Wilamová, Sirma

On the function of hedging devices in negatively polite discourse

SIRMA WILAMOVÁ

ON THE FUNCTION OF HEDGING DEVICES IN NEGATIVELY POLITE DISCOURSE

Introduction

Being polite means to be a considerate conversational partner. In terms of negative politeness being polite means to choose the right words to express a communicative goal, which might be felt as face-threatening for the addressee such as refusal, disagreement or criticism in order to avoid a potential conflict and hence to maintain harmony in interaction, which is, generally, considered as highly desirable.

Hedges (*particles, lexical and clausal hedges, pragmatic idioms*) are pragmatic markers that attenuate (or weaken) the strength of an utterance. Along with the core principle of negative politeness as postulated in Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987) an FTA is viewed as a violation of the speaker's privacy and freedom of action, for which hedges provide a possible compensation. Hence **negative politeness** enables the speaker to go on-record (i.e. to make his/her communicative intention clear to the hearer), but with redress, which means that the speaker makes an effort to minimize the imposition, authoritativeness or directness of his/her utterance.

In this paper I will discuss a number of linguistic means that may be used as politeness devices in negatively polite discourse and try to show how they contribute to expressing a higher degree of politeness. However, it should be emphasized that I will focus exclusively on those lexico-grammatical devices that are **non-structural**, i.e. separable from the propositional content of the message, and will try to assign a pragmatic value to them.

The following typology of hedging devices draws on Fraser's (1996) general typology of pragmatic markers and Brown and Levinson's (1987) relevant linguistic politeness strategies. However, it has been extended to include a set of other signals which have occurred in the material under investigation. The corpus data is obtained from literary dialogues in two novels by David Lodge, *Changing Places* (1975) and *Small World* (1984); the description of the pragmatic roles of hedging devices is accompanied by frequency occurrence at the end of the article.

1 Pragmatic functions of hedging devices

The analysis of the material has shown that hedging devices are the dominant means of expressing negative politeness, which confirms the hypothesis that attenuation is connected primarily with respect for other people's privacy, which is a central concept in English culture (Holmes 1995).

As has been said, hedges occur as **mitigating devices** which attenuate the propositional content of the message. However, attenuation can be achieved in different ways employing diverse linguistic and non-linguistic strategies.

1.1 Clausal mitigators

The first and the most frequent pragmatic markers are clausal mitigators, namely **pseudoconditionals** and **but-clauses** occurring in the final position, i.e. after the propositional content. As negatively polite devices they soften the illocutionary force of the utterance by building upon **face-preserving** principles. This type of pragmatic marker "signal[s] the speaker's desire to reduce the face loss associated with the basic message" (Fraser 1996). There exist a number of varieties of clausal mitigators, but I shall consider only the two types that occur in my corpus.

1.1.1 Pseudoconditionals

Pseudoconditionals are typically represented by if-clauses in the position of afterthoughts such as …, if I may say so, …, if I were you, …, if you wanted to, …, if you like, …, if you insist, …, if it comes to that, …, if that isn' t an impertinent question, … .

This group of pragmatic markers is labelled *pseudoconditionals*, because these if-clauses are not truly conditional sentences in their nature as they **syntactically** lack the other part of the conditional structure and **semantically** they lack the condition which has to be fulfilled before something else can happen. What, then, is their **pragmatic** function in relation to politeness? As the data revealed pseudoconditionals function as a very frequent linguistic means which softens the illocutionary force of the utterance by taking into consideration **face-preserving principles**. As a rule, they are attached only after the propositional content of the message, which shows that the speaker first goes on-record by making a speech act that could be felt as an FTA. On the other hand, there is, however, a feeling that the message uttered is expressed in a more on-record way than is appropriate, and thus there is a need to mitigate the content of the message by adding a softener which would provide sufficient compensation.

