidental; that language users avail themselves of options from language's 'meaning potential' (1976:142); that these options are the grammar; and that the selection takes place in contexts of situation, not *in vacuo* - these ideas underpin the present inquiry. Perhaps Halliday expressed this best in the final sentence of his Introduction to Functional Grammar (1985:345):

A text is meaningful because it is an actualisation of the potential that constitutes the linguistic system; it is for this reason that the study of discourse... cannot properly be separated from the study of the grammar that lies behind it.



Central here are the notions of agency and rational choice: language is purposeful, intentional, goal-directed behaviour. Green refers to sentences as 'instruments used intentionally by agents' to execute 'particular plans' that are formulated a propos 'particular addressees' of whom the speaker may be 'presumed to have particular beliefs and attitudes' (1989:113). There is a transparency, then, in surface form that aids the investigator by providing 'direct insight into the meaning which is expressed (Fowler & Kress, 1979:205).

Language, then, will tell an investigator much - from the examination of properties in text to the inferencing about context and its relationship with text. On this interface, Green (1989:11) writes:

There is more to understanding utterances than parsing them and deriving representations of their propositional meaning... it is necessary also to make inferences about what the utterer believes about what the addressee believes, and about what effects the utterer intends the utterance to have.

Thus a pragmatic interpretation entails a coherence of discourse that is larger than the words of the text, allowing the investigator to move beyond what is said to what is meant, unpacking the meanings that are 'mobilised' by language (J. Thompson, 1984:132).

### 5.3.2 The perilous path of communication: inference as a pragmatic process

The fact that language has a conventional syntax, semantics and a defined lexicon, together with rules of adherence that bind members of a speech community in their construction of utterances, may suggest that what one says matches one's intention which itself matches one's hearer's interpretation (Green, 1989). There is, as Reddy (1979) has shown, a pervasive, albeit erroneous, assumption that language is an efficient and faithful vehicle for thought transmission. This is reflected in the metaphor 'conducting' a conversation with its connotations of control and efficiency - quite distinct from the notion, pointed out by Gadamer that conversation has 'a spirit of its own' in which participants are 'far less the leaders... than the led' (1975:345). In this regard, Candlin (1981:166) cites Winograd (1974):

A sentence does not convey meaning the way a truck conveys cargo, complete and packaged. It is more like a blueprint that allows the hearer to reconstruct the meaning from his [sic] own knowledge.

Thus, while we speak of people 'exchanging' ideas or thoughts, in fact, true exchange is not possible: 'utterances... are apprehended by listeners to some indeterminate degree within the context of some fit between life experiences' (Crymes & Potter, 1981:123). In Berlo's words, 'the probability of perfect communication is zero' (1971, cited by Miller & Steinberg, 1975:288); or in the terse words of Hewes, Doelger, and Pavitt, (1985), 'interpreting a message is a dirty business' (cited by Penman, 1990:21), all of which is 'evidence of how thin the ice is that everyone skates on' (Goffman, 1981:10). Human communication is to some extent non-transparent: the hearer has to do more than 'see through the act' to detect the sender's communicative intention (Dascal & Berenstein, 1987:139). The fact that 'some measure of opaqueness is inherent in every communicative act' (Dascal & Berenstein 1987:139) has important implications for the hearer's processing task.

In place of the conduit or truck metaphor, Reddy (1979) convincingly presents his 'toolmaker's paradigm' - in which sentences are like blueprints with a range of possible inferences and no assurance of correctness - as a more realistic portrayal. Here, communication is a much riskier business involving, from the speaker's perspective, assumptions about what the addressee believes; and from the addressee's perspective, a great deal of inferential work in un-earthing speaker intention. Willing uses the term 'interactivity' (1992:1) to refer to the work that interlocutors do to keep their processing knowledge current and to overcome communicative malalignments.

Communication has both an explicit element (semantics) and an implicit element (pragmatics) and the intersection of the two is a pre-condition for the production and interpretation of meaning. The interpretation process is complicated by the fact that the hearer's processing task - recovering meaning from uttered thought - is inescapably dependent on a reading of implicit cues: given that it is not possible for a thought to be totally explicit, the linguistic properties of an utterance 'always underdetermine the thought' (Blakemore, 1989:42). Further, any compensatory effort to upload the explicitness of text so as to reduce reliance on context, only adds to the ponderousness of the text; increases processing effort; and violates both Quantity and Relevance maxims (Blakemore, 1989). The gap between what is said and what is meant is filled with taken-for-granted which themselves provide an excellent window on 'participants' understood realities' (Tracy & Carjuzaa, 1993:175).

Context, then, is crucial to the assignment of meaning. In fact, the importance of pragmatics to the processing of communication has been given unprecedented prominence in Wilson and

Sperber's (1981; 1986) paradigm, which relegates traditional linguistic elements (semantics, syntax, phonology) to a relatively minor role. Here Gricean maxims are effectively recast under one sweeping 'principle of relevance', founded on the complementary concepts of ostension (the signal given by the speaker) and inference (the process by which the hearer derives meaning). While this is beyond the scope of this inquiry, its mention is relevant to the notion of communication as a 'risk experience' (Baker, 1975:37) - a notion which will be revisited toward the end of this chapter, and in Ch. 8, in discussions of what mitigation does to risk in supervisory communication.

### 5.3.3 Frame theory - a pragmatic account of the interpretive process

The third premise that preambles the typology is the recognition that participants bring with them, to any particular speech event, a framework of expectations - a 'context of anticipation' (Hogan, 1983:39) - that largely determines both what they say and how they are interpreted. Minsky (1975) called this 'a remembered framework to be adapted to fit reality by changing details as necessary' (cited by Brown & Yule, 1983a:238). In fact, the 'frame' is a metaphor for understanding discourse as 'a process of fitting what one is told into the framework established by what one already knows' (Charniak, 1979, cited by Brown & Yule, 1983a:239). Wittgenstein's notion of the indefinite variety of 'language games' or speech events that humans invent (1958:10-11) has as its 'interpretative corollary' the idea of an inferential schema or frame: 'a body of knowledge that is evoked in order to provide an inferential base for the understanding of an utterance' (Levinson, 1983:281). Goffman refers to a 'mutual knowingness' (1981:11) that underpins the assignment of meaning. So, whether one interprets an utterance ('I won't forget what you have done') as a threat or a promise; or another ('can we move the fridge?') as a request for permission or a request for action; or another ('we're all here') as an observation of fact or a signal to begin a meeting - each time depends on the speech event-specific expectations ('frames') that participants bring with them to the event.

In the speech event of the supervision encounter, 'frames' provide a way of representing the background and contextual knowledge that participants pre-suppose and activate as producers and receivers of language; and the interpretation of mitigation operates from this perspective. The investigator responds to instances of mitigation textually and contextually by using her own linguistic and communicative competence to understand textual properties; and by interpreting utterances contextually, within the frame-specific schemata which govern them.

### 5.3.4 Mitigation as meta-communication

It has been noted that language has both a propositional function and a personal function - sending a message and sending a view. Within this paradigm, mitigation is the speaker's viewpoint on the message being sent. As has been suggested, a peculiar tension may obtain when a conflict exists between these two elements.

A compatible view is that mitigators are 'messages about messages' (Willing, 1992:28), guiding interpretation by the hearer of the propositional content of the message proper. Bateson uses the term 'metacommunicative' (1972:178) for signals sent to enable receivers to interpret meaning. Such signals indicate that 'the subject of discourse is the relationship between the speakers' (Bateson, 1972:178). Like Fraser's 'discourse markers' (1990b), they orient the hearer, rather than create meaning of themselves. Lakoff's term 'paralinguistic' is used to denote elements that function 'as a comment on the message, not generally as the message itself' (1975:319), arguing that most of what we say is relational rather than denotative (1974a). In Stubbs' words, these messages lack a 'property of thesis' (1983a:68).

The devices themselves are 'non-salient' (Willing, 1992:36): generally neither the forms nor the way in which they transform the propositional content are attended to consciously. According to Willing, linguistic signalling of this kind can be achieved very minimally and efficiently: 'the cues have had many centuries to be worn down and polished' (1991:37). This is akin to Goffman's notion of 'enabling conventions' (1983:5) and 'hardened access routes' (1983:3). Writing about the emic status of particles, Brown states that they are 'opaque' to the users (1980:125), operating 'in the background of awareness' (1980:124). In one sense, because the engine that attends to the relational barometer is running constantly - 'a delicately set thermostat which keeps the communication system simmering at the desired temperature' (Stubbs, 1983a:241) - it is silent and invisible, naturalised into taken-for-grantedness.

It might be argued, too, that meta-messages necessarily have to operate on a different level of consciousness to the propositional message so as not to obtrude. Yet this feature renders them particularly difficult to retrieve through retrospective methods, as interlocutors are not usually aware of their meta-function within unfolding discourse. Hence the need for analysis to be made on actual transcripts, not memory of dialogues.

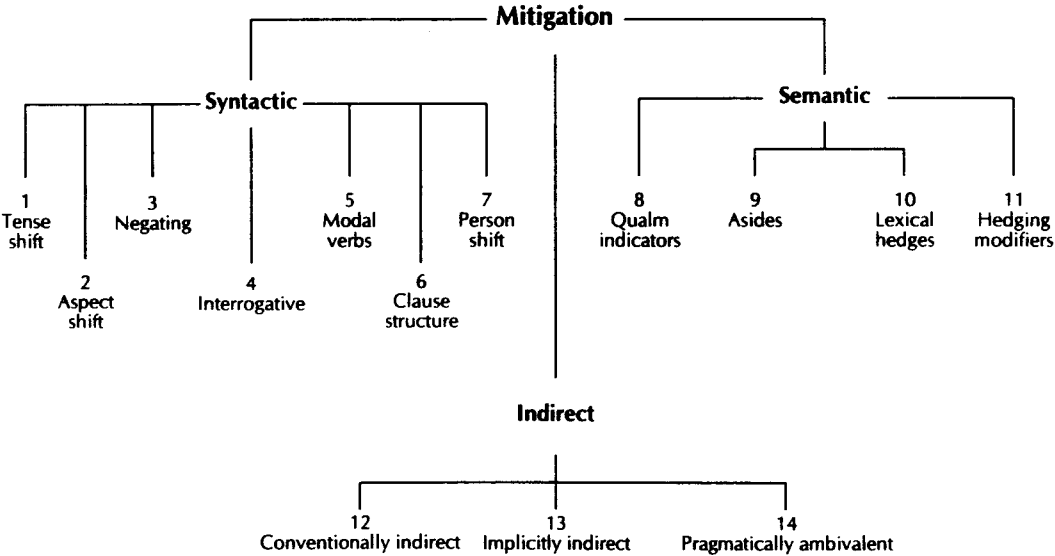
## 5.4 The typology of mitigation: preamble

### 5.4.1 A logical paradigm

The intention in Ch. 5 is to inventory - classify, describe and interpret - the range and type of mitigation that emerged from the grounded theory study of supervisory conferences; and display these in a typology (Fig. 2). Categories of mitigation have been identified and grouped into a logical paradigm that accounts for all the mitigation in the data (but note App. 24). The research method by which this was achieved was outlined in Ch. 4. The rest of this chapter is organised according to the 14 categories of the typology, each of which has been allocated a numbered code (1-14).

The description of each code follows the same format based on three mini-functions - naming, exemplifying and interpreting. In each case, the category is named; examples are cited from the data; and a pragmatic interpretation is given of how the mitigation operates. The pragmatic interpretation includes an analysis of defining features, often organised internally into logical sub-classes. The heart of Ch. 5, therefore, is composed of these pragmatic accounts of mitigation, which individually and collectively interpret the presence and function of mitigators through a pragmatic lens.

The typology (see Fig. 2) contains three major categories, named Structural, Semantic, and Indirect. They are all strategic for they all function through an orientation to face. However, the manner in which they are realised linguistically varies; and this variation provides the basis for the tri-partite division. The syntactic category covers mitigation which is grammaticised into the mechanics of message construction through the syntax of the language (e.g. tense, negation, interrogation). The semantic category covers mitigation conveyed directly through the function of words as signals of meaning (e.g. lexical hedges, hedging asides). The indirect category covers types of strategic mitigation that operate through obliqueness. Here a four-point gradient is established, extending from the pole of explicit to that of ambivalent. Unlike the indirect category, the order of elements *within* the syntactic and semantic categories is random.



**Figure 2:** Typology of utterance-level mitigation in supervisory discourse

5.4.2 Interconnections

As the display of the typology suggests, the three macro- categories are not separate, discrete and autonomous units but rather interconnect in important and intricate ways, a complexity perhaps belied by the apparent neatness of the schema. This complexity operates in two primary ways.

Firstly, as the schema suggests, the entire category of Indirect mitigation is itself realised syntactically and semantically. For example, the means by which a speaker may be ‘conventionally indirect’ (Code 12) is typically syntactic - i.e. through the use of an interrogative instead of a declarative e.g.

- *did you think, think that the actual group task itself went a bit too long or were you happy with that?* [8.3.1]

Secondly, an interweaving of syntactic, semantic and indirect categories is normal, unmarked usage (Craig et al. 1986). While the typology may suggest neat, separated units, in fact mitigators rarely operate in isolation; most commonly they co-exist within and across utterances, deriving their power as much from their collocational and contextual connections as from their individual pragmatic force. In the following instance

- *I think then you, I think run the danger of moving into just parrot fashion sort of drill responses which (are) without meaning [4.7.7]*

the supervisor is being critical of the drill phase of the teacher's lesson. Here, syntactic mitigators (e.g. the clause structure which places the critical comment in the subordinate clause attached to a main modalising clause) is blended with semantic mitigators (e.g. the minimising adjunct 'just'; and the specification hedge 'sort of'). In addition, the supervisor renders the criticism more indirect by a subtle shift of tense: instead of referring to the action in real time (in the time-history of the discourse, this would be past), he refers to it in the time-neutral present ('you run'). This softening is aided by the ambiguity of the second person ('you', my interlocutor c.f. 'you', people in general). Combined, these syntactic shifts allow the 'danger' to appear hypothetical rather than real. This instance illustrates the co-existence of mitigators from all of the three macro-groups, and indicates that as well as the attenuation borne by the individual item, there is a cumulative or collective impact as well. This kind of patterning led discourse researchers Aronsson and Satterlund-Larsson to refer to such manoeuvres as 'social choreography' (1987:2).

#### 5.4.3 Systematising the data: drawbacks of a typology

Assigning items to categories involved a constant re-appraisal of the study's central and peripheral purposes. Apart from Holsti's guiding criteria (1969), discussed in Ch. 4, a major decision was the over-all organisation of information. A typology, of course, offers great attractions: it eases the process of analysis; it imposes order on seeming chaos; it aids in convergent and divergent thinking; it offers clarity through a schematised display. Yet, despite these advantages, a number of drawbacks pertain.

As already suggested, a shortcoming of any system of classification is the distortion that results from a failure 'to reflect the extent to which different devices work together to convey meaning' (Holmes, 1984:363). A typology is necessarily static, while natural language is fluid, dynamic and subtle, with nuance and suggestion - 'the very stuff of skilful communication' - resulting as much from the co-placement of meaning-carrying items as from individual ones (Holmes, 1984:363).

A second failure of any typology is its character of being set in concrete, its failure to show that other ways of interpreting the data are also possible. For example, in his classification of

workplace-based clarification and problem-solving strategies, Willing (1992) organises items logically along a continuum from minimal discourse cues to explicit full-utterance meta-discoursal messages. There is an inherent elegance about this system, which is perhaps a result of the operation of a single criterion -degree of explicitness<sup>1</sup>. The point here is not that one is better or more appropriate, but that the decision to settle on a typology is itself limiting, blinding one to viable classificatory options.

A third failure of a typology is its inability - through being a representation of a restricted aspect of language (mitigation) -to account for anomalies and overlaps that are a part of the natural complexity of 'unfettered' language. While it is perhaps a tribute to the richness of language that it generates so many potential analytical perspectives, this does not ease the researcher's task. For example, the notion of modality, central to mitigation, is discussed in different sections<sup>2</sup>; and while this is justifiable, it militates against neatness.

A fourth weakness of a typology of the kind used in this inquiry is that it gives no indication of the interactional context from which items derive and from which they gain their mitigating meaning. Enough has been said about the non-correspondence of form and function for it to be clear that mitigation is not an intrinsic quality, but rather is an interplay of text and context. What is attenuating in one context may be intensifying in another<sup>3</sup>. Determining the effect of a particular item has to do with lexico-syntactical properties (e.g. where an item is placed); pragmatic factors (e.g. the accompanying speech act being modified); social factors (e.g. the relationship between the interlocutors); contextual factors (e.g. the history of the discourse and the purpose of the speech event) - many of which are considerations that a typology is unable to capture.

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<sup>1</sup> To some extent, this is echoed in the internal organisation of this study's macro-category of *Indirect*.

<sup>2</sup> See modal verbs (syntactic), clause structure (syntactic), and hedging modifiers (semantic). Sometimes, an item is classified in one category, even with the awareness that there is an extremely good case for placing it elsewhere: for example, the utterance '*it's important that learning is always...*' [4.8.1] could have been discussed in the section on modal orientation (Code 5); but instead, seems to serve the study better as an instance of person shift (Code 7) - an avoidance of the first person ('I think') and the second ('you should'); and a distancing of the critical element to the more remote third person ('it').

<sup>3</sup> Compare the force of 'just' in the following instances: 'I just [= merely, only] wanted to say'... uttered by a supervisor as a preamble to a criticism; and 'it's just [= exactly, precisely] what I wanted' uttered by the receiver of a birthday gift, opened prior to speaking (c.f. Lee, 1987).



Given these drawbacks<sup>1</sup>, it might be argued that the task is inherently fraught: the act of classifying is premised upon firm decisions about form, function and context which the complexity of natural language is wont to defy. A compromise of sorts is achieved through the tri-partite, interlocking schema, with cross-referencing (mainly through footnotes) to alert the reader to overlaps and other perspectives.

## Overview

This introductory section has set out the premises that, along with politeness theory, determine the approach taken to mitigation. Notwithstanding the caveats about typologising, the next section catalogues the classes and sub-classes of the typology of mitigators gleaned from the critical incidents of the conferences.

## 5.5 The typology

### 5.5.1 Macro-class I: Syntactic mitigation (see Fig. 3)

#### Code 1: Tense shift

- *I was<sup>2</sup> worried at one stage because you tended to be looking to one side of the class [9.2.1.]<sup>3</sup>*

At a semantic level, tense refers to 'the relationship between the form of the verb and the time of the action or state it describes' (Richards et al. 1985:290). Unmarked deictic conventions (Fillmore, 1971; 1974; 1975; cited by Brown & Levinson, 1978:123) place the roles of speaker and hearer within the spatio-temporal and social location of a speech event. Thus the past time inflection indicates the past time zone.