Let us consider the Examples 1 and 2:

Example 1

> Desireé offers Philip (a British university professor), who otherwise has to leave America, a job below his social level.
> You could work for me, <u>if you like</u>. (CHP/PS-<u>DZ</u>/4/12)

Example 2

> Mary comments on Ron's wife's opinions.
> She was brainwashed, <u>if you'll pardon the expression</u>. (CHP/MZ-<u>MM</u>/3/5)

1.1.2 But-clauses

The other subgroup of clausal mitigators are utterances that begin with *but*. As opposed to pseudoconditionals, which soften the illocutionary force by emphasizing the hearer's freedom of action, but-clauses attenuate the propositional content of the utterance by providing an **explanation** of the speaker's motives for carrying out a face-threatening act.

But-clauses occur in several typical contexts. Firstly, they contribute to increased politeness by expressing **agreement**, or at least **pseudoagreement**. As Leech (1983: 138) claims, "[…] there is a tendency to exaggerate agreement with other people, and to mitigate disagreement by expressing regret, partial agreement, etc.".

Example 3

> The two strangers talking on the plane are discussing a man they both know. Fulvia Morgana has a very low professional opinion of Philip Swallow, whilst Morris Zapp tries to walk on thin ice as Philip Swallow is actually his close friend.

FM: But his lecture was not very eventful, I must say.

MZ: Yeah, well, that doesn't surprise me. He's a nice guy, Philip, <u>but he doesn't exactly set your pulse racing with intellectual excitement</u>. (SW/<u>MZ</u>-FM/1a/6) [seeking agreement]

Example 4

> Persse asks his new acquaintance a question which is rather too personal.

PMG: And where where you found, if that isn't an impertinent question.

AP: It is a little intimate, considering we've only just met. But never mind. (+ providing an answer) (SW/PMG-<u>AP</u>/1/10)

As is obvious from the above examples the speaker goes on-record with his/her opinion that is different from that of the addressee. Such a disagreement or refusal to provide an answer could be felt as face-threatening and therefore impolite. Pragmatically, but-clauses represent a strategic means of achieving at least partial agreement and hence maintain harmonious relations between participants in the interaction.

Secondly, but-clauses typically occur as parts of face-threatening acts such as **refusal** or **disapproval**, or **apology.** Not only do they soften an FTA by providing

an explanation why it must be carried out, but together with the speech act expressed in the first part of the utterance (most often thanking or apologizing) they actually disguise the true nature of the speaker's communicative goal as shown in Examples 3 and 4.

Example 5
> Rejecting an invitation to stay longer.
> Thank you, <u>but I can't stop.</u> (CHP/MZ-<u>HS</u>/1/8) [refusal]

Example 6
> I'm sorry to barge in on you like this, <u>but my husband wrote asking for one of his books</u>. (CHP/MZ-<u>HS</u>/1/8) [request]

1.2 Subjectivity markers

This type of hedge consists of **speaker-orientated markers**, which emphasize the subjective attitude of the speaker towards the message. Here belong pragmatic expressions such as *I think, I hope, I guess, I suppose, I don't think, I wouldn't say* etc.

The pragmatic role of this type of hedge lies in the fact that it attenuates the speaker meaning by increasing the degree of subjectivity of the utterance. By using **attitudinal hedges** the addressee transforms an assertion into a question phrase, which " […] signals a lack of certainty and high degree of indeterminacy on the part of the speaker and consequently implies the necessity of confirmation on the part of the hearer […]" (Urbanová 1995). Hence hedges imply to the hearer that the speaker's utterance is not to be taken as something universally true or definite, but rather as a personal **opinion**, **judgement** or **belief**, which is open to further negotiation.

Example 7
> Joy asks her lover about their future. She expects he has already told his wife about their relationship.

JS: What are your plans? [….] I don't mean this weekend, I mean long-term plans. About us.

PS: Ah. Well, <u>I thought</u> I wouldn't say anything to Hilary until she's well-settled in her training for marriage guidance. (SW/<u>PS</u>-JS/7/1) (= I have decided not to tell her yet, actually.)

Example 8
> <u>I was thinking</u> that before we go any further, perhaps we ought to come to an understanding. (SW/DZ-RF/2/1) [suggestion] (= Let's make an agreement)

Not only do attitudinal hedges increase the degree of subjectivity, but they also serve to indicate the speaker's **uncertainty** and **indecision** about the utterance he

makes. Being uncertain or indecisive may, of course, be the result of insufficient information or a character feature, but often it is a manifestation of politeness and deference as in Example 8, which is considered to be a very strong **culture-specific phenomenon** in English.