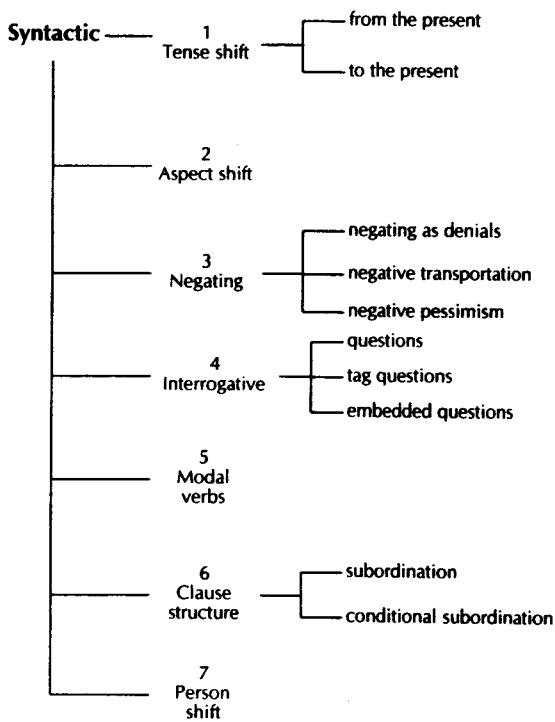
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<sup>1</sup> Another issue, which must remain unexplored, is the tension wrought from 'carving up' an integrated natural phenomenon (here, language) into discrete artificial units, a tendency which Christie (1993:8) attributes to the Western perception of reality as 'atomised' and 'objective'.

<sup>2</sup> All data-driven utterances are italicised to differentiate them from contrived or 'introspected' examples. The feature of interest to the accompanying discussion (here, tense) is indicated, where possible, by underlines. Where the entire sample is the feature of interest, it is not underlined.

<sup>3</sup> The number code [9.2.1] refers to the first move within the second critical incident of the ninth SD.

However, tense may also have pragmatic meaning, serving a purpose, outside of time anchorage, for the speaker in relation to the hearer and the context. Brown and Levinson refer to marked tense ‘centrings’ as ‘point-of-view operations’ (1978:123) that allow the speaker a number of facilities, notably politeness. Tense shifts<sup>1</sup> are politeness-oriented adjustments, or operations, which allow speakers to mitigate their message. In Goffman’s terms, they are meaningful for they represent changes in a speaker’s ‘footing’ (1981:151).



**Figure 3:** Macro-class I: Syntactic mitigation

Analysing tense within functional-systemic terms, Kress distinguishes between the deictic function of a tense-marked form, that locates the utterance in the ‘history of the discourse’; and its modal function, which passes comment on the ‘reality-, certainty- or actuality-status of the ideational part of the utterance’ (1977:43). It is with such modal comments that this section is concerned. While it is not possible to claim a precise one-to-one correspondence between a certain point-of-view operation and a particular pragmatic meaning, the examples set out below are underpinned by the sense that the tense choice is marked and reflects a pragmatic meaning (mitigation) which overlays the semantic one (time).

<sup>1</sup> c.f. aspect shifts (Code 2) and person shifts (Codes 7).

## Shift from the present

Often the speaker chooses the past over the unmarked present, or makes a shift from present to the past, with the motivation to distance the thought or event or state from the present. Removing the time is effective pragmatically: it makes the offending comment 'less present', more remote, more nebulous, less retrievable. The outcome of this 'distantiation' (McLaughlin, 1984:146) is to reduce the relevance, and also the force of the accompanying assertion. If it happened in the past, perhaps it no longer exists or applies?<sup>1</sup> Fraser (1980) places this kind of mitigation under the heading of 'immediacy,' a term taken from the work of Mehrabian and Wiener (1966) in psychotherapy, where immediacy is correlated with positive feelings, and distance with less positive ones. The suggestion is that distancing can convey a negative attitude even toward the message itself (Fraser, 1980:346). Goffman refers to the 'embedding function' of talk (1981:151), whereby, for example, a speaker may shift from reporting the current feelings of the 'addressing self' to the 'embedded' feelings once had, and (perhaps?) no longer espoused. Kress claims that an event which is rendered distant from the place and time of the speech event 'cannot necessarily be vouched for': the speaker neither experiences it nor expresses it as actuality (1977:44). Thus a functional shift resembles a grammatical metaphor: 'past tense comes to symbolise the concept non-actual' (Kress, 1977:44).

Typically, the shift is from the present, where the event is actually located, to the past; and it often occurs in utterances containing expressive modality:

- *I still thought there was a bit of confusion for the students [1.9.1]*
- *I just sort of felt that... it somehow shifted the focus of your lesson [4.2.1]*
- *I was worried at one stage because you tended to be looking to one side of the class [9.2.1]*
- *I just thought perhaps you should have asked them first [9.5.3]*

In regard to utterances prefaced by a mental process verb in the matrix clause (e.g. 'think', 'feel', 'wonder'), Kress argues that two modalities are operational: firstly, the mental process verb itself distances and therefore softens the proposition embedded to it; and secondly, the past tense morpheme ('thought', 'felt') removes the force of the utterance 'from the actual now to the non-actual not-now', a modality that protects the speaker against potential challenge and is useful in awkward situations of 'inherent disequilibrium' (1977:45)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This blurring of conventional distinctions is also an important ingredient in pragmatic ambivalence (see 5.5.3 on indirectness).

<sup>2</sup> These issues are further discussed in Codes 6 and 11.

Sometimes the immediacy of the present is avoided by the shift to the future form, as in these examples of 'will'-for-negative-tendencies:

- *and also in relation to language um I think you're so conscious of their level [mm] as being very low that there's slight tendency to over-accommodate, so that you will say things like you you'll break up your model into 'we're looking for a two bedroom flat in the city' [5.6.1]*
- *you'd be surprised how much you can get out of them and you won't be correcting them... [5.7.5]*

Sometimes the shift is from present to conditional. In the following example, in order to appear less confronting, the supervisor chooses the marked conditional over the unmarked present, before then retreating to the time zone of the event:

- *now in the practice I think I've got down here the groups were a little inattentive. Once they'd finished practising one of the situations up here, these two men over here for example, they just started chatting amongst themselves [mm]. How would you react to that? what, did you feel that you, did you ignore them on purpose? or did you think to yourself 'well, what will I do about that group over there who aren't practising'? [3.10.1]*

#### Shift to the present

On the other hand, in moments of solidarity that characterise positive politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1978), a shift from the past to the present suggests a collegiality, symmetry and a seeking of harmony. The following example shows how the supervisor shifts to the past when being critical and back to the present to be collegial. Interestingly, the shift to the present is accompanied by a person shift from 'you' to 'we'. The shifts cannot be fully explained through semantics alone. There is a suggestion, too, that the present, being the least time-zoned tense, affords a safe neutrality which serves a mitigating function:

- *yeah that, I thought I just thought about that although when you asked them, when you asked them if they write on the paper I just thought that was, you were lucky, because they hadn't started it on plastic [mm] and there was no and you remained in control of all of that, but tiny details like that I mean we all do it [mm] and sometimes we're lucky and sometimes we're aren't - unlucky, it can throw you all then um I just thought perhaps you should have asked them first to... [9.5.3]*

A marked shift to the present may be an indicator of positive politeness: the 'dramatic' or 'vivid' present highlights a sharing between speaker and hearer. Likewise, a marked shift to the present can also have a mollifying effect: although it brings the problem/issue into the

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<sup>1</sup> This issue is discussed in Code 7.

immediacy of 'now', it also mitigates by removing it from its true location - the time zone where it logically belongs - and placing it in the time-neutral present:

- *so you're looking for linkages across time? [2.1.4]*
- *you're asking them to remember and apply something they learned in that situation, to a new context without you actually saying 'would you please re-apply your learning?' [2.1.14]*
- *it's cultural, you, what you're doing is providing a cultural behaviour pattern... at a personal level it may not annoy but our job there is also to teach them cultural conventions for the rest of the teachers so we've got to break them in for the others as well, it's like training horses [2.6.9]*
- *so that's one example, you're throwing them into this task before their mouths and their minds are ready for it. Similarly, the second task, which again is more complex [mm] they have to formulate questions off out of their own heads, they have to say: does it have two... bedrooms? is it in Bondi? [5.3.1]*
- *you've mixed you're mixing them all up together and [yeah] expecting them to suddenly produce it [5.3.5]*
- *that's what teachers do [8.8.2]*

On some occasions, a marked choice of time calls attention to itself as having a pragmatic nuance. In the following example, the use of the marked 'going to' instead of the unmarked 'will' for future expectations takes the edge off the supervisor's certainty, a mitigation enhanced here by the duplication as well as person shift (second to third) and voice shift (active to passive) - all of which are choices that cannot be accounted for solely through recourse to semantic meaning:

- *um drilling I agree it's still an area that you know can be worked upon but I think you're going to find that by going to the lower level you're going to be forced it's going to be forced upon you [7.2.1]*

## Code 2: Aspect shift

- *in the practice phase it was going a little bit away from this casual informal atmosphere that you created in the presentation [3.8.5]*

Aspect is 'a grammatical category which deals with how the event described by the verb is viewed, such as whether it is in progress, habitual, repeated, momentary etc' (Richards et al. 1985:18). The facet of aspect with which this study is concerned is marked usage, typically a shift from the simple to the durative in places where the durative is not appropriate from a time standpoint. The pragmatic interpretation of this shift is that the speaker, through violating the Gricean maxim of Manner, seeks to make the action more vague, less precise, less able to be pin-pointed and located in time. This reduces the sharpness, so blunting the criticism. There may also be the nuance that the speaker, in shifting to the durative, is choosing to

highlight the process, perhaps to deflect attention from the person (where 'you', typically, is the teacher/addressee). In rendering the event itself less precise or focal, it works as a 'tentativiser' (Brown & Levinson 1978:158), hedging the assertion.

- *you were putting these pictures on the floor but they didn't quite know what you wanted* [3.11.1]
- *so you're involving all the people all the time* [8.11.1]
- *were you... perhaps hoping in the middle of it 'I wish this were a bit shorter?'* [3.1.3]

Related to this category are instances such as the following :

- *so it's just another thing, always keeping in balance, maybe the material isn't motivating* [10.3.9]
- *have you, instead of, instead of um using an oral response, think of just going and lurking beside a kid* [2.10.5]
- *I think, making them aware that they're making those errors* [1.7.3]

In this last example, the '-ing' form may be described in different ways: as a softer substitute for the harsher imperative ('make them aware'); as a gerund noun clause subject ('making them aware (is)...'); or as an elliptical form that allows avoidance of both the second person and a modal of obligation ('you should make them more aware...'). Whatever the 'expanded' version is deemed to be, the '-ing' form affords a focus on process which helps make the assertion more palatable as criticism.

The '-ing' form is not always readily identifiable as the durative aspect, and grammarians differ in their classifications of terms (e.g. durative aspect, gerunds, present participles). It is beyond the scope of this study to explore this other than to mention that it promotes some difficulty in classification<sup>1</sup>. It is, however, tempting to link the marked use of the form with Ross' (1972) 'category squish' concept in which he argues against the traditional discrete distinctions among grammatical classes (nouns, verbs etc.) and for a continuum from 'verbiness' to 'nouniness'. He suggests that the '-ing' form moves an item out of the category of 'pure' verb<sup>2</sup>, further right along the left-to-right continuum. Such a move is away from 'syntactic freedom and volatility'

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<sup>1</sup> For example, there is a potential overlap between instances of Code 2, involving aspect shift, and Code 7, involving person shift often through nominalisation. In general, the 'rule of thumb' by which the two have been separately classified is this: if the '-ing' form appears to be used as strategy to allow the speaker to delete agency, then it is classified a code 7; when, on the other hand, the motivation behind the '-ing' form seems to be to make time/event/verb location less precise through a shift to the durative, then the classification is code 2.

<sup>2</sup> From left to right: verb -> present participle -> past participle -> passive participle -> adjective -> preposition -> adjectival noun -> noun (Ross, 1972:316).

in the direction of 'syntactic inertness' (Ross, 1972:317). The pragmatic force of the shift is akin to the deletion of agency that may occur through nominalisation<sup>1</sup>.

### Code 3: Negating

- *I don't think they quite got the idea [1.9.5]*

This section will deal with three aspects of negating: negating as denial; negative transportation; and negative pessimism.

The distinction is made, following Bublitz (1992), between the grammatical notion ('negation') and the pragmatic one ('negating'), reflecting a distinction between language-as-system and language-in-practice. As with other grammatical constructs, interpretation of a speaker's preference for a type of negating is bound up closely with 'treating principles of pragmatics as a necessary complement to rules of grammar' (Bublitz, 1992:553).

#### Negating as denial

- *it's not a problem [2:5:3]*
- *it 's not like it was a great problem [4.1.9]*
- *I'm not hassled about it [2:5:3]*
- *it wasn't always consistent [1.1.9]*
- *what, you didn't feel it was successful? [1.1.3]*
- *why don't you... ask them?... if the kids aren't liking the text [10.3.9]*
- *it's just that nature has not endowed us with low-pitched voices [2.4.2]*

The first aspect of negation is the obliquity and relative uninformativeness of negation in comparison to affirmative counterparts. Leech's (1983:100) examples demonstrate this well:

Abraham Lincoln was shot by John Wilkes Booth.  
Abraham Lincoln was not shot by Ivan Mazeppa.

As the number of people who did not shoot Lincoln is millions of times greater than the number of people who did, the negative declarative is therefore significantly less informative than the affirmative. Leech argues that the Gricean maxim of Quantity actually operates with

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<sup>1</sup> This is discussed further in Code 7.

an implicit sub-maxim of ‘negative uninformativeness’ which suggests that, all things being equal, an affirmative is a more efficient route towards clear expression of meaning (c.f. Levinson’s ‘Principle of Informativeness’, 1983:146). The negative therefore has a marked or special purpose, principally in the denial of positive pre-suppositions that are present in the context (c.f. Givon, 1978). Thus ‘*it’s not a problem*’ is not quite as unproblematic as its affirmative equivalent (‘*it was a minor problem*’), for it includes reference to the presupposition of a problem somewhere in the context of discourse (Levinson, 1983). This notion of denial is apparent in the following example:

- *don’t get me wrong, it’s not like it was a great problem, I’m sure that they got a lot from doing that [4:1:9]*

Here, the supervisor raises the idea of a problem by means of denying it: a cleverly oblique way of making a point. It is as if, in the face-to-face interaction, the denial allows the supervisor to occupy a more comfortable pragmatic space than that which would be afforded by the affirmative, albeit direct, counterpart.

That negation is not satisfactorily explained through a purely semantic account is explored in the work of Horn (1984; 1985) and Horn and Bayer (1984) who account for the negation of a sentence (like ‘the king of France is not bald’, in Givon, 1978) not as linguistic negation, (which involves simply the denial of a proposition) but as a meta-linguistic device, the purpose of which is to deny the pre-supposition subsumed in the affirmative utterance: ‘the king of France isn’t bald; there is no king of France’ (Green, 1989:113).

As well as violating Quantity, negatives also violate Manner. Evidence from psycholinguistic research suggests that a negative sentence takes longer to process than its affirmative counterpart (Clark & Clark, 1977, cited by Leech 1983:101; Clark & Lucy, 1975, cited by McLaughlin, 1984:150), so causing an utterance to be more oblique than necessary. A circuitous route - ‘a complex process of interpretive reasoning’ (Bublitz, 1992:563) - requires of the hearer more inferential work as he or she struggles to unpack the meaning and locate the scope of the negation through both textual and non-textual clues (Bublitz, 1992)<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the increased inferencing courts greater risk through increased ambivalence (Bublitz, 1992).

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<sup>1</sup> A similar point about unpacking meaning in indirect utterances is made in Code 10, on lexical hedges. See also the discussion of the mitigating influence of a cautious use of praise in supervisor discourse (App. 21).



McKenzie (1992) suggests that the 'double negative' effect of constructions like 'not unintelligent' (c.f. Holmes' 'not unreasonable', 1984:358) sets up an ambiguity in the receiver's mind related to a 'generalised vagueness' (McKenzie, 1992:234). McKenzie's field of inquiry is the use of euphemism in school reports; and he cites one student's reaction: 'although what the euphemism actually means... can be deduced, people generally seem to find the news far less shocking than if it had been told bluntly or directly' (1992:234).

Order of elements is also significant. In the data, often a negation precedes an affirmative, as if the speaker is cautiously setting the scene for the assertion by first hedging it:

- *um you don't have to apologise [mm] you're there to do that [mm] that's your job [5.9.1]*
- *um often when you correct you don't pay attention to um whether you're trying to get, you, put it this way you over-correct for accuracy [5.9.3]*

The effect of the mitigation becomes very apparent if the order of elements is reversed, as in this reconstruction of the first example above: that's your job -> you're there to do that -> you don't have to apologise.

In his discussion of litotes, Leech's (1983) interpretation of negation similarly reveals a mitigating function. Arguing that a negative proposition is assumed to be denying a positive expectation, the underlying proposition ('the norm') might be seen to be the corresponding positive proposition. Thus, in the instance '*it wasn't always consistent*' [1.1.9], the underlying proposition is the expectation 'it is consistent'. Leech writes: 'in this way the understatement disguises a bad report in a form which on the face of it permits a good interpretation' (1983:148). This conforms with the psychological principle 'the Pollyanna Hypothesis' - the notion that people prefer to look on the bright rather than the gloomy side of life (Leech, 1983:147)<sup>1</sup>.

#### Negative transportation

- *I don't think there's anything wrong with censoring information [9.10.1]*
- *I don't think you have to [9.11.2]*
- *I don't think it hurts with those types of conversational things [9.11.2]*

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<sup>1</sup> This is also known as the 'positivity assumption' (Tesser, Rosen & Waranch, 1973:268). In Holt (1993), an analysis of the sequential patterns of death announcements (as an instance of bad news breaking) reveals that speakers collaborate to move towards an overtly positive stance which itself facilitates topic exit. This category of topic shift is described by Adelsward (1994) as the 'Pollyanna exit'; and by Maynard (1994) as 'the good news exit'.

- *I don't think they they quite got the idea [1.9.5]*
- *I don't know if you picked this up [3.9.1]*
- *you don't want to really be asking these other comprehension questions [3.4.4]*
- *I didn't notice that anyone had actually written that [9.1.3]*
- *I don't think that's all that unusual [10.3.1]*

The second aspect of negation emerging from the data is a phenomenon variously called 'neg-raising', 'negative transportation', 'negative leftshifting' (Bublitz, 1992: 556 and references contained therein). First commented on by Jespersen (1917), it was referred to as 'the strong tendency in many languages to attract to the main verb a negative which should logically belong to the dependent nexus' (1917:53). In Jespersen's examples,

- a. I don't think he has come
- b. I think he has not come

the first has the negative removed from its logical position. Poutsma (1928:105) anticipated the pragmatic significance of negative transportation by claiming that the shift effected a 'softening' of the sentence's negativity. In pointing out the limitation of semantics in accounting for meaning, Bolinger (in letters to G. Lakoff (1967), cited by Lakoff, 1969:140; see also Bolinger, 1968) observed that the negative force of a transported negative 'is perceptibly weaker' than its non-transported counterpart (cited by Horn, 1978:131). Over the last seventy years or so, the interpretation of the transported negative has moved from a general disposition among philosophers to dismiss it as a peculiarity, to a recognition of its considerable pragmatic meaning (Bublitz, 1992).

Horn claims that two principles are relevant in the discussion of the negative. The first is that 'the negative force weakens with the distance of the negative element from the constituent with which it is logically associated' (1978:132). The second is that the negative force 'strengthens with the degree of incorporation (or morphological absorption) of the negative element' (1978:132). Thus in Horn's examples,

- a. I don't think I saw anyone in the room (negative is transported)
- b. I think I didn't see anyone in the room (negative is logically associated)
- c. I think I saw no one in the room (negative is incorporated)

(a) is weaker than (b) which is weaker than (c)<sup>1</sup>.

According to Green (1989), the pragmatic force of the transported negative is to implicate rather than assert, thereby weakening or hedging the claim being made. This is in line with Bolinger's 'Uncertainty Principle' (Lakoff, 1969), where, because the transported negative indicates greater uncertainty in the speaker's mind regarding the negation, it thereby signifies a milder negation. Lysvag (1975) draws attention to verbs like 'think', 'believe', 'seem', 'suppose'; and differentiates between their strong sense, (e.g. 'I believe in God') and their weak sense (e.g. 'I believe there is oil in the Norwegian sea'), arguing that only the weak sense is capable of the hedging potential. He calls these 'hedging predicates': 'verbs that make predictions on states of affairs that have no truth value beyond their subjective impression' (1975:152). He demonstrates how such hedging constructions are able to be transported into single-word sentence adverbials (such as 'seemingly', 'apparently', 'presumably'), carrying an equivalent pragmatic force<sup>2</sup>.

Horn (1978) links the transported negative to indirect speech acts, as a functionally-based phenomenon related to the pragmatics of politeness and giving options. Leech (1983) makes the point that when the negative is transported to a verb expressing emotion or belief (e.g. 'I don't like') it is often preferred as a form of understatement of the syntactically positive equivalent ('I dislike it'). The motivation for this hedging is 'euphemistic reticence' (1983:102), clearly related to the face-driven concerns of politeness.

For Halliday, the issue of negative transportation is bound up with the expression of speaker attitude: 'since the modality is being dressed up as proposition, it is natural for it to take over the burden of yes/no' (1985:333). Likewise, Bublitz (1992) links it to the speaker's need to increase the degree of quantification and tentativeness of the underlying proposition. Bublitz (1992), in addition, shows how mitigation is carried through the mechanics of ordering and processing of information in English, a phenomenon he refers to as 'rhematic splitting' (1992:567), which is an effect of negative transportation. Normally, in the unmarked or

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<sup>1</sup> The incorporated negative is relevant to the description in showing the scope possible in the strength of an utterance (c.f. Levinson's discussion, 1983:162-4). However, it is less of a concern to this inquiry than the transported negative, of which there is abundant evidence in the data.

<sup>2</sup> This is discussed further in Code 11.

underived version, the negative - which carries rhematic information - is conveyed to the right of an utterance (e.g. 'I think it won't rain'). However, in the marked or derived instance, the negative is transported to utterance's initial or thematic position ('I don't think it will rain'). What results is a split rheme and a 'quasi-thematisation' (Bublitz, 1992:568). As a result, the speaker, by foregrounding the negating function, is able to herald the forthcoming proposition, and so 'to soften and tone down the novelty and unexpectedness' (Bublitz, 1992:567). The early negative thus signals that expected assumptions are to be overturned. In violating the unmarked rule, the speaker is thereby letting it be known that he/she gives more store to the effect of the utterance on the interlocutor than the absolute truth value it carries. The effort is to reduce 'the degree of oppositeness and antagonism which may be inherent in the communicative situation and which could then possibly lead to conflict' (Bublitz, 1992: 568).

It will be noted that instances of negative transportation very often co-occur with first person pronouns followed by an assertion e.g. '*I don't think they quite got the idea*' [1.9.5]. Bublitz (1992) links this to negative politeness through the fact that modalising an explicitly subjective assertion is less likely to impose the speaker's view onto the hearer's, and thereby reduces the hearer's obligation to receive the proposition as unmitigated fact<sup>1</sup>.

### Negative pessimism

- *I would suggest, and um I wonder sometimes if it's an area we shouldn't explore more* [10.2.5]
- *the only other thing I wouldn't mind saying* [8.11.1]
- *it's not necessarily the best way to learn* [5.9.5]
- *I um I wouldn't go through all the aspects of grammar until I'd set the scene, until I'd established the context* [5.8.5]
- *why don't you give them um a sheet and ask them?* [10.3.9]

Pessimism is a core element of negative politeness. It allows the speaker to give redress to the hearer's negative face, by explicitly expressing doubt in the existence of the felicity conditions governing the speaker's speech act (Brown & Levinson, 1978:178). The pessimism contained in this type of politeness formulae, often through the strategic deployment of modal verbs and adverbs, has a deliberately awkward, convoluted nature: the hearer is supposed to compute from the evidence of effort that the speaker has put into the design of their utterance, that the speaker wishes to refrain from appearing overly impositive. In the context of giving criticism, the mitigation operates by reducing obligation to optionality, and by distancing through

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<sup>1</sup> This is also discussed as clause sub-ordination in Code 6.

burying. Further, by wrapping the sentiment in a negative, the speaker seems to suggest 'the stronger likelihood of a negative response from the addressee' (Lakoff, 1976:19). This allows the hearer room, indeed permission, to disagree and signals the speaker's desire not to impose on negative face.

#### Code 4: Interrogatives

- *do you still find it a problem?* [1.5.1]

Questions in English provide a fascinating area of study and their richness and complexity take us far beyond the confines of this project (Goody, 1978; Hudson, 1975; Keenan, Schieffelin & Platt, 1978). Much of the complexity arises from the lack of a neat correspondence between form and function; and between question type and politeness strategy (Green, 1989). A question may have the syntactic form of the interrogative ('could you pass the salt?') but serve as a polite request; yet another may lack the interrogative ('I understand you've brought the documents with you') but function as a request for information. Indeed, pragmatics is concerned with this very phenomenon, the fact that the implicit meaning of an utterance may be quite different from its overt form. Hymes (1972a:xxviii) wrote:

One and the same sentence, the same set of words in the same syntactic relationship, may now be a request, now a command, now a compliment, now an insult, depending upon tacit understandings within a community.

As form alone provides an insufficient basis for determining the rule-governed nature of meaning, one must turn, at least in part, to the rules governing social relationships and hence to a pragmatic interpretation (Goody, 1978).

Questions are a primary means by which supervisors 'conventionalise' their approach to feedback, in particular the giving of negative feedback<sup>1</sup>. The concern here is with the syntactic properties of questions as markers of pragmatic meaning.

The data generated three varieties of interrogative: questions as an alternative to statements; tag questions; and embedded questions. The varieties share a particular pragmatic meaning:

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<sup>1</sup> This is also discussed under the topic of indirectness (5.5.3).

they hedge the force of an assertion and, in comparison with the declarative counterpart, reduce its impositive and face-threatening character. All three varieties serve, as Lyons points out, to 'grammaticalise the feature of doubt' (1977, cited by Levinson, 1983:275).

### Questions as an alternative to statements

Linguists approach questions in different ways. Goody (1978) sees them as variously weighted demands for response. Green (1989) places questions on a continuum from sincere (where the speaker wants some information); to rhetorical (where the speaker knows the answer); and in between (e.g. clarification and confirmatory questions), being points on the gradient where the speaker or hearer's knowledge of the answer is a matter of degree, not of absolutes. In Crymes and Potter's (1981) data-based study, questions are lined up on a cline of assertion, through two degrees of challenge, to leading and open questions; and each of these is correlated to form, tag type and tone direction. Others (discussed in Levinson, 1983; and Willing, 1992) see questions as containing within their own syntax the pre-suppositions denoting their own answers<sup>1</sup>. A key point is that questions cannot be falsified (R. Lakoff, 1972a:230), and therefore are not a source of confrontation, debate or controversy - a feature that renders them a useful device for speakers wishing to avoid conflict. Levinson prefers to avoid making any absolute definitive claims about or what he calls 'questionhood', but rather, in a truly pragmatic way, prefers to lay meaning at the nexus of form and context: 'the nature of the use to which interrogatives are put can vary subtly with the nature of the language-games or contexts in which they are used' (1983:275).

In the context of supervisory discourse, questions allow the speaker to turn an 'I' statement into a 'you' question. Especially at the moment of giving negative feedback, the shift in focus from first to second person<sup>2</sup> converts a potential statement of criticism into an apparent inquiry.

- were you happy with the language analysis? [1.8.1]
- do you still find it a problem? [1.5.1]
- do you remember the question that you asked? [3.3.3]
- what... part of the lesson (would you do) differently? [10.1.1]

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<sup>1</sup> Thus a yes/no question is an open proposition closed off by one of two options; and a Wh-question introduces the pre-suppositions obtained by 'replacing the Wh-word by the appropriate existentially quantifiable variable' e.g. 'who' by 'someone' (Levinson, 1983:184).

<sup>2</sup> This is also treated as person shift in Code 7.

- *how could you have worked on that?* [8.1.3]
- *what do you feel about your questioning skill?* [6.1.1.]

Lakoff claims (1974a) that in assuming the position of questioning, the speaker engages in self-humbling - a response is needed, making the asker subservient to the addressee - thereby compensating in part for the relational asymmetry.

Included in this category are rising-toned declaratives (Ching, 1982); elliptical questions; and a hybrid form of statement/question - the 'queclarative' (Geluykens, 1987; Sadock, 1971; Sadock, 1974) - which lacks the syntactic properties of the interrogative, may or may not have rising tone, and yet functions as a question (Pomerantz, 1980, cited by Willing, 1992: 38-9).

- *you can't improve your handwriting?*<sup>1</sup> [5.12.9]
- *he's studying science?* [9.6.5]
- T *well I was ah letting some (errors) slip through*  
S *yeah, on purpose?*  
[9.8.3]

Sadock (1974) argues that hybrids allow for the exploitation of illocutionary ambiguity whereby a speaker is assured a path of retreat should the need arise<sup>2</sup>. Ching's (1982) study of the question intonation in declaratives reveals a plethora of ways by which the question contour indulges the addressee's positive face (through anointing); or negative face (through deference which grants personal space/autonomy). One such is labelled 'mitigation' (1982:105) in that the speaker appears to provide an opportunity for the hearer to disagree. This seemingly makes the notion of truth negotiable, reduces the imposition, while at the same time rendering the speaker apparently sincere and non-aggressive.

### Tag questions

Another form of question that is featured in supervisory discourse is the tag question, which serves as an 'illocutionary-force modifier' (Brown & Levinson, 1978:166) or attenuator (Holmes, 1984:358). The most common is the end-placed tag with contrastive-polarity form:

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<sup>1</sup> As tone is not being 'transcribed', it is not possible to underline the feature of significance in these examples.

<sup>2</sup> This is also discussed as pragmatic ambivalence in Code 14.

- *you're still having a little bit of trouble with your gestures, aren't you? [3.5.1]*
- *they got a bit confused with that, didn't they [3.9.1]*
- *it's a problem, isn't it? (9.2.7]*
- *those people who came in late were a bit of problem, weren't they? [9.6.1]*

The category of tags also includes invariant tags (e.g. 'OK'? 'alright'? 'right?' 'yeah?' 'huh?'), which appear both medially and finally. As the following example shows, the tag serves to soften the directive by seeking co-operation rather than obedience:

- *think about that 'cause you do that quite a lot all right? [2.5.3]*

As Lakoff points out (1976), the tag question, both in its usage and in its syntactic shape in English, falls mid-way between an outright statement and a yes-no question. It is the equivalent, she asserts, of 'a performative verb of softened saying or thinking' (1972a:241). In what is perhaps a simplification of the one-to-many form-function nature of questions (Green, 1989), Lakoff (1976:15) relates this phenomenon in part to an issue of speaker confidence:

One makes a statement when one has confidence in his [sic] knowledge and is pretty certain that his statement will be believed; one asks a question when one lacks knowledge on some point and has reason to believe that this gap can and will be remedied by an answer by the addressee. A tag question, being intermediate between these, is used when the speaker is stating a claim but lacks full confidence in the truth of that claim.

One might add to this last point that the lack of confidence may in fact be a *show* of lack of confidence, for as has been stated elsewhere, matters pertaining to face are largely to do with things as they *appear*, not necessarily as they in fact *are*. Politeness, after all, is about face: it requires lip service and attention to appearances - an effort to be seen to be going through the motions (Green, 1989). Lakoff suggests that 'sham deference is better, anyhow, than real brusqueness' (1975:314).

The tag removes the assumption that the statement is to be believed, as an outright declarative would. R. Lakoff demonstrates, following Grice, how this is achieved through a suspension of the normal sincerity conditions pertaining to speech acts (1972b, cited by Hudson, 1975:6-7). In the tag question 'that's a Rembrandt, isn't it?', the speaker violates both the Quality and Quantity maxims. These violations signal to the hearer that the speaker does not vouch for the remark in the same way as an outright declarative (Corum, 1975; Hudson, 1975). In this way, the speaker succeeds in not forcing a view, belief or assertion on the hearer: the tag question



is 'non-substantial' in that it avoids putting the questioned person 'on the spot' (Good, 1979:156)<sup>1</sup>. Instead, the tag grants space, a notion of negotiability and collaboration, all of which dilute its impositive nature. After all, 'a speaker can demand belief from someone else only on condition that he himself [sic] fully believes the claim he is making' (R. Lakoff, 1972b:917). In this way, tags protect speakers from the consequences of their own speech acts (Lakoff, 1974).

At the same time, the tag question furnishes the speaker with a means by which they can avoid full commitment: it 'modifies the assertoric force' of the declarative clause (Hudson, 1975, cited by Levinson, 1983:261), and gives one an 'out' (Lakoff, 1976:16). The tag carries dubiety, in the place of surety, and signals that the speaker is seeking to self-demote (Lakoff, 1985) and avoid conflict. It also increases the co-operative spirit by providing 'easy entry' for an interlocutor seeking the floor (Holmes, 1993:97). In this sense its use is placatory and harmony-oriented, a proactive avoidance of confrontation (Coates, 1987). In the context of supervisory discourse, these signals help flatten the hierarchy between the giver and receiver of criticism. By thus down-toning their higher status and rendering the criticism more peer-like and less impositively hierarchical, supervisors also hedge their authority,

To take up a recurrent motif in this inquiry, what is important is the fact that the tag, like other syntactic devices with pragmatic functions, serves as a signal from speaker to hearer: that they *wish to appear* less confident, less sure, less committed to the utterance than they might otherwise be. Such signals typically involve a duality - the humbling of self, the anointing of other - and give evidence of the mutuality of face.

#### Embedded questions

- *I don't know if you were listening for that or whether you were aware of it [3.7.1]*
- *I wasn't sure whether you were aware of it or not [9.13.1]*

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<sup>1</sup> c.f. the obligation to respond that is conveyed by an unmarked question-answer adjacency pair.

In the embedded interrogative construction, the question is avoided syntactically by being buried within the subordinate clause of a declarative utterance<sup>1</sup>. Often, the main clause contains a mental process verb with a transported negative - indeed, the construction is characterised by the presence of 'verbs of incertitude' (Dancygier, 1993:431). In by-passing the syntactic question, the speaker pre-empts any potential defensiveness in the hearer. The hearer is not put on the spot for an answer, but is allowed the privilege, indeed the luxury, of answering or not. The beauty of the embedded question is that it relieves the hearer of the obligation to answer: it legitimises the option of 'not hearing' and furnishes the pragmatic choice of 'opting out' (Bonikowska, 1985).

Included, too, is the *de facto* embedded question, which lacks the usual syntactic embedding markers, but functions similarly to relieve the hearer of any obligation to respond:

- *it might be (an) interesting thing just to go and ask one of the teachers in, say or accounting or economics or whatever and, go and observe them and see how much they wander round the room, what-over-the-shoulder, yeah, is there a style difference between teaching in ESL and other mainstream subjects? [2.3.8]*

- *I always one one um thing that always occurs to me with this problem, is is the lesson or the teaching or everything engaging the student, are they mm is it meaningful to them in any way? [5.13.1]*

Holmes (1984) cites evidence from Newell's (1981) research that suggests that embedding FTAs within larger chunks of talk is an attenuating discourse strategy not unconnected the phenomenon of footing shifts, or asides<sup>2</sup>.

## Code 5: Modal verbs

- *You might find that they might attack that vocabulary exercise more willingly [4.4.9]*

'Modality', writes Halliday 'refers to the area of meaning that lies between yes and no' (1985: 335). Thus, in a context where efforts are being expended to avoid full-on face confrontation, it lends itself very readily as a resource for pragmatic exploitation. As examples given show, modal verbs function to reduce the force of the main verb from the extreme poles of 'yes' and

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<sup>1</sup> The use of 'if' is discussed in Code 6, under conditional subordination.

<sup>2</sup> Asides are discussed in Code 9.

'no' by offering degrees of polarity along this continuum. *Prima facie*, they reduce certainty by suggesting possibility (e.g. something may/could/might be problem); and they reduce obligation by offering optionality (e.g. you may/could/might consider making a change). Hatch calls them 'syntactic signals of pragmatic intent because they tell us to re-interpret either the truth value of the utterance or the presuppositions that go with it' (1992:262).

- you could do it a little bit earlier [4.8.1]
- you could work more in small groups [1.4.1]
- you can go back to it later [1.6.13]
- you could have spent a little bit more time [3.6.1]
- maybe you ought to think about that as a discipline thing [2.6.3]<sup>1</sup>
- that's probably something you need to address [2.8.3]
- it could've just been little pictures [3.2.7]
- you needed to balance your time out a bit more [8.6.1]
- those little instructions... can be very important [9.5.3]

The actual number of semantic distinctions within the modality system may be counted in the thousands (Halliday, 1985). Their fascination notwithstanding, it is beyond the parameters of this investigation to probe beyond what is needed to achieve an adequate functional characterisation and a plausible pragmatic interpretation, both of which are detailed below<sup>2</sup>.

### Dimensions of modality

Beyond a fundamental distinction premised on clause function (information; goods and services), Halliday's (1985) characterisation of instances of modality operates according to three dimensions: type, value, and orientation. In the category type, Halliday distinguishes four uses: probability, usuality, obligation and inclination, each of which is seen as a gradient between the poles of 'yes' and 'no'. Thus the continuum of probability ranges from certainly to possibly; that of usuality, from always to sometimes; that of obligation, from required to allowed; and that of inclination, from determined to willing. Within the dimension of *value*, each instance of modality can be broadly ranked as high, median or low; and along the dimension of *orientation*, the options of subjective or objective are each realised both explicitly and implicitly.

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<sup>1</sup> Modal adverbs (e.g. 'maybe', 'probably') are treated in Code 11.

<sup>2</sup> Being a major means by which mitigation is achieved, modality is discussed at different points, primarily here and in Code 11.

### The speaker's angle: two modal functions

Modality is generally agreed to be an account of subjectivity: a means of showing the internal, subjective representation of an outside reality (Willing 1992:79); an expression of 'the speaker's angle' (Halliday, 1985:340), or 'internal-state signalling devices' (Lakoff, 1975:310). However, it is not always perfectly clear exactly to what thing the speaker's angle is being represented.

Generally, a bipartite distinction is drawn in distinguishing modalities. Fairclough (1989) differentiates between 'expressive' and 'relational' modality: the former pertains to the speaker's relationship/authority/degree of commitment to the truth and certainty of the proposition; the latter pertains to the speaker's relationship/authority to the other participant. Thus the instance *'I thought they did get the dialogue very well'* [1.3.1] bears expressive modality; while the instance *'perhaps if you try to use gestures more until you've mastered this and you could work more in small groups'* [1.4.1], bears relational modality. Holmes' (1982; 1984) distinction is comparable: she refers to 'epistemic' modality (the speaker's attitude to the truth content of the proposition) and 'affective' modality (the speaker's attitude to the addressee in the context of the utterance). Similarly, Kress (1985) distinguishes between a modalising of 'ostensive content' and a modalising of participants within an interaction. In his analysis of the power asymmetries of an interview, he shows that the male interviewer (+power) modalises through the interaction, while the female interviewee (-power) modalises about the status of her knowledge (1985)<sup>1</sup>. Stubbs' (1986) schema, which aligns with the above, shows how modals perform both 'referential' and 'illocutionary' meanings, allowing a speaker to convey cognitive as well as personal meanings; but, in addition to this duality, modals also serve politeness functions.

### An economy of forms for a range of functions

The pragmatic advantage of modals verbs, in the context of face in supervisory discourse, derives from the fact that an economy of forms serves a range of purposes. The complexity emerges because the same modals may be associated with different 'modalities': for example 'may' can related to possibility (expressive) as well as permission (relational); 'must' can relate

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<sup>1</sup> Had the focus of the present inquiry been on issues of power and ideology (rather than on face and mitigation), it would have been interesting to explore whether the same configurations are operationalised in the power asymmetries of supervisor-teacher interactions.

to certainty (expressive) and obligation (relational). The impossibility of drawing up a one-to-one correspondence between form and function generates a great potential for modal indeterminacy and ambiguity. Within this pragmatic space, modal verbs frequently operate as mitigators in the supervisory context of action.

Two examples will illustrate. In the instance cited below, the supervisor is talking about the need for concept checking. He concedes that the teacher did do some concept checking (= praise); but that it came too late in the lesson (= criticism):

- *you could do it a little earlier [4.8.1]*

The use of the modal 'could' gains its pragmatic power from being able to be used for a range of modal purposes. It may be:

- a low modal to express probability. Expansion: 'it is possible to concept check earlier in the lesson'; or
- a low modal of obligation. Expansion: 'something for you to consider is the idea of concept checking earlier in the lesson'; or
- a strategy to extend optionality as a tactic of negative politeness to avoid imposition. Expansion: 'if you like, an idea to try is to concept check earlier in the lesson'.

The pragmatic power of 'could' in this example (applicable to many others from the data) derives from the fact that the modal may potentially serve more than one speech function and therefore may be deconstructed to any of a range of meanings. As an added complication, conventionalised usages - such as 'could' for polite commands which are conventionally cued in certain activity types (of which giving feedback is an example) - are mapped onto other modal meanings. There is also the fact speakers themselves may be not definitively clear and may be blending some expressive and some relational elements of meaning within the same modal. The complexity is further enhanced when we consider that any and all ambiguities may in fact be deliberate: the speaker may have a vested interest in appearing less than absolutely certain in order to afford themselves the avenue of 'retreatability' should it be needed<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This is further discussed in Code 14.

A second illustration may be drawn from an analysis of Halliday's sub-category 'orientation' as applied to an example from the data. A fruitful way of unearthing pragmatic meaning is to explore, for any given utterance, what other options were possible (but were not chosen). A common pattern in the data is exemplified in the utterance '*I thought it worked well*' [1.1.9], in which a main clause containing a mental process verb is followed by a clause containing the proposition. The full range of options available within the category 'orientation' is displayed below:

<i>I thought it worked well</i>	SUBJECTIVE - explicit
It might have worked well	SUBJECTIVE - implicit
It probably worked well	OBJECTIVE - implicit
It's likely that it worked well	OBJECTIVE - explicit

With relative ease one could imagine scenarios within which any of the latter three might have been used. What is important here is that the sub-class 'subjective; explicit' carries an important ambiguity. It could mean one of these two things:

- My belief is that it worked well; or
- I think (but am not sure) that it worked well

That is, the supervisor may be conveying her attitude toward the truth content of the proposition (a cognitive function); or she may be expressing affective modality (her attitude toward the teacher in the supervisory context of the utterance). If the former obtains, then we have an assertion of belief; if the latter, we have an assertion whose illocutionary force has been modified through attenuation. However, because the ambiguity is grammaticised - built into the syntax of the utterance - it remains potent unless/until subsequently disambiguated. As such, as long as the cognitive and affective meanings are overlaid, the inescapable effect is one of mitigation. This ambiguity<sup>1</sup> is important because it renders indeterminate the precise illocutionary force of the utterance. Such elusiveness of meaning is an important weapon in the arsenal of mitigation.

### Other complexities

Another complexity within the modality system of English derives from the fact that an apparent lack of modality may actually indicate extreme modality. Fairclough's argument that

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction between ambiguity and ambivalence is elaborated in Code 14.

the present simple tense of 'your library books are overdue' represents 'a categorical commitment of the producer to the truth of the proposition' (1989:127). Thus the absence of apparent modality and the expression of extreme modality may be served by the same form (in this case, the present simple tense)<sup>1</sup>. Once again, the economy of form generates rich scope for pragmatic possibilities, such as the ideological ones that Fairclough explores.

A further complexity within the modality system is the apparent paradox that 'we only say we are certain when we are not' (Halliday, 1985:340). Thus, 'Mary must have left' is less certain than 'Mary's left'. Similarly in the following instance from the data:

- *don't get me wrong, it's not like um it was a great problem, I'm sure that they got a lot from doing that [4.2.3]*

The expression of certainty ('I'm sure') actually undercuts the proposition to which it is attached.

This discussion of modal verbs leads one to conclude, with Willing, that the system of modality in English 'cannot be equated simply with "speaker's attitude"' (1992:84); nor can it derive its total meaning from the semantic level of text. One must necessarily turn to a pragmatic consideration of text-and-context in order to appreciate the full range of possibilities and the way in which the system is richly exploited for the purposes of creating pragmatic meaning.

## Code 6: Clause structure

- *I think the introduction was a bit too short [8.4.1]*

English clause structure provides an important syntactic means of mitigation. In the data, this happens in two major ways: sub-ordinating the main idea through a clause pattern of modalising main clause + projected, subordinate clause; and through conditional subordinate constructions. These are discussed in turn below.

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<sup>1</sup> c.f. the text of the hypo-mitigated script in the simulated supervisory conference of Ch. 7 (see App. 33).

## Subordination

A pervasive pattern in supervisory language is illustrated in the following examples:

- *I noticed you trying to use some of X's suggestions [1.1.1]*
- *I thought it worked well ah but it wasn't always consistent [1.1.19]*
- *I think they were weren't, they still weren't quite sure what the conversation was about [3.4.1]*
- *I felt that generally speaking they they got it [4.7.11]*
- *I think the reason for that was they just didn't know [4.3.10]*
- *I feel that the tasks you are setting the students are too complex for their level [5.1.3]*

The pattern depicted is a main clause, containing a first person pronoun with a verb of perception, followed by a subordinate clause (underlined) containing the proposition<sup>1</sup>. In Hallidayan terms, this is as an initial modalising, projecting clause, containing a mental process, followed by a separate projected clause in a hypotactic or unequal clause complex. The concern here is with the way in which the clause structure is exploited for the purpose of mitigating the message<sup>2</sup>.

The message is mitigated in two ways, both of which derive from a question of priority within clause status. Firstly, the modalising element bearing the subjectivity marker is foregrounded into the initial position of the utterance. This gives prominence to the speaker's declaration of subjectivity, suggesting that the forthcoming proposition is less of the nature of fact and more that of opinion. Giving prominence to the speaker's subjectivity creates 'room' for other opinions. The mitigation lies in the humbling of the speaker's self along with the offer of 'negotiability' to the hearer, the combination of which reduces the impositive quality of the proposition.

The second point has to do with inequality of status in the clause complex. There is the event, represented by a mental process verb ('*I thought*'); and there is the report of the mental act, contained in the projected clause ('*[that] it worked well*'). One message projects another 'just as a projector projects a picture' (Butt, 1991:19). The reporting 'presents the projected element as dependent' (Halliday, 1985:233); and makes it a category 'of the language, not of the real

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<sup>1</sup> Subordination is used here in the sense of grammatical dependence. In a pragmatic sense, all clauses may be deemed dependent since context features heavily in their interpretation (S.Thompson, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> The modalising power of the initial clause is treated in Code 11.



world' (Halliday, 1985:251). In this way, the propositional content (the report) is relegated an inferior status, removed from prominence, distanced to a more remote and less potent position. As a result, the message - not co-incidentally containing the FTA - is 'buried' or embedded in the subordinate clause. The relationship of subordination is itself meaningful for 'syntax serves pragmatics' (Lakoff, 1984:488).

Packaged as a subordinate noun clause, there is the suggestion (Green, 1989; Bolinger, 1972) that the meaning of the (a) example (below) is less strong as an expression of conviction than alternative constructions e.g. (b) (Green, 1989:139):

- a. He expects that he will win
- b. He expects to win

Insight into the mitigating effect of this syntactic arrangement - the foregrounded modalising clause and the subordinated message clause - may be gained by recasting it differently e.g. 'the tasks you are setting the students are too complex for their level'. Here, the thematising modal clause ('I feel') has been removed, and the message has been promoted both to positional prominence and main clause status. Presented thus, rather than as a report of a speaker's mental process, the proposition is real world-based not language-based. The utterance assumes an authoritative, fact-like (as opposed to opinion-like) quality; negotiability is withdrawn; and as a result, the assertive power of the utterance is considerably enhanced, as too is its face-threatening force.

### Conditional subordination

A second way in which clause structure serves a mitigating purpose is through the use of conditional subordinate clauses, as evidenced in the pattern below:

- *perhaps if you try to use gestures more until you've mastered this [1.4.1]*
- *if you put the pictures up there, it's just helping them [3.2.15]*
- *if they've missed the explanation and there hasn't been the comprehension check or during the explanation if there hasn't (been) the concept check then they can get left behind [4.8.1]*
- *if you've been a social worker - you must be aware of the power (of non-verbal language) [5.14.3]*

In the first two of these examples, the supervisor softens the face threat by dressing up a directive as a suggestion. This is achieved by creating optionality in the place of obligation;

and is realised through the conditional clause. It safely abides by the negative politeness dictum 'don't coerce the hearer' (Brown & Levinson, 1978:177). In the third example, the supervisor is talking about what happens when a teacher's explanations proceed without concept checks. In fact, he is describing what happened in the lesson just observed: the teacher failed to concept check adequately and some students did in fact get left behind. The conditional construction allows the supervisor to mitigate his message: the conditional (along with other devices, such the modal verb 'can', and the third person focus of 'they') renders the proposition hypothetical and generalised (something that can happen to people) rather than actual, immediate and personal (something that just happened to you). The distancing - removal to time unreal and agents un-named - effectively removes some of the sting.

It is enlightening to consider how the conditional achieves this effect. Heringer (1972, cited in Brown & Levinson, 1978:167-8) proposes that the 'if' structure allows the speaker to suspend the felicity conditions presupposed in the speech act; and thereby to pay polite deference to the hearer's face. This is comparable to the way the polite question ('could you...?') suspends the felicity condition of ability presupposed in asking a favour. Thus, 'a primary and fundamental method of disarming routine interactional threats' (Brown & Levinson, 1978:151) is to hedge the assumptions upon which they are based.

James' (1986) analysis of conditionals includes a valuable pragmatic dimension - understanding what hearers impute from information that is issued in combination with 'if'. Proceeding from the base of syntax - that the syntactic structure of a conditional clause makes it sub-ordinant to, not co-ordinate with, an independent clause - he calls on Hare's (1970) term: that the independent clause attached to a condition is 'encaged' in the hypothetical form (James, 1986:454). The truth value of the proposition carried by the independent clause can be 'uncaged' only in relation to the connected hypothesis. In other words, the 'if' functions as a 'modal qualifier' (James, 1986:456) affecting the interpretation of the independent clause. It signifies that the 'words-to-world direction of fit' (a Searlian concept, cited by James, 1986:455) as denoted by the independent clause may or may not hold. It is a qualified assertion bearing an incomplete argument. Therefore, a compound construction of declarative + conditional clause does not assert truth or falsity in the same way that a single indicative clause does. Indeed, 'the presence of *if*... signals non-assertiveness of the assumption in its scope' (Dancygier, 1993:403). Thus, when criticism is expressed conditionally in supervisory talk, the syntax triggers the imputation of reduced force.

Further, James (1986) shows how the conditional violates two Gricean maxims. Firstly, by using a conditional, a speaker admits to the lack of sufficient evidence (a violation of Quantity). Secondly, in specifying what the lacking sufficient evidence is considered to be, the speaker violates Quality.

### Code 7: Person shift

- *I still thought there was a bit of confusion for the students [1.9.1]*

This category concerns instances of 'person shift' which, in different ways, mitigate the supervisor's FTAs. Brown and Levinson refer to the strategy of impersonalising speaker and hearer through avoidance of certain pronoun uses: 'one way of indicating that S doesn't want to impinge on H is to phrase the FTA as if the agent were other than S, or at least possibly not S or not S alone, and the addressee were other than H, or only inclusive of H' (1978:195). Because pronouns 'can never be extracted from the political process of naming' (Pennycook, 1994:175), their use is rarely, if ever, one of simple, deictic correspondences, for the world which they serve to reference is neither 'unproblematic' nor 'uncontested' (Pennycook, 1994:174). Indeed, it is the pragmatic purposes of pronouns - indicating, masking, separating, blurring, distancing and combining - that renders their use inherently varied and complex (c.f. Wood & Rennie, 1994; Zambon, 1992/3; Zupnik, 1994).

Three types of pronominal shift were identified: a preference for the third person; a shift from second to first person ('I' statements); and an ambivalent use of the second person. These will be discussed in turn below.

#### Preference for/shift to the third person

As the following examples show, there is a patterned preference for the third person over the second when an FTA is being voiced<sup>1</sup>:

- *perhaps the other thing I would have done to is an insistence on the 'I'll' [3.1.1]*
- *there's a slight tendency to over-accommodate [5.6.1]*
- *it's important to let people realise that one thing is finished and the next thing's starting [4.6.5]*

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<sup>1</sup> The converse is seen in the preference for the second person in the expression of praise (See App. 21).

- *that's one thing, to respond to error in the light of the accuracy-fluency aims of the lesson [5.9.5]*

The significance of opting for the third person largely relates to the issue of agency. The agent of an action is the noun or noun phrase which refers to the person or thing which performs the action of the verb (Richards et al. 1985:8). Agency is important because it allows one to attribute - or avoid attributing - causality or responsibility for an action. In the following instance, the supervisor is talking about the way the teacher did the drilling:

- *I thought it worked well but it wasn't always consistent [1.1.9]*

The choice she makes is the third person ('it', referring to the drilling), which allows her to avoid the more confronting second person<sup>1</sup>. This distancing, or point-of-view operation, then allows her to say '*it wasn't always consistent*', in place of a second person construction, such as, '*you drilled well but you weren't always consistent*'. Thus, as well as mitigating through negation-as-denial<sup>2</sup>, she is able through the third person to refer to the drill as something seemingly separate from the person who did the drilling i.e. from the agent. The connection between action and agent is severed, or at least camouflaged, and the sting thereby removed. Second person pronoun avoidance allows both de-personalisation and generalisation (Brown & Levinson, 1978)<sup>3</sup>.

It will be helpful here to examine the interactional context of the utterance just cited:

- |   |   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|---|---|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4 | T | <i>ah, no, it's difficult, it's not my voice on the tape, so what they're hearing on the tape and what I'm saying back to them, I don't know, it's probably a different stress [mm] and the intonation is probably slightly different</i> |
| 5 | S | <i>had you listened to the tape and practised it beforehand?</i>                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 6 | T | <i>I listened to it a couple of times</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 7 | S | <i>and practised?</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 8 | T | <i>I'd been trying! ((both laugh))</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

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<sup>1</sup> According to Wood and Rennie (1994), 'dummy it' is an instance of false deixis which enables avoidance and often co-occurs with minimisation.

<sup>2</sup> A more confronting option would have been: '*it was sometimes inconsistent*'.

<sup>3</sup> Both of these contribute to vagueness, treated in greater detail in Codes 12, 13 and 14.

- 9      S      *I thought, I thought it worked well ah but it wasn't always consistent*
- 10     T      *no well that's how it felt when I was doing it I felt bad that um [mm] it's not what in fact it should be*
- 11     S      *yeah um perhaps you could incorporate the suggestion of a separate gesture for intonation*

The supervisor's criticism is the inconsistency between the pattern established on the teacher's pre-prepared tape and the teacher's own voice. As it happened, the teacher failed to produce a pattern in class that matched the model on the tape, leading to inconsistency in the drill. The teacher's failure probably has its source in lack of practice (as the supervisor suggests in Turn 7). In Turn 9, by avoiding agency, the supervisor cushions the criticism, and almost suggests that the inconsistency is accidental. Though she has implied that the whole problem could have been avoided (Turns 5 & 7), she does not pursue this track; and instead chooses to weaken the force of her utterance, and hope, one might presume, that the message still gets through. When, in the end, she does shift to second person (Turn 11), the utterance itself is heavily mitigated, posed as a suggestion for improvement, rather than as a remedy to a problem.

Another telling instance occurs in [1.6. 5-8]. Here the supervisor leads in towards making a critical comment, gets to the second person, and then pauses, mumbling indistinctly as if unable to make the critical comment itself:

- 5      S      *I noticed that when a student asked you the question 'what do the "them" mean?' ((laugh)) and you, (indist)/*
- 6      T      *I should have anticipated that, I totally overlooked/*
- 7      S      *and*
- 8      T      *fluffed it*

The teacher steps into the pause, completes the utterance, and relieves the supervisor of her difficulty by confessing that he 'fluffed it'<sup>1</sup>. Part of the difficulty experienced by the supervisor may be linked to constraints imposed by the choice of the second person.

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<sup>1</sup> This illustrates Schegloff's thesis (1988a) that the structuring of bad news often leads the recipient to be the one who actually states it.

Linked to the avoidance of agency is the frequent use of nominalisation, as in the following instance:

- *the main problem in the whole drilling, the only problem that I could see left was getting them to drill in unison [1.3.1]*

Turning the action (finite verb) into a noun (gerund) removes the need for an agent and allows the supervisor to distance the problem from the teacher and so remove the sting from the criticism. In this instance, the real issue at hand is the yet-to-be-gained mastery of a teaching procedure; however, the nominalisation makes the issue both less of an 'action', and less connected to the teacher, and hence easier both to say and to hear.

Nominalisation is one of Brown and Levinson's (1978) strategies for disassociating the speaker and hearer from the particular infringement under discussion. Calling on Ross' (1972; 1973) continuum of 'nouniness'<sup>1</sup>, they associate negative politeness with the 'nouny' end of the gradient. An expression becomes less 'verby' the more an actor is removed from its doing/feeling quality, and the less harmful it seems to be. Nominalisation, then, distances, formalises and defuses: 'it is not objects that are dangerous, it is their trajectories' (Brown & Levinson, 1978:213).

Agency and its underpinning motivations have been sufficiently well investigated (Fairclough, 1989; Green, 1989; Trew, 1979) for there to be no doubt that these things are not accidental. Brown and Levinson refer to the 'social pressure to bring some crucial noun phrases... into syntactic positions where they can be deleted' (1978:201). There is a connection here with how a speaker chooses to package perceptions for the hearer's consumption. Holmes (1984) and Fraser (1980) comment on the mitigation derived from 'a semantic distinction between appearance and reality' (Holmes, 1984:361) which can be forged by a speaker's using devices such as 'on the face of it', or 'technically speaking'. Such devices explicitly assign responsibility for the truth of propositions to an unnamed, third party. There is a sense in which the speaker's shift to the third person - for purpose of camouflage or distancing - may be subtly related to this.

Conversely, Fraser shows how mitigation can be built into positive politeness through solidarity created by linguistic 'immediacy'. Drawing on Mehrabian and Wiener's (1966)

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<sup>1</sup> This was introduced in Code 2, on aspect.

experimental work in psychotherapy, he suggests that syntactic foregrounding heightens immediacy and increases solidarity: thus 'John and I went to the movies last night' reflects greater positive immediate speaker feeling towards 'John' than 'I went to the movies last night with John' (1980:346-7).

A helpful way of understanding how an utterance is operating pragmatically is to consider what options exist at any given point. One such instance related to agency is examined in Appendix 25.

### Shifts to the first person

The 'shift to I', discussed as a mitigation device in Waite (1990b:112; 1991:19-20), is a pervasive feature of supervisory discourse. It seems to have two sub-classes. The first is illustrated below:

- *so if you think OK well these words could come up then I need to know how to spell them [6.4.9]*
- *when you want to raise your voice, you it, you like me, sound as though... [2.4.2]*
- *at a personal level it may not annoy but our job there is also to teach them cultural conventions [2.6.9]*
- *that's why you we wander around the room and just pick up different things [2.3.7]*
- *at a personal level it may not annoy but our job there is also to teach them cultural conventions [2.6.9]*

Here there is a 'jointness' implied, not only because it is first person plural, but because of the notion of solidarity (you and I are both teachers) rather than distance (you are the teacher and I am the supervisor).

The second sub-class is where the supervisor seems to make an 'empathy leap' and speak as if she were the teacher:

- *were you.. perhaps hoping in the middle of it I wish this were a bit shorter? [3.1.3].*
- *see how you can take the material that you have and really exploit it to the nth degree... what can I get out of this? how can I rework it? [7.1.1]*
- *you need to be clear in your mind what you see as the areas of weakness.. . and then I would create my cloze based on the areas I'm focussed on [5.4.3]*

This strategy has in it something of the positive politeness of shifts to the vivid or dramatic present<sup>1</sup>. While different from the first class, the effect is not dissimilar: it creates a one-ness and therefore a sense of co-operation and collaboration, not unlike the outright granting of positive face that is also characteristic of the discourse.

Calling on Brown and Gilman's work on the pronouns of power and solidarity, Waite suggests (1991) that the 'I statement' is a move in the direction of solidarity, akin to the shift, in languages with a T/V system, from the formal V to the informal, familial T. It might therefore serve to de-emphasise the relational power asymmetry and allow the supervisor to take on 'the teacher's voice', saying, in effect 'I'm just like you' (Waite, 1991:20). Waite also suggests (1991:19) that 'I statements' show respect for the teacher's professional autonomy, providing the notion of optionality rather than obligation vis-a-vis the supervisor's request for action<sup>2</sup>. Certainly, such 'I statements' as the following:

- *I've always found it useful, you might disagree [10.4.3]*

would seem to conform to Waite's view, by granting 'equal rights status' to the teacher<sup>3</sup>.

Ambivalent second person.

The second person in English is undifferentiated for number, serving in contexts where there is either a singular or plural addressee<sup>4</sup>. In addition, 'you' may serve as an indefinite pronoun, meaning 'people in general'; here it serves as the more informal equivalent of the formal indefinite 'one'. Significantly, indefinite 'you' implies 'inclusion of the speaker' (Quirk &

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<sup>1</sup> This was discussed as tense shift in Code 1.

<sup>2</sup> This view was often expressed by supervisors interviewed for the ethnographic study (Ch. 6) where 'I' statements were perceived as a means of avoiding 'getting people's backs up'. Neumann (1992) makes a similar point: he warns that 'you' suggests that the proposition bears 'a universally agreed opinion' when in fact supervisory comment is inescapably one individual's viewpoint on another individual (1992:36). 'I' statements may remove the 'cosmic' connotation and allow the supervisor to take responsibility for ('own') the feedback (1992:36).

<sup>3</sup> Waite's view has recently undergone a modification, in which he suggests a division based on number (1992, pers. comm., 8 Sept.): while first-person plural shifts may be inclusive, singular shifts may be a strategy to *exclude* the teacher from membership in the topic or process under discussion - as if to say 'I do this but you don't'. As this is not centrally connected to mitigation, it will not be pursued further here.

<sup>4</sup> In some sociolects, 'yous' serves as plural.



Greenbaum, 1973:112; Leech & Svartvik, 1975:57) which counters the means in English of referring to people in general excluding the speaker: 'they say (= it is said that) they (= some relevant, unspecified people) are going to dig up our street next month' (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973:112).

Supervisors' use of 'you', being instances of natural language, is very complex; and as often with pragmatic meaning, the usage exploits the ambivalence inherent in a one-to-many correspondence of form-function. 'You' may mean 'you the singular addressee' or 'people in general'; when the latter, it may have either a strong or a weak sense of speaker-inclusion. Sometimes it is quite clear which 'you' is intended; sometimes it is not at all clear. It is the claim of this writer that the lack of specificity and clarity surrounding the use of 'you' is not unintentional.

The mitigated meaning of 'you' therefore derives from two sources. Firstly, the criticism may be buried under the generality of an indefinite 'you' or under the solidarity of an implied 'we'; secondly, the very fact of the ambivalence overlays instances of 'you' with the notion of possibility: that is, it may mean that the speaker is not strictly referring to 'you the addressee'. In the context of an FTA, such blurred edges around the meaning of 'you' afford a highly expedient device for sting removal<sup>1</sup>.

Some illustrations from the data will illustrate. It will help to begin with an unmitigated instance of 'you the addressee', such as the following example, in which the supervisor is praising the teacher:

- *you're very demanding on accuracy as a teacher, you demand that they get it right [5.4.3]*

However, the meaning of 'you' may be much less obvious: it could be 'you, the addressee' or 'people in general, including the speaker':

- *one of the really good ploys of doing it is instead of you always asking the questions is to get them to ask you a question and it takes the threat off them [6.1.5]*

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<sup>1</sup> In the blurring of meaning that accompanies such pronominal use, there is a hint, too, of the strategic 'deployment of anonymisation' which Linell and Bredmar (1994) refer to in their data on sensitive topics.

Whenever there is a nuance of 'we teachers', the effect is to erode the 'I the speaker/supervisor/you the teacher/supervisee' barrier.

Sometimes the confrontational 'you' exists alongside instances of the generalised 'you', and gains its mitigation, as it were, through a blurring environmental influence:

- *no no I um I wouldn't go through all the aspects of grammar until I'd set the scene, until I'd established the context. In fact that's a general direction that you need to consider, that you go from the general to the specific [mm] instead of you launch straight into asking them what part of speech is 'two bedroom' [5.8.5]*

Here, the supervisor embeds the confrontational 'you' (married to the critical FTA) in a mitigated context containing not only implications of 'we teachers', but also suggestions couched in the first person conditional ('I would..'). In another example (below), mitigation likewise resides in mixed pronominal use:

- *sometimes we're lucky and sometimes we're aren't - unlucky, it can throw you all then um I just thought perhaps you should have asked them first to... [9.5.3]*

Here 'we're' offers solidarity, as does 'you' (in 'it can throw you'), both of which cushion the forthcoming separation of supervisor and teacher into 'I' ('I just thought') and 'you' ('perhaps you should').

The pragmatic advantage afforded the speaker through the use of deliberately indeterminate language is a frequent refrain in this thesis<sup>1</sup>. Certainly the elusiveness of the English 'you' creates the conditions by which addressed critical comment may be less confronting.

### 5.5.2 Macro-class II: Semantic mitigation (see Fig.4)

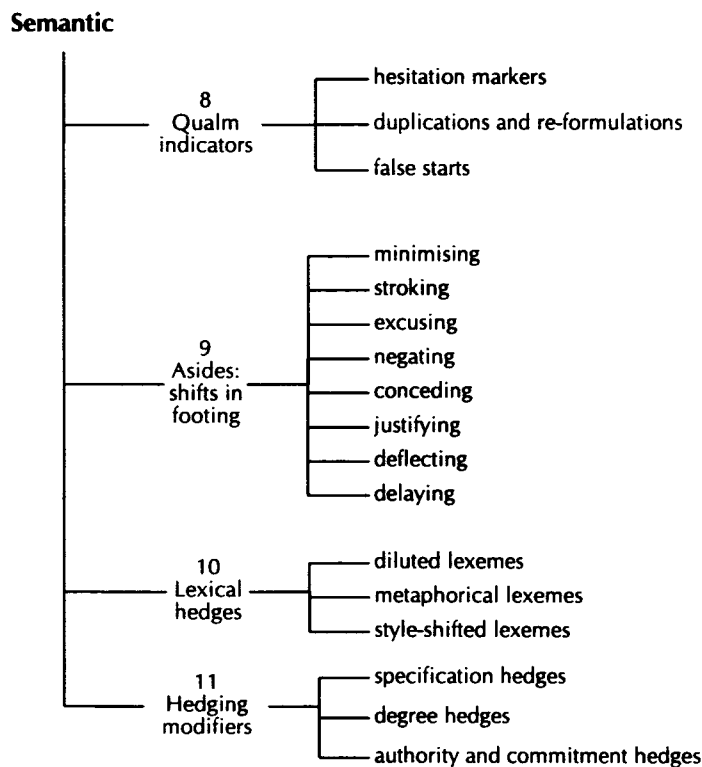
#### Code 8: Qualm indicators

- *because um, well, you know you wouldn't organise a wedding party the day before [3.8.5]*

This category is reserved for a mixed bag of acoustic and linguistic signals - 'disfluency markers' (Butler-Wall, 1986; Hatch, 1992) - which share one important feature: the fact that

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<sup>1</sup> This is treated in substantial depth in Code 14.



**Figure 4:** Macro-class II: Semantic mitigation

they indicate an uneasiness or reticence on the part of the speaker<sup>1</sup>. They tend to forewarn face threat and reflect the speaker’s hesitation: hence the collective label of ‘qualm indicators’. In signalling this hesitation, they make the forthcoming assertion more tentative and equivocal. The fact that these are ‘shows’ - conventional signals designed for addressee consumption - is captured in the words of one supervisor who spoke of being ‘conscious of going into hesitant mode’, referred to as ‘slightly play acting’ in which a ‘diffident’ as opposed to a ‘definitive’ mode was intended to help the student teacher better ‘accept the criticism’<sup>2</sup>.

Brown and Levinson group this type of strategic behaviour within ‘deference phenomena’ (1978:190), involving a humbling of the self, functionally linked to the self-deprecation that accompanies acts like acceptance of congratulations (‘I really don’t know how I passed’); the giving of gifts (‘it’s just a little thing I picked up’); and requests for help (‘what an idiot I am,

<sup>1</sup> Disfluency is the antonym of fluency, defined by Crystal and Davy as ‘smoothness of continuity in discourse’ (1975:85).

<sup>2</sup> Informant #10, interviewed for the ethnographic study, Ch. 6.

I just can't understand this'). In some languages, the humbling may take on the aspect of bumbling, buffoonery or slow-wittedness (1978:191), all of which are symbolic acts of 'self-minimisation' (Brown, 1980:128).

The concern in this study is with a particular type of behavioural humbling - a show of verbal incompetence through disfluency. For Brown and Levinson, a show of verbal hesitation is a 'merging (of) reluctance and incompetence' (1978:192). Similarly, Lakoff argues that the avoidance of imposition implies the granting of options, which itself involves hesitancy 'since the effect of giving someone else options is often to seem indecisive yourself' (1974a:23). This is supported empirically (Greene, Lindsey & Hawn, 1990) where a positive correlation was found between multiple discourse goals and verbal hesitation.

The following instances show normally fluent speakers actively sabotaging their own fluency so as to appear less assertive, less powerful, less impositive:

- *I thought I just thought about that although [nod] when you asked them, when you ask them if they write on the paper I just thought that was, you were lucky, because they hadn't started it on plastic [mm] and there was no and you remained in control of all of that, but tiny details like that I mean we all do it [mm] and sometimes we're lucky and sometimes we're aren't... [9.5.3]*
- *why don't you give them, why don't you give them um a sheet and ask them? Just to as you're going through the novel to gauge, I mean you can do it any way you wish, very quickly it could just be pictorial, for chapter one you know you might only have ((drawing while talking)), slightly less, I mean this is so quick it's not, it's no real, you know... [10.3.9]*

Structurally, members of the class of qualm indicators tend to be utterance fragments rather than whole utterances. They fall into three sub-classes: hesitation markers; duplications and re-formulations; and false starts. These are discussed in turn below.

### Hesitation markers

Hesitation phenomena are a commonly occurring feature of natural speech in which gaps or hesitations appear during the production of utterances. Labov and Fanshel define hesitation as the difficulty speakers have 'in getting (their) words out' (1977:114). They took an absorbing interest in this feature in the micro-analysis of the patient Rhonda's language in whom verbal cues of tension were described as hesitation, self-interruption, uneven tempo, condensation and long silences.

There are, of course, idiolectal differences among speakers, as well as other influences on the production of hesitation phenomena. It has been posited (Richards et al. 1985) that when people speak, up to 50% of their speaking time may be made up of pauses. In the transcripts, pauses are noted only as short or long (the former signalled by a comma, the latter by a full stop, forcing a correspondence of convenience between the spoken and written media). Pauses may be of two types: silent pauses caused by a break between words; and filled pauses, in which the gaps between words are filled with semantically-void fillers such as 'um', 'er', 'ah', 'mm'<sup>1</sup>. Crystal and Davy suggest that hesitation markers signal a speaker's tentativeness, awkwardness, and unwillingness to offend (1975). Willing posits that the markers may suggest 'I'm thinking' - i.e. that the speaker is taking the matter seriously, is putting the content first, is signalling 'this isn't about you, it's about the facts' (1993, pers. comm. 15 Nov.).

The difficulty faced in the identification of mitigation markers is differentiating those hesitations (or 'spontaneity phenomena' Eggins, 1990) which are inherent in the nature of spoken language - 'normal non-fluency' (Crystal & Davy, 1969:104) - from those which, generated by the speaker's reluctance to produce the forthcoming utterance, are signals of diffidence functioning as mitigators. Greene et al. (1990) similarly report the need to distinguish between features that have a social function and those that indicate a cognitive load<sup>2</sup>. The operational, convenience-imposed solution to this quandary was achieved by judging any single instance of hesitation (short, long, filled or unfilled) as a feature of natural language, rather than as a mitigator. Additional instances of the same hesitation were then considered to be mitigating. However, the inquiry may well err on the side of caution by not deeming as mitigating a set of different hesitation markers. Thus in the following example,

- *because um, well, you know you wouldn't organise a wedding party the day before [3.8.5]*

where each instance of hesitation is qualitatively different, each is interpreted as a natural feature, despite an intuitive sense that the individual, if not the collective, impact of such a display may well be mitigating<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> These are standardised in the transcripts to 'um' or 'ah'.

<sup>2</sup> In addition, Goffman (1981:183-4) examines speech 'faults' - pauses, restarts, redirections, repetitions, mispronunciations, unintended double meanings, word searches, lost lines etc - from the point of view of 'footing shifts' and deliberate and non-deliberate 'frame breaks'.

<sup>3</sup> Because the thrust of this inquiry is qualitative, the study avoided implementing a quantitative concept of disfluency, such as Tracy and Eisenberg's 'non-fluency index' (1990/1991:60).

where each instance of hesitation is qualitatively different, each is interpreted as a natural feature, despite an intuitive sense that the individual, if not the collective, impact of such a display may well be mitigating<sup>1</sup>.

A common feature of supervisor's language is the use of 'you know', scattered through utterances. 'You know' is a pervasive and multi-functional feature of interactive spoken language: it breaks the distance of a long turn without giving up the floor; it acknowledges the listener as a collaborative partner in the conversation; it signals a possible entry-point; it warns the listener that some further explaining is forthcoming (Crystal & Davy, 1975; Good, 1979); it expresses uncertainty or imprecision and a desire for reassurance; and it attributes understanding to the hearer (Holmes, 1993). Lakoff (1974a) points out that it signals a violation of Quantity by telling the hearer what is already known, a signal which helps the hearer to foreground presuppositions that will assist in the interpretation of meaning.

There is a good argument that 'you know' functions as a mitigator. For example, it has the character of a point-of-view flip (Brown & Levinson, 1978:125), in which, stroking the hearer's positive face, the speaker acknowledges that while the hearer may not actually be familiar with the particular details of the present situation, he or she may be familiar with that kind of situation in general terms. This is part of the positive politeness strategy of 'claiming common ground' (Brown & Levinson, 1978:122) by pre-supposing hearer knowledge. Similarly, Fraser refers to 'you know' as a signal of a speaker's 'attitude of solidarity' with the hearer (1990b:392); Holmes includes it within the category of 'hearer-oriented downtoners' (1984:360); and Crystal and Davy term them 'softening connectives' designed to 'alter the stylistic force... so as to express the attitude of the speaker to his [sic] listener' (1975:91-92). As well, 'you know' as a marker of co-operation implies that speaker and hearer knowledge is equal and agreed-upon (Pearson, 1988). Rather like question tags, 'you know' could also be interpreted as mitigating in that, if the knowledge is indeed commonly shared, it is not something being imposed harshly by speaker on the hearer. This view notwithstanding, the fact that the form has become so highly conventionalised within spoken interactive talk, may mask the marked flavour that would denote its mitigating quality.

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<sup>1</sup> Because the thrust of this inquiry is qualitative, the study avoided implementing a quantitative concept of disfluency, such as Tracy and Eisenberg's 'non-fluency index' (1990/1991:60).

## Duplications and re-formulations

Duplications happen when the same set of words is repeated (e.g. 'I think, I think'); while re-formulations refer to the same idea, formulated differently (e.g. 'I think, I feel'). Both are linked to what Pearson terms 'clutters' (1988:92, borrowed from Owsley & Scotton, 1984); and what Greene et al. term 'ideational repetitions' (1990:119). Of course, such features are part of normal speech and account for some of the natural redundancy of spoken language, as contrasted to the 'density of packing' in writing (Brown & Yule, 1983b:7). What is of concern here is the tendency for such phenomena to cluster around the delivery of an FTA, fuelling the suspicion that they mitigate by signalling speaker reluctance.

## False starts

As with other hesitation phenomena, false starts (or 'incomplete sentences', Brown & Yule, 1983b:6) are also a natural part of spoken language as a speaker struggles with the mental engineering of message-encoding processes. Sometimes, the false start signals that the speaker is at pains to find the right way to express a point; sometimes, it involves a self-repair, itself a weakening of the assertive force of the utterance (Hatch, 1992:311)<sup>1</sup>. The following example from the data includes a mixed collection of hesitation phenomena, the cumulative effect of which is to signal speaker disquiet:

- 1        S        *ah I just sort of felt that while it may have been ah good revision for them for a previous lesson that it it somehow shifted the focus of your lesson um that it became a bit top-heavy with these past simple past um past simple verb forms um when you had such a very different focus the language focus of your lesson, if it had been a lesson which built on the verb forms then I could see the point of it but I felt that it distracted and because it took such a long time*
- 2        T        *yeah it did take longer than I thought*

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<sup>1</sup> It is at times difficult to distinguish between a set of false starts and delaying asides, discussed in Code 9.

- 3      S      *it then made the point of your lesson just seemed really a long way down the track and um I don't know, it, don't get me wrong it's not like um it was a great problem, I'm sure that they got a lot from doing that [4.2.]*

One feature worthy of passing mention is the occasional evidence of performance errors (Fromkin & Rodman, 1983; Pit Corder, 1981; Wajnryb, 1984) in the supervisor's language. Performance errors (lapses or slip-ups) in native-speaker speech are linked to performance factors inherent in the nature of spontaneously generated speech. They are sometimes correlated to endogenous factors, like anxiety or tension (or the converse, relaxation). In the second of the examples below, the supervisor actually self-corrects:

- *meanwhile these three were left out so it was [= would have been] quite nice to perhaps go round 'OK let's look at so-and-so....' [8.11.1]*
- *and the one group here had a confusion sorry were confused about the widower [8.10.5]*

While it is possible that such instances are influenced by the reluctance the supervisor feels in expressing the forthcoming FTA, their exploration lies outside the scope of this inquiry.

### Code 9: Asides

- *it's just an alternative [8.2.8]*

A pervasive mitigation mechanism in the data is the 'aside'. Typically, these are short utterances which accompany criticisms. They differ from 'qualm indicators' (Code 8) in being complete units, not fragments. More so than 'qualm indicators', they mitigate through juxtaposition - i.e. their meaning is closely linked to the accompanying criticism.

The word 'aside' is borrowed from drama where words are spoken by an actor which other actors on the stage are not supposed to hear. An illuminating approach to asides is gained from Goffman's (1981) notion of participation framework or 'footing'. In Goffman's terms, the aside furnishes the speaker with one means (among a multitude of options) of momentarily shifting voice or alignment within the 'production format of an utterance' (1981:145). He writes (1981:155):

When we change voice... we are not so much terminating the prior alignment as holding it in abeyance with the understanding that it will almost immediately be re-engaged.



Goffman's analysis of footing shows that speaker/hearer roles are in fact 'gross' and 'global folk categories' which need to be 'decomposed' into smaller elements so as to be well understood (1981:129). He also demonstrates how a speaker's shift in footing effectively re-allocates roles for the hearer and for any others in the participation framework.

It is illuminating to scrutinise the dramatic aside in this light. Imagine a scene with two actors on stage before an audience. The play, of course, is 'sealed off' (Goffman, 1981:139) from the audience who do not belong within the realm of make-believe. The audience may give appropriate signs of attentiveness but may not respond as addressees. At the moment, and for the purpose of the aside, the speaker-actor shifts footing and simulates addressing the audience as if they were participants. Accordingly, the other actor on stage moves from being a 'ratified addressee' to being a 'non-ratified participant'. In effect, the other actor's role is momentarily suspended. At the same time, the audience moves from ratified 'eavesdropper' status to the status of ratified participant (though still without the right of response).

Of course, in supervisory talk, when the shift of footing takes place, it does not, as in a stage play, involve a change of addressee. Throughout, the addressee remains the teacher-supervisee; yet the utterance has the character of an aside or a 'byplay' (Goffman, 1981:153) in that it sends out a different message from the main message from which it itself branches off. It thus serves as a meta-communication - a means by which the speaker can send an internal message about their other message: that is about to be delivered, has just been delivered, or is in the process of being delivered. Significantly, it allows a degree of indirectness to pervade the communication, and through being indirect, mitigates.

A supervisor's aside signifies the wish to speak, as it were, with another voice. The shift in footing, from main message to meta-message, involves a shift in speaker status. This can be best understood in terms of the various roles into which Goffman decomposes 'speaker': 'animator' (the one who produces the sound); 'author' (the one responsible for the words); and 'principal' (the one who attests to the belief). When the supervisor shifts into the aside, something happens to the status of 'principal': it is as if there has been a 'change of gears' (1981:126) through which the quality of sincerity has moved up a notch; as if, by the shift, the supervisor signals a proviso - 'understand that part of what I say to you is derived from the obligations of my institutional role; and another part is 'the real me', that to which I truly attest'. The change in alignment places some distance between the propositional content of the FTA in the main message (the institutional supervisory voice) and the embedded voice

(the supervisor's personal voice). Indeed, 'success in pleading mitigation' has to do with 'shedding... responsibility' (Burns, 1992:83): the self is split into two selves - that which bears blame and that which stands itself apart from the blame-bearing (Goffman, 1971). Thus the shift in footing reflects a re-'positioning of self' vis-a-vis the views being presented (Tracy & Carjuzaa, 1993:178). The outcome is akin to the notion of 'double-voice discourse' (Sheldon, 1992:95), where in this case, what is heard is both the institutional message-bearing voice and the addressee-oriented relational voice. The shift enables the speaker to editorialise, albeit subversively. In Goffman's terms, asides allow supervisors to project another social role into their talk. He cites Mead's (1934) terms: 'a "me" that tries to incorporate its "I" requires another "I" to do so' (1981:148). The aside enables 'individuality' momentarily to be thrust in front of the 'role-performing functionary', whereby the very assertion of risk is an assertion of selfhood (Burns, 1992:353). That all this happens and is received below the level of conscious attention is part of the process by which, as Goffman writes, 'experience is laminated' (1981:156).

#### Functional and structural properties

Asides sub-divide into eight sub-classes, categorised functionally according to their purpose. These are listed and treated below in random order: being qualitative variations on the category 'aside', they are not 'weighted' according to the degree of mitigation conveyed. Assigning an aside to a sub-class is more a matter of analytical convenience than of utterances having properties with clear-cut exclusivity<sup>1</sup>; and on occasion, assignment is only resolved through resort to prosodic properties.

While asides have been categorised functionally - in harmony with the overall functional interpretation of language which underpins politeness theory - another form of treatment is structural, specifically in terms of their position within or vis-a-vis the FTA-bearing utterance. Indeed, attention to position has been a feature of the literature (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Houtkoop-Steenstra, 1990). Positionally, asides occur in three locations: initial (prefacing), final (anterior) and medial (embedded or mid-stream). Holmes argues that the location of the

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the utterance 'I suppose this is nit-picking in a way' [3.8.1] may be seen as an attempt to reduce the importance of the comment (minimising); or to deny the comment as 'real' criticism (negating); or to account for why it is mentioned (justifying); or to signal reluctance and a forthcoming FTA (delaying).

mitigating utterance is significant in that it allows the speaker to 'foreground' into prominence or 'demote' from importance particular aspects of the discourse (1984:362).

While most attention in the linguistic literature has been given to prefacing comments (see below), the data of this study tended rather to show a dominance of asides embedded in or anterior to FTAs. Both medial asides, and to a lesser extent anterior ones, tend to have a parenthetical phonological character, which has varying manifestations. For example, in this case of a mid-stream minimising aside, the utterance is said faster and in a lower tone than the main critical utterance:

- *the main problem... the only problem that I could see left was getting them to drill in unison [1.3.1]*

In the case of the following mid-stream delaying aside, where the purpose is to put off (and signal the wish to put off) breaking bad news, the impression can be of a slowing down rather than a speeding up<sup>1</sup>:

- *I I think that if I think it's important at low level at which this class is [4.8.1]*

Apart from this mention of prosody, attention now focuses exclusively on the word-level of the utterances.

### The aligning function of disclaimers

Utterances in sentence-initial position, perhaps because of their prominence, have attracted considerable attention in the literature. This has especially fallen on the pragmatic power of prefacing disclaimers, sometimes called 'but-prefaces' by which a speaker signals or projects comment about a forthcoming comment e.g. 'I know it might hurt you to hear this, but...' <sup>2</sup>. Position notwithstanding, much of what is known about prefacing is functionally applicable to embedded and anterior asides as well, with the difference being that instead of signalling the disclaimer in advance, it follows fast on the heels (anterior) or in the midst (embedded) of the FTA.

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<sup>1</sup> This contributes, too, to Schegloff's (1998a) thesis that the structure of bad news messages facilitates the hearer's guessing.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, one respondent-supervisor (#10) in the ethnographic study (Ch. 6) claimed to use this ploy with deliberate strategic awareness.

Hewitt and Stokes (1975) discuss disclaimers in the context of people's over-riding orientation to gearing their words and deeds to the maintenance of order and harmony. A disclaimer is defined as 'an interactional tactic employed by actors faced with upcoming events or acts which threaten to disrupt emergent meanings or discredit cathected situational identities' (1975:1). Because delivering an FTA is at variance with the social order, the prefacing disclaimer serves as an 'aligning action' to bring the problematic behaviour in line with known and shared 'cultural constraints' (1975:11). This is consonant with Scott and Lyman's treatment of 'account behaviour' where linguistic devices are used in an explanatory mode 'whenever an action is subjected to evaluative inquiry' (1968:46). Houtkoop-Steenstra's (1990) work on account behaviour in proposals focussed on the sequential structure of such interactions; and uncovered the extensive preparatory work engaged in by speakers to signal the delicacy of what is to follow, as well as to project the action. She found that such preparatory work played an important role in determining how the proposal was received.

Similarly, in this inquiry, the mitigating effect of speaker's asides serves to influence the way in which the supervisor's projected FTA is received by the teacher. This is supported by San Miguel and Stevenson's (1992) whose study points out the place of pragmatic prefaces in achieving a conciliatory function in supervisory talk. In a similar vein, preparing the ground in advance is perceived by Dascal and Berenstein (1987) as a device speakers use to secure for the hearer the 'appropriate mode of attention' (1987:144). With their emphasis on 'grasping' as a particular mode of understanding, they argue that the task of the interlocutor is to recognise what set of rules are in force and then to tune in or orient themselves appropriately. These measures are achieved through the speaker's 'indicating devices', which often signal 'expected differences in attitude between the interlocutors towards a certain message content'. Significantly, as with most politeness markers, these are also Gricean breach markers: where, for instance, through tautology, the speaker violates Quantity; through seeming digression violates Relevance; or through disorderliness, violates Manner.

The eight functional sub-classes of the category 'aside' are treated in turn below.

Asides: eight sub-classes

### The minimising aside

These utterances minimise the harshness of the accompanying criticism. This can occur in two ways. Firstly, the problem cited can be minimised so that the mitigation lies in the devaluing of the propositional value of the FTA:

- *the main problem... the only problem that I could see left was getting them to drill in unison [1.3.1]*
- *I don't think they quite got the idea... only minor points, as I said [1.9.9]*

The second way is to minimise the criticism through de-valuing the opinion being given. Typically, this is achieved by 'self-effacements' (Pearson, 1988:93) by which supervisors detract from their own authority:

- *I don't know, it's just an alternative [8.2.8]*
- *There was just one problem... I was just worried about [9.1.1]*

Often the intention is to emphasise the subjectivity of their own opinion and by implication thereby give equal status and value to anyone else's, including the teacher's:

- *I've always found it useful, you might disagree [10.4.3]*

Often, too, there is an explicit attempt to flatten the relational asymmetry. In the following case, the supervisor's aside indicates the assumption of shared knowledge. As we do not tell people what we know they already know (the Quantity maxim), the aside also serves to 'account' for the comment and reduce any imposition it might be imputed to convey:

- *it's a good idea as you well know to do that [9.7.5]*

In the attempt to minimise the worth of the supervisor's own opinion, sometimes the step is made into self-denigration where the humbling may mean owning up to less than worthy motives:

- *I suppose this is nit-picking in a way, it was a little bit of a problem that you... [3.8.1]*

Self-denigration of this kind, like self-repair in speech (Goffman, 1981), signals a closer intimacy between speaker and hearer by shifting the focus from the transactional to the interpersonal function of talk.

### The stroking aside

These provide praise which functions strategically to counter the sting of the FTA and 'shore up' the positive feelings of the addressee (McClenahan & Lofland, 1976). By buffering or cushioning the teacher's ego against the critical onslaught, they bolster confidence so as to enable the teacher to deal better with the blow.

- *what do you think you could have done there with the drill, it, I mean, it was really nice little dialogue, I loved the dialogue, it was very natural... [3.2.1]*
- *if you've been a social worker you must be aware of the power of non(-verbal language) [5.14.3]*
- *just those little instructions... can be very important, you handled it perfectly and they all understood [9.5.3]*

There is evidence in the literature of this pattern at the above-the-utterance level where a particular configuration of moves is perceptible (Pajak & Seyfarth, 1983): sometimes, there is a see-saw effect (for every criticism, there is a counter-balancing compliment); sometimes, the criticism is 'sandwiched' between adjoining items of praise (Calderhead, 1988; Farson, 1963; Gervasio, 1989; Held, 1989). Sometimes the praise is placed as a lead-up to the FTA<sup>1</sup>.

It might be said that a 'banking metaphor' obtains: every criticism represents a deficit/withdrawal on the confidence coffers; every compliment infuses the funds. That this is so is not surprising. Given instructions to supervisors to build on strengths (Turney et al. 1990); given the face constraints of interpersonal interaction; and given the supervisor's linchpin position as the logician in an often tense matrix of relationships, it is no wonder that the literature is replete with references to supervisors' attention to the teacher's affective and psychological needs (Terrell et al. 1986; Mansfield, 1986)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Maslach's observation - that criticisms may be motivated by the desire to appear 'discriminating' (1986:47) - lies outside the scope of the present study.

<sup>2</sup> This was treated in depth in Ch. 2.

Despite their awareness of the morale needs of supervised teachers, supervisors who have not the opportunity to reflect on their verbal behaviour in Sds seem to have only fleeting awareness of the praise-criticism configuration or its dangers (Maslach, 1986). They are also largely unaware of teachers' ready, adept and cynical reading of the strategy<sup>1</sup>.

### The excusing aside

In excusing asides, the supervisor makes allowances for the event which has drawn the criticism. Thus with one hand they strike the blow (FTA); and with the other, they administer the antidote. These counter blows achieve a kind of 'self-neutralisation' (Pajak & Seyfarth, 1983:22), and can 'leave teachers confused about how concerned they really ought to be about the problem' (Pajak & Seyfarth, 1983:22). It seems, too, that supervisors happily dip into a bevy of ready-made excuses to account for failure events e.g. Terrell et al. (1986) report a pattern of supervisor-initiated excuses that suggested failure events were beyond the teacher's control. The sense is of agency being separated and distanced from the teacher and located 'out there'. In accounting for the problem, they partially excuse it. Such devices effectively 'de-responsibilise' (Brown, 1980:128) the teacher and move what should be an opportunity to consult principled pedagogy (Stones, 1987) to the nebulous and idiosyncratic realm of art and mystique. A by-product is to render visible the supervisor's human face: thus, pursuing the conceptual framework of 'footing' introduced at the start of Code 9, when supervisors make allowances for the teacher's failed event, they signal a shift to a more soothing and compassionate voice<sup>2</sup>.

Excusing asides make the supervisor's task easier by reducing the teacher's discomfort. Often the message is a statement of empathy - that they understands the teacher's difficulties:

- *sometimes it's hard to ask questions that are more inferential [10.2.5]*

Frequently, the message amounts to a disclaimer of 'it's not your fault':

- *possibly (they didn't like it because) it's out of their realm of experience [10.3.13]*

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<sup>1</sup> One teacher reported that the configuration made him quite suspicious 'of the impending "but" at the end of a compliment'. Maslach (1986:47) cites a supervisee: 'I've come to distrust the part about doing a good job because I figure it's just a sugar coating to make the criticisms easier to swallow'.

<sup>2</sup> This 'wedge' between the supervisor's role self and the real self is taken up again in Ch.8.

- *in most lessons there are (parts a teacher isn't happy with), no matter who gives them [10.1.1]*
- *I think if you had another class, that would be fine, but the nature of that class is such... [2.11.1]*
- *it's no fault of yours that they don't like it [10.3.13]*

At other times, the excuse is packaged as reassurance:

- *drilling's still an area that can be worked upon.... you'll get a lot more experience (on the lower level) [7.2.1]*
- *lots of things are just experience-related [8.4.1]*
- *it's difficult, I think as a new teacher you tend to cling to the blackboard [8.7.3]*

### The negating aside

These deny the critical nature of the criticism, and show the supervisor's reluctance to be perceived as being critical:

- *don't get me wrong, it's not like um it was a great problem [4.2.3]*
- *I don't know, it's just an alternative [8.2.8]*
- *if that's the major criticism then there's nothing much wrong with the lesson [4.3.9]*
- *I'm not criticising, I'm just saying [2.4.2]*
- *I'm just sort of checking [7.5.7]<sup>1</sup>*
- *I'm not hassled by it, it's not a problem [2.5.3]*

On occasion it is difficult to differentiate between a minimising and a negating aside, especially when the reducing factor threatens to negate the criticism. For the purposes here, the criterial element for a negating aside is the feature of denial (= this is not criticism); whereas in the minimising aside, the problem is reduced (= this is only a small problem).

### The conceding aside

The conceding aside is a variation on the stroking aside: it offers praise in the form of acknowledgment of effort in the context of a failed event. The positive acknowledgment goes some way in removing the sting of the accompanying FTA:

- *I know you've made a concerted effort to work at that and that's been noted [7.3.1]*
- *while it may have been ah good revision for them for a previous lesson [4.2.1]*
- *you've obviously been thinking about it [1.3.5]*
- *you tend to explain rather than concept check things... which you do quite well [8.4.1]*

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<sup>1</sup> Here the negative (e.g. I'm not criticising) is implied rather than stated.



### The justifying aside

If conceding is related to stroking, then justifying is related to excusing. What the supervisor is making excuses for, however, is not the teacher's but the supervisor's behaviour. Typically, the aside seeks to account for why the supervisor is making the critical remark; and typically it is voiced with an apologetic tone. Again, there is a distancing (Pearson, 1988) and 'de-responsibilising' function (Brown, 1980:128) through which the speaker locates a causal source outside of (him- or) herself.

In the following example, the speaker links the aside discursively through topicality: the teacher had earlier raised the issue of wasting time, to which the supervisor links up as a means of lessening the sting of the criticism:

- *I mean when you're talking about wasting time, sometimes that takes two or three minutes off [10.4.3]*

Likewise, in the next example, the supervisor justifies the criticism by reminding the teacher that it came from her:

- *I think the best advice is advice that you you know came up with yourself just be you know really well prepared [7.4.9]*

In the following example, the supervisor does not call on an outside source, but in referring to the internal source ('a question in my mind') seems to signal that it happened involuntarily - there is the sense that the speaker is wishing, in Goffman's terms, to be perceived as 'animator' but not as 'author' or 'principal':

- *so that was just a question in my mind, I'm just telling you what happened [9.4.7]*

In the next example, the supervisor justifies time spent on critical points as a 'general policy': the use of the present simple tense denotes that this style of feedback is the supervisor's general approach, and is not a response to an individual case. It is as if the supervisor were saying: 'I always do this, not just with you'. Not only is there is comfort in the reassurance of normalcy, but the failed events are referred not as past events over which one ought to lament but positively regarded, future learning opportunities:

- *I actually spend more time on the weak things than the positive because that makes more, there's more potential for learning [5.1.3]*

Such asides serve a discursual function in signalling 'intra-textual cohesion' (Holmes, 1984:361). However, as mitigators, they 'de-emphasise or play down the importance of the speech act' with which they are connected (Holmes, 1984:361-2). Thus they suggest that the content of the speech act is not very important. For Brown and Levinson, such topic shifts are in fact hedges: they mark a change and 'perhaps partially apologise for it' (1978:174).

### The deflecting aside

There are asides that operate by deflecting - momentarily shifting the focus from hearer to elsewhere, usually to the speaker. Typically, this is achieved through positive politeness, with the speaker at pains to display common solidary ground with the hearer. A frequent ploy is 'apparent self-disclosure' (Miller & Steinberg, 1975:319), in which supervisors acknowledge their experience of the particular difficulty associated with the failed event. This effectively takes the pressure off institutional roles; shifts the focus to shared human qualities; and momentarily flattens the hierarchy. As well, there may be an element of commiseration, showing awareness that all teachers were once inexperienced, that the difficult path towards expertise is trodden by all. The supervisor thus tries to reduce the loneliness of failure (present) and suggest that, because learning is dynamic, time will bring mastery (future).

- *just as a hint really, I've always found it useful [10.4.3]*
- *you've got a similar problem to (what) I have [2.4.2.]*
- *I mean we all do it [9.5.3]*

In the last instance, the present tense ('do') carries a convenient ambivalence. The time reference may be to past completed events (we teachers have all 'been there, done that') or to events not specifically linked to time ('we're all human -anyone can make a mistake'. Either interpretation is mitigating, and the effect is heightened by the ambivalence.

In the following example the deflection to self also locates the need to criticise outside the teacher's actual behaviour, thus overlaying the deflecting and justifying functions.

- *pacing is the thing I find most difficult in teaching so that's probably why I'm most aware of it because it's the one I always worried about myself [9.12.1]*

### The delaying aside

The delaying aside serves by warning: hinting at a dysphoric environment, it heralds the criticism. There is a sense that the supervisor is loathe to get to the point - indeed, consistent with a 'humbling of self', a disfluency is injected into the speech, marring the speaker's verbal competence. Typically, the supervisor proceeds tautologically, with words as a delaying tactic. In the instance below, the supervisor's reluctance to spell out the bad news is quite palpable:

● *I think that I think that um I've mentioned in my notes here that um you tend to explain rather than concept check things [mm] now I also said you tend to explain in brackets which you do quite well, you're very good at explaining and so I think people get it they get the idea which is fine but um for those who don't get it if they've missed the explanation [mm] and there hasn't been the comprehension check [mm] or during the explanation if there hasn't the concept check then they can get left behind [mm] and I I think that if I think it's important at a low level at which this class is I think it's important that learning is always well it's two things really...[4.8.1]*

The tautologies - violating Grice's Quantity maxim - both reflect reluctance to get to the critical point; and signal this reluctance to the hearer<sup>1</sup>. The delivery may be thought of as oblique: approaching bad news from a 45-degree angle (Clark & LaBeff, 1982); but the angle of approach is itself meaning-bearing: Clark and LaBeff's (1982) study found that that a deliverer's evasiveness may speak the same message as a point-blank statement. That this strategy is face-attending at the potential expense of clarity is corroborated by Tracy and Eisenberg's findings on over-information (1990/91).

The Gricean violation acts as a signal: it gives the hearer the chance to impute the imminence of bad news; extends the courtesy of a moment's warning; and takes the edge off the shock value of the FTA when at last it is delivered. Thus, the hearer is given time to avoid any untoward affective 'flooding out' (Goffman, 1961:55). This is not, of course, pure altruism: signalling their attention to face saves supervisors from the unpleasantness of emotional leakage. Therein lies the delicate balance and intrinsic mutuality of face preservation<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> c.f. sentence-initial disclaimers (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975).

<sup>2</sup> This tactic is shared by people whose professional role requires them to be bearers of bad news: 'presaging' in police-legal contexts (McClenahan & Lofland, 1976:256] is also reported of medical settings (Glaser & Strauss, 1965; Sudnow, 1967).

## Code 10: Lexical hedges

- *it feels nicer to have it all integrated [4.4.9]*

This category relates to the meaning of words chosen by the supervisor at or near the point of giving criticism. The assumption is that 'observations of the world about us are intimately bound up with the words we use to describe them' (Alexander & Slater, 1987:179). The following discussion will clarify how such choices operate as 'hedges' on lexical or referential meaning (Brown & Gilman, 1989:160).

The data yielded three major, marked, mitigating patterns of lexical choice. These embrace diluted lexemes, metaphorical lexemes and style-shifted lexemes. These distinctions are born of analytical convenience: the groups are at best semi-distinct sub-classes which often defy separation and display a great deal of overlap.

## Diluted lexemes

In this category, a word is chosen over its less marked equivalent for its softened or attenuated meaning. The markedness of the choice derives from the sense of deliberate avoidance of a more congruent form. The purpose is to mollify the semantic harshness of the criticism.

It is, of course, impossible to nominate which precise lexeme is being avoided, for it exists, as it were, *in absentia* (James, 1983). It is enough to suggest possibilities and recognise the strategy of avoidance as operant. Some examples from the data follow: here, the diluted lexeme is underlined and a possible alternative, more potent, 'avoided' lexeme is included, afterwards, in square brackets<sup>1</sup>. This method of substituting inferred meaning for given text is akin to Labov and Fanshel's expansion model, by which they integrate the text with the implicit information for the purpose of approximating the speaker's actual intention:

- *it's very important to let [= make] people realise that one thing's finished and the next thing's starting [4.6.5]*
- *it's a good idea [= I recommend] to have a look at that [7.5.13]*
- *did you have any particular things in mind [= intend, plan] [9.3.1]*
- *I noticed [= saw, observed] you trying to use some of X's suggestions [1.1.1]*

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<sup>1</sup> In some cases, the lexical avoidance overlaps with a particular choice of modal orientation e.g. 'it's a good idea' in lieu of 'I recommend' or 'you could/should'.

- *I think it helps them [= they need it] get the intonation of the whole question [1.2.3]*
- *maybe you ought to think about [= consider adopting] that [2.6.3]*
- *when you're doing the drilling, you want [= should be] to be doing the drilling and nothing else [3.4.4]*

A preponderance of such lexical items through the discourse gives the impression of language having been 'castrated' (Crichton, J. 1992, pers. comm., 2 Oct.). The impression one derives is of a casual, friendly chat rather than a purpose-driven, agenda-based, focussed professional meeting<sup>1</sup>.

### Metaphorical lexemes

The subject of metaphor has an absorbing history (Levinson, 1983), dating as far back as Aristotle, to recent works, such as that of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) who argue that metaphor is integral to human thought. Levinson explores two central semantic theories of metaphor - the comparison theory and the interaction theory (1983), arguing that such semantic approaches fail to afford a satisfactory account of the phenomena. Proposing a pragmatic dimension to the interpretation of metaphor, he draws attention to the 'connotational penumbra' (1983:150) that metaphors bear. These involve 'incidental' rather than 'defining' characteristics of words, drawing on factual properties of referents and therefore knowledge of the world in general. The semantics therefore provides 'a characterisation of the literal meaning or conventional content' from which, along with knowledge of contextual details, pragmatics derives and provides the metaphorical interpretation (1983:156).

Halliday's treatment of metaphor as 'rhetorical transference' (1985:319), allowing a separation of the congruent or literal sense from the incongruent, affords a helpful means of interpreting metaphorical usage in supervisory talk. He classifies such non-literal uses of words as forms of lexical variation derived from basic semantic relationships.

An essential feature is the correspondence between the congruent or literal meaning and the incongruent or metaphorical meaning. Quite aside from how the history of language evolved - did it begin with congruent modes and gradually elaborate metaphorical ones? or have metaphorical forms been inherent in the language from its start? (Halliday, 1985) - a continuum approach functions heuristically. Choices of marked and unmarked, and recognition

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<sup>1</sup> This impression derives in part from the use of non-technical language, discussed below under 'style-shifted lexemes'.

of such uses are, of course, part of what it means to know a language (Halliday, 1985) and thus 'the selection of metaphor is itself a meaningful choice' (1985:321).

The concern here is to explore metaphor as it relates to mitigation and to highlight its pragmatic significance. It is at the nexus of textual choice and context that one may forge a pragmatic interpretation of supervisors' metaphorical usage as hedging. In the instances cited below, the metaphorical lexeme is underlined, and a more congruent or literal alternative is placed after it, in square brackets. It is clear from an understanding of context - the setting of supervision; the role relationship of supervisor and supervisee; the purpose of the speech event; the immediacy of the FTA of criticising - that the metaphorical preference for the less marked, more congruent, conventional or literal choice represents a hedge on the speaker's illocutionary force. The metaphor cushions the message, and takes the edge off the harshness of the more congruent option. Herein lies the mitigation.

In addition, metaphor can mitigate by signalling an appeal to intimacy, establishing solidarity through the presumption of shared ground - what Cohen calls 'linguistic intimation' (1978:9). He writes: 'figurative use can be inaccessible to all but those who share information about one another's knowledge, belief, intentions and attitudes' (1978:7). As a consequence, its use signals intimacy by explicitly initiating 'the co-operative act of comprehension' (Cohen, 1978:7). Three steps are involved here: the issuance of a special 'concealed' invitation by the speaker (i), which the hearer makes a special effort to accept (ii), through which transaction a community of 'an intimate pair' is forged (iii) (1978:6-7).

- *they obviously didn't have [= know] that word* [1.5.7]
- *have a look at that [= consider]* [7.5.13]
- *I was really worried when you put [= wrote] 'description'* [9.4.1]
- *I think that's what was in my head [= I thought]* [9.7.3]
- *I think it helps them get [= acquire, master] the intonation of the whole question* [1.2.3]
- *people can't sort of slip through the net [= remain unnoticed]* [4.8.3]
- *could you pull [= take, elicit] that experience out of them?* [5.7.5]
- *do you feel a bit more comfortable [= confident, secure] about that* [1.6.1]
- *the students obviously picked up [= learned, understood] exactly what you were getting at* [1.8.1]
- *think about [= try to avoid] doing [= saying] "shh"* [2.5.3]

Determining the parameters of metaphor is far from clear-cut as no simple demarcation line exists: 'much of the history of every language is a history of demetaphorising' (Halliday,

1985:327), or words beginning as metaphors and gradually losing that character. Furthermore, different discourses will have different patterns and degrees of metaphorical usage<sup>1</sup>.

### Style-shifted lexemes

A third pattern is a tendency to use non-technical, colloquial language (also reported in Hatch, 1992; San Miguel & Stevenson, 1992). In the examples which follow, the non-technical lexeme is underlined and a more technical, less colloquial alternative is placed in square bracket after it:

- *one of the really good plays [= strategies, techniques]... instead of you always asking the questions [6.1.5]*
- *it would have been better to move those people [= students] [9.7.3]*
- *just stick them up [= write, display] as dollars and they can read them off [read, refer to] [9.11.3]*
- *just pick up [= select, choose] different things and say [= present] it to them [2.3.7]*
- *just try to jolly them around to it [= stay calm, keep a positive atmosphere/outlook] [2.1.5]*
- *you can always leap on them [= discipline] [2.12.10]*
- *the timing was a tiny bit out [= wrong] [3.12.1]*
- *it feels nicer [= it is better] to have it all integrated [4.4.9]*

Certainly this orientation toward the non-technical, in a context that calls for the technical - indeed, might be said to have its own purpose-specific meta-language (Richards et al. 1985; Wajnryb, 1993a; Wallace, 1981)<sup>2</sup> is marked usage and warrants discussion.

The use of hyper-correct forms, technical language and the avoidance of colloquialism is an important means of achieving distance between interlocutors (Lakoff, 1976). A 'heightened self-consciousness' (Fairclough, 1989:66) inspires awe and restricts access. English, of course, lacks the T/V system as a means of encoding honorifics, but other referent honorifics exist that afford inferences which indirectly give respect to one's addressee. In Brown and Levinson's example - 'we look forward very much to dining with you' (1978:186) - the choice of lexeme ('dining' over 'eating') may indirectly encode a distancing respect.

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<sup>1</sup> In this example from the data - 'you've also got to be careful too so that you word it so that it's not just a yes or a no answer' [6.1.3] - the use of 'word' is seen as congruent, albeit perhaps at one time metaphorical, and hence is not here coded as a lexical hedge.

<sup>2</sup> Some would argue that the nature of the language used is less important than the fact of whether or not it is shared: c.f. Roberts and Blase's notion of 'semantic congruence' (i.p.:13).

Conversely, the avoidance of such markers of respectful distance - such as the preference for non-technical language - serves to reduce distance, increase solidarity and level out the asymmetry. Like slang, the use of what Pearson calls 'downward lexical style shifts' (1988:79) evokes shared associations and promotes camaraderie (Brown & Levinson, 1978). As a strategic gesture of positive politeness, colloquialisms, like metaphor, are about 'shared perceptions' (Swan, 1993:242): they help forge a shift from a hierarchical to a more collegial relationship. They allow supervisors to de-role a little, to divest some of their institutional/authoritative status. Herein lies the mitigation: if the dialogue can be construed, from patterns in its *field* lexicon, to be closer to a friendly chat between equals than to a status-imbued meeting between diverse ranks, then the accompanying criticism is depleted of a good deal of its sting. This is consonant with Holmes' (1984) characterisation of how illocutionary force becomes modified: attenuating a negatively affective speech act (such as criticism) reduces the social distance and increases the solidarity between participants. Lee (1987) also comments on such lexical shifts as contributing to the 'depreciatory meaning' (1987:381) borne by other elements in the clause. The process echoes Goffman's (1961) references to the joking informality by which superordinates are able to achieve negative sanction in face-to-face encounters with subordinates.

There is an additional element in the interpretation of mitigation in the supervisor's register shift. Non-technical language is intrinsically less precise than technical language, the latter having evolved partly in response to the demand for precision. As lexical imprecision is a characteristic of informal conversation (Channell, 1994; Crystal & Davy, 1975) the shift away from a technical orientation signals 'the speaker's assessment' of the situation as 'informal' (Crystal & Davy, 1975:91-92). Perhaps, given the power distribution in the dyad, this assessment serves as an invitation from supervisor to teacher, comparable to that from a speaker (+power) to interlocutor (-power) to 'call me by my first name', or to the French notion of 'tutoyer'<sup>1</sup>.

In summary, lexical hedges are signals of marked, incongruent lexical choice which - through dilution, metaphor or register shift - seek to remove some of the harshness of the message.

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<sup>1</sup> Supervisors are not alone, of course, in seeking out linguistic means of mollification: consider the doctor's 'could you just pop up on the couch for a moment?', when the utterance is not a request; the ability/compliance of the addressee is not at issue; the action is not remotely like 'popping up'; the site hardly resembles a 'couch'; it's likely to take longer than 'a moment'; and the minimising 'just' does no credit to the forthcoming discomfort.



One cannot avoid the sense, too, that there is a link to euphemism, which has been reported in the literature on bad news delivery as a tactical means of easing face encounters through muffling features of stark reality (Coombs & Goldman, 1973; Glaser & Strauss, 1965; McClenahan & Lofland, 1976). Lakoff points out (1973; 1976) that euphemisms are a way of not imposing by granting optionality: 'they allow the addressee the option of seeming not to hear what he [sic] is actually hearing' (1976:76). Of course, the pretence is only conventional, what Schegloff (1988a:454) calls '*pro forma*' - not unlike the pretence of asking about another's ability to pass the salt. If euphemisms become 'too arcane or thick for perception' (Lakoff, 1976:67), the conversation may well founder. However, as face is about appearances and mutual constraints and as each party is operating both at- and below-the-face level, pretence is good enough. Green writes that while 'the offer may be a facade, the option non-viable and the respect a sham', what matters is the effort seen to be expended (1989:142).

### Code 11: Hedging Modifiers

- *maybe you could do that tomorrow with them so that they can see that this is really the sort of language which is useful [9.14.1]*

These are modifiers of various sorts that serve to hedge the word(s) which they are modifying. They can consist of one word (e.g. 'just'), a phrase (e.g. 'at least'), or a clause (e.g. 'I think'). The actual form of the modalising particle varies with the nature of the speech act represented. For the purposes of this study, there are three main groups of hedging modifiers - hedges on specificity; hedges on degree; and hedges on authority and commitment - and they typically appear in mixed combinations.

For Brown and Levinson, 'dubitative particles' (1978:159) operate by suspending the felicity conditions on assertions - that is, that speakers know what they say to be true. They work as hedges on Quality, suggesting that a speaker 'is not taking full responsibility for the truth of his [sic] utterances' (Brown & Levinson, 1978:169). Holmes (1984) explores this further by suggesting that different categories of speech acts (following Searle, 1976) hedge in different ways: for example, representatives may be attenuated by reference to the speaker's knowledge about the proposition (e.g. 'I guess'; 'probably'); expressives may be attenuated by devices expressing degrees of feeling (e.g. 'a bit of a problem').

The function of the hedge is to modalise the accompanying utterance, usually an assertion. As with other forms of mitigation, the effect is to soften and dilute. Modality, of course, is also

achieved through modal verbs<sup>1</sup>. The present category deals with modalising particles which are semantic mitigators: they carry their modality in their lexical/semantic weight as meaning modifiers, rather than through their syntactic function.

### Specification hedge

The purpose of specification hedges is to render vague the associated category membership. Typically, these are devices such as 'kind of', 'type of', 'sort of', 'like', which, as predicate modifiers, reduce the 'nouniness' or 'verbiness' of the subsequent item. Thus, 'it was a sort of problem', is less of a problem than the same utterance minus the modifier ('it was a problem'); and 'I sort of felt' signals less weight of feeling than simply uttering the verb minus the modifier ('I felt'). The modifiers attenuate typical supervisory FTAs of suggesting or criticising 'by blurring the speaker's intent' (Brown & Levinson, 1978:122). They are violations of Manner in that they deliberately achieve a less precise communication of speaker's attitude: therein lies the mitigation:

- *it was necessary for them to have a bit of sort of rhythm [3.6.1]*
- *I just sort of felt that it... somehow shifted the focus of your lesson [4.2.1]*

That vagueness violates Manner is evident from Alston's definition of vague as 'any kind of looseness, indeterminacy or lack of clarity' (1964, cited by Binnick, 1970:148)<sup>2</sup>. Pearson refers to such hedges as 'quasi-content items' (1988:92); while James' term is 'compromisers' under which label he groups devices which function by 'lowering', 'toning down' or 'softening' the assertive force of their immediate co-text by 'compromising' on the full semantic significance of the structures they modify (1983:194). Such markers of imprecision operate interactionally to reduce the impositive weight of the proposition on the hearer. In addition to the imprecision signal, such hedges have an affective function, signalling the speaker's desire to reduce social distance (Holmes, 1993:101).

Specificity hedges derive their pragmatic power from the deliberate exploitation of 'fuzzy concepts', a notion associated with G. Lakoff (1972) who drew on Heider's work (1971) and Rosch's (1973) to confirm that category membership is not a matter of yes-or-no, but rather a

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<sup>1</sup> These were treated in Code 5 as syntactic mitigators because their modality is grammaticised in the structure of the utterance.

<sup>2</sup> This was treated in part as lexical imprecision in Code 10.

question of degree. Thus a robin is central to the notion of 'birdiness', a duck less so, and bats even less (G.Lakoff, 1972). Hedges do more, however, than 'reveal distinctions of degrees of category membership' (G. Lakoff, 1972:197). They show the inextricable link between semantics and pragmatics. Thus, G. Lakoff's example, 'John is a regular bachelor', would not be said of John were he indeed a bachelor. The hedge 'regular' highlights certain metaphorical properties of the noun and exploits these to create a particular connotation, or more correctly, a particular pragmatic meaning. A case from the data is:

- *You don't want to really be asking these other comprehension questions [3.4.4]*

where the omission of 'really' shows how its inclusion is in fact mitigating.

Words which achieve this function set up a 'something like' relationship between the qualified construction and an item *in absentia* (James, 1983:104). Thus, in the utterance '*I... sort of felt...*', the speaker is saying that the feeling he is experiencing is something like but different from the feeling as it is normally or usually experienced. Thus, 'compromisers reach out toward an assumed norm' (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1972:455).

The 'reaching out' towards a norm is significant because it indicates that the interpretation is heavily reliant upon hearer inferencing and co-operation (Goffman, 1981; James, 1983). To pursue the example '*I... sort of felt...*', the hearer has to recognise what the 'assumed norm' of such a feeling is, as well as how the speaker's feeling is an approximation of this. James argues that the construction sets up an invitation, from speaker to hearer, for the latter to interpret speaker meaning according to such shared, albeit unstated, norms. Underpinning the invitation is an assumption of sufficient actual, perceived or desired 'interpersonal rapport' between the interlocutors to support such inferencing. Importantly, the signalling of this assumption becomes a marker of solidarity. This is consonant with evidence that links linguistic imprecision and informality with in-group affiliation (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Halliday, 1978; James, 1983).

### Degree hedges

These are hedges on the degree of what is being referred to; and are typically achieved through two means: minimising adjuncts and modal adverbs.

## Minimising adjuncts

Minimising or 'restrictive' adjuncts (Quirk et al. 1972:434) - such as 'just', 'a bit', 'a little', 'a touch', 'not quite' - serve as hedging particles by reducing the amount or quantity of some related item. Through such attenuation, they reduce the illocutionary force of the whole speech act (Holmes, 1984). In typical cases, such as the examples below of 'just' and 'a little bit', the hedge is on the degree of imposition that the criticism is creating for the hearer<sup>1</sup>. Leech argues that minimisers within litotes typically 'understate the degree to which things are bad' (1983:147), so conforming to the Pollyanna Hypothesis, by which people prefer not to be gloomy.

- *it made the point of your lesson, just seemed really a long way down the track [4.2.1]*
- *did you find that (the dialogue) was a little bit too long? [3.1.3]*
- *so that's just something to keep in mind [10.3.13]*

The particle 'just' is a particularly pervasive minimising adjunct in supervisory language. The primary semantic function of 'just' is to express a restrictive meaning, which 'narrowly delimits the extent of the FTA' (Brown & Levinson, 1978:182). However, Lee (1987) distinguishes among four types of meaning, ranging from 'depreciatory' to 'emphatic'. That 'just' can both attenuate and intensify (Labov, 1984; Lee, 1982) is testimony to Moore and Carling's 'principle of modulation' (1982, cited by Lee, 1987:395):

Meaning is not precisely defined at the level of the word... but emerges from a complex interaction firstly between the linguistic elements in the utterance themselves, and secondly between these and the more general context of utterance, including the speaker's 'knowledge base', the contextual setting and so on.

Three points, arising from Lee's study of 'just', need mentioning here, and they pertain generally to the category of minimising adjuncts. Firstly, the use of the minimising adjunct in the data tends to be of the depreciatory kind, where the speaker minimises the significance of an accompanying assertion. Secondly, linked to this, such instances serve as modalising exponents, conveying speaker attitude towards the process that falls within its scope. As such, the usage falls within the interpersonal rather than the ideational function of language

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<sup>1</sup> That this is language- and culture-specific is made clear in Sifianou's (1992) contrastive assessment of diminutives in English and Greek.

(Halliday, 1985). This is important to the study since the minimising adjunct serves to signal to the hearer the speaker's attitude towards the proposition being conveyed. Especially in contexts linked to requests for action - when the critical FTA is linked to a suggestion for change - the minimising adjunct reduces the imposition on the hearer's negative face, acting as a modalising directive (Lee, 1987). Thirdly, even when 'just' carries ideational meaning, such as in its time-restrictive sense, its meaning is often compounded by an overlay of depreciation (Lee, 1987).

### Modal adverbs

Modal adverbs - such as 'perhaps', 'possibly' 'probably' - serve as hedging particles by reducing certainty and obligation; by increasing optionality; and significantly, through the one-to-many meanings of modal particles, by blurring the distinction between various possible modal meanings<sup>1</sup>. Brown's term - 'de-responsibilising mechanisms' (1980:128) - is particularly apt.

G. Lakoff's list of 'hedges and related phenomena' (1972:196), containing over sixty modalising/modifying particles illustrates how hedging power is not limited to any one form or even one function ('very' as an intensifier and 'somewhat' as a reducer may each serve as a hedge); but how meaning in any given case must take into account both the literal sense (semantics) and the connotational sense (meaning in context, or pragmatics). In the following examples from the data, the hedging modifier is underlined and the expanded version shows how the hedge works:

- *it's a problem that you have to at least anticipate [3.9.13] Expansion:* a problem that you don't have to do anything about other than recognise in advance that it might happen
- *You could have quickly gone through them and said [3.9.13] Expansion:* the thing I am saying that you missed doing is very little because it could have been done so quickly.

The importance of connotational or pragmatic meaning comes to light in the analysis of a word like 'really', which Labov treats under the notion of 'intensity', defined modally as 'the commitment of the self to the proposition'(1984:44). In the data, as in natural occurrence, 'really' seems to have a range of meanings, some of which carry a pragmatic, hedging power. Sometimes 'really' is used as a direct intensifier. At other times, where it acts as a pause-filler,

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<sup>1</sup> c.f. Code 5.

rather of the nature of 'um' or 'ah', it is a 'cognitive zero' (Labov, 1984:44), and does not contribute to referential meaning.

On other occasions, however, the meaning of 'really' is more complicated. In the following example, the fact that it is displaced from its unmarked position ('you don't really want'), combined with the marked durative aspect ('asking'), signals that it functions not, as it may appear, as an intensifier, but in fact as a mitigator, modalising the supervisor's suggestion. This is supported by Held's (1989) research into the hedging quality of some instances of 'maximisation':

- *you don't want to be really asking these other comprehension questions' [3.4.4]*

A fourth meaning, seen quite pervasively in the data, also carries pragmatic power. In the instances below, 'really' can, at face value, mean 'actually' or 'in fact'. But there is an overlay of pragmatic meaning (rendered palpable if the 'really' is removed). The pragmatic function here is to relieve the baldness of an otherwise relatively unmitigated utterance (a hedge on Quantity). James refers to this as a 'relational function' (1983:193) where items they serve to relate stretches of discourse in a continuative role as well as to relate the propositional content to the interpersonal dimension. A similar interpretation of redundant linguistic material is offered by Martyna (1980) who deems lack of elaboration as abrupt. Labov (1984:68) points out that any 'pragmatic periphrasis' is unsatisfactory because it loses the emotional content of intensity conveyed by the adverb.

- *You really have to at every change of stage in the lesson [3.10.13]*
- *it's not really a test [3.3.11]*
- *perhaps you were trying to encourage them a little bit too much by accepting um things that weren't really suited to what you were trying to get them to do [9.1.5]*
- *you really have to make those linkages all the time [2.1.16]*

The motivation for such usage is the avoidance of conflict and collision in a face-to-face encounter (Sheldon, 1992). Gibb's (1969) study of defensive/supportive behavioural climates in interpersonal interactions shows how a stance of certainty and dogmatism produces defensiveness, whereas provisionalism and tentativeness reduce it. Significantly, one respondent said that her use of pragmatic modality was designed to send the message: 'there's still room for your opinion here'<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Informant #12 in the ethnographic study (Ch. 6).

## Authority and commitment hedges

A third category of hedges includes those which attenuate the force of the accompanying utterance through an anticipatory or parenthetical clause. This is typically expressed by a subset of 'private verbs' (Quirk et al. 1985:1181): 'I think', 'I feel', 'I guess', 'I suppose', by which speakers signal that they wish to 'divest' themselves of some of the responsibility for their assertions (Lakoff, 1974a:10). The hedge may pertain to authority or commitment<sup>1</sup>.

### Authority hedges

- *'I think it helps them get the intonation of the whole question [1.2.3])*
- *I think it's important that that learning is always... [4.8.1]*
- *I thought the drilling was pretty good [4.9.11]*

The Hallidayan interpretation of clause structure clarifies how an instance (such as the first above) functions as a modalising clause. Halliday (1985) views such a structure as a common type of interpersonal metaphor based on the semantic relation of clause projection. Here, the speaker's opinion in regard to the validity of his or her observation is coded not congruently, as a modal element within the clause ('it might help them ....'), but as a 'separate, projecting clause in a hypotactic clause complex' (1985:332). Instead of saying 'it helps them get the intonation of the whole question', the supervisor prefaces the proposition with 'I think'. The proposition is projected as fact and the subjectivity ('I think') is encoded in the projecting clause, which is foregrounded. There are, of course, other, more objective ways (e.g. 'it is likely that') for saying the same thing, as well as more 'intermediate' ways (where the modality is expressed as a prepositional phrase e.g. 'in my opinion'). Lakoff argues that 'framing a statement as a cogitative act rather than as a declarative act leaves the addressee free to believe or not' (1974a:25). By granting options, one reduces imposition.

The pragmatic power of the projecting subjective clause ('I think') can be gauged by comparing it with the force of the same propositional utterance without the projecting clause. The following examples are taken from the data; the first of each (a) is authentic; the second (b) contains the projected proposition, stripped of the modalising clause and other mitigating influences.

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<sup>1</sup> The clause structure feature was treated in Code 6.

- a. *I think the question was perhaps just a little bit too general* [3.3.7].
- b. The question was too general
  
- a. *I think then you I think run the danger of moving into just a parrot fashion sort of drill* [4.7.7]
- b. Then you run the danger of a parrot fashion drill
  
- a. *I think you know try and find a little bit of that inferential just just try and get them thinking* [6.1.3]
- b. Try and get them thinking

Clearly, the de-mitigated statement lifts the proposition closer to the category of objective fact. The hedging supervisor compromises the validity of the proposition by the ubiquitous reminder of subjectivity<sup>1</sup>. It therefore bears a relational message of uncertainty and deference (Sheldon, 1992)<sup>2</sup>.

Another hedging influence on the power of 'I think' is its inherent ambiguity<sup>3</sup>. Lysvag (1975) distinguishes the two forms of 'I think' as the (non-hedging) strong and the (hedging) weak. The pragmatic power of this clause structure, pervasive through the data, derives in part from the ever-present possibility that the 'doubt' meaning (not the 'belief' meaning) is the one being projected: therein lies the mitigation.

Urmson's (1952) treatment of a class of verbs he calls 'parenthetical' is relevant here. These function 'to orient the hearer aright towards the statements with which they are associated... against the emotional, social, logical and evidential background' (1952:491). Grammatically, they operate either parenthetically ('your son, I regret, is dead') or as an anticipatory clause followed by a noun clause ('I regret that your son is dead'). Urmson claims that such verbs do not do the work of psychological descriptions; but rather are a set of devices, like sentence adverbials (e.g. 'admittedly', 'arguably'), by which 'we prime the hearer to see the emotional significance, the logical relevance, and the reliability of our statements' (1952:484). They function to 'show rather than state' - serving as warning, priming or orientating signals

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<sup>1</sup> The speaker may imply that the view is only *his or her* opinion; or it is only *one* opinion; or that different opinions are *equally* valid. Overall, such signals reduce the notion of any one objective truth.

<sup>2</sup> Such projecting clauses seem to achieve the same ends as that achieved by one supervisor in this minimising aside (treated in Code 9) that accompanied a suggestion: '*I've always found it useful, you might disagree*' [10.4.3].

<sup>3</sup> This was also treated in Code 5 (in the example '*I thought it worked well...*' [1.1.9]) as the distinction between a statement of belief and a statement of dubiety.



(1952:484). Lakoff says that such verbs in such environments do not describe 'an act of cogitation' but soften illocutionary force (1974a:9). Similarly, Corum refers to their modal as distinct from their 'factive' function (1975:135). In the context of the present inquiry, such parenthetical verbs have the function of orienting through mitigation - by compromising the link between speaker and the truth conveyed by the associated proposition. In Goffman's terms, they introduce some distance 'between the figure and its avowal' (1981:148).

### Commitment hedges

The down-graded value of such subjective representations as projecting modalising clauses is even further degraded when the clause itself is hedged through a marked choice of the verb of perception. In the place of a statement of cognition ('I think') there may be an expression of affective state ('I feel...'); of doubt ('I guess...'; 'I suppose'; 'I'm not sure'); or of denied knowledge ('I don't know...').

- *I suppose the main criticism... I've got of that stage of the lesson [1.8.3]*
- *I don't know, it, don't get me wrong, it's not like it was a great problem [4.2.1]*
- *did you weigh up, I guess, ways of assessing their understanding the text [10.2.1]*
- *I'm not sure about giving them anything to read [8.2.2]*

Each of these carries a particular hit-and-miss quality and hedges the commitment of the speaker to the proposition projected in the accompanying clause. Holmes refers to them as speaker-oriented down-toners 'used to explore the speaker's reservations in relation to a particular speech act' (1984:359). They appear functionally similar to devices designed overall to combat participants' status inequity - referred to by Tracy and Carjuzaa (1993:175) as 'work to rein self in'.