Example 9

A young assistent in conversation with an elderly professor, who asks him:

RD: Interested in prosody, are you?
           Yes, <u>I suppose</u> I am. (SW/<u>PMG</u>-RD/1/3)

1.3 Downgraders

The next type of hedging devices are **downgraders**. As has already been said, along with the "core" of negative politeness, it is considered polite to be non-imposing. If, however, this is not possible, then the imposition must be at least minimized. Downgraders, similar to the hedges described, are also **speaker-orientated** hedges represented by expressions such as *just, just in case, a bit, a few, a little, rather, scarcely, etc.*

The primary role of these attitudinal markers lies in the fact that they **minimize the size of the imposition** that is being made on the hearer as in Example 10 or they serve as a form of **self-protection** of the speaker, the reason for which may be insufficient knowledge of the partner's wants, opinions or beliefs as in Example 11.

Example 10

An opening turn in a phone call the next day after an argument.
I <u>just </u>wanted to apologize for the last night. (CHP/MZ-<u>HS</u>/5/2)

Example 11

HS: So you really fiddled this for Philip?
           Well, I wouldn't say it was entirely my doing. I <u>just</u> gave Stroud a nudge in the right direction. (CHP/MZ-<u>HS</u>/5/11)

The strategy of minimizing the imposition is often used in order to show **tact** or **modesty** towards the speaker as in the following examples.

Example 12

Meeting at the coctail party.

PS: You're Mrs Zapp?
DZ: Is that so surprising? You think I look too old? Or too young?
           I was <u>just</u> surprised. I suppose I assumed you had gone to Rummidge with your husband. (CHP/<u>PS</u>-DZ/1/8)

Example 13
DZ: Somebody told me you got a terrific write-up in the last Course Bulletin.
           That was <u>just</u> Willy Smith. (CHP/<u>PS</u>-DZ/4/11)

1.4 Tentativizers

Tentativizers are pragmatic markers which similarly to subjective markers contribute to a greater degree of politeness by conveying hesitation, uncertainty or vagueness. However, the way they explore them differs from that of subjective markers.

This group of markers includes two types of markers, namely (1) expressions such as *well* and *I don't know* which signal reservation and decrease the certainty and definitiveness of the utterance and (2) markers of **intentional vagueness** represented by pragmatic expressions such as *a kind of, sort of thing* or *a glass or two* whose main aim is to redress an FTA in the way that it decreases expliciteness of an utterance and hence enables the speaker to be less direct and bold on-record in communicating his/her meaning.

Example 14
           A host offers her guest possibilities where he can sleep.
           <u>I don't know</u> where would you like to sleep? This is the main bedroom.
           Or there's this other room which I use as a study, but it has a bed in it. It
           is really quite comfortable. Take your choice. (CHP/<u>PS</u>-MB/4/2)

Example 15
           After offering his secretary to call him by his first name, the boss invites
           her to lunch.
           Then would you care to join me for a little Italian nosh and <u>a glass or two</u>
           at a trattoria I know in Covent Garden? (SW/<u>FS</u>-G/2/1)

1.5 Performative hedges

"Politeness is manifested not only in the content of conversation, but also in the way conversation is managed and structured by its participants" (Leech 1983: 139). What do such expressions as *I (just) want to know, I must ask, I'll (just) say one thing, I (just) wanted to apologize, I'm inclined to agree* or *I'm curious to know* actually do?

Hedged performatives are **speaker-oriented markers** which merely comment on the speech acts that immediately follow. In that respect they can be called "**introductory**".

These markers most frequently hedge face-threatening acts such as requests, suggestions, apologies etc. They contribute towards a higher degree of politeness in several ways. Firstly, using Leech's term (1983), *oratio obliqua* hedges the propositional content of the message, which would otherwise sound too "bare" and hence

less polite. Secondly, they serve as a linguistic means which signals the speaker's illocutionary goal, giving the hearer time to adjust and shape his/her answer.

Example 16

> There's something I must ask you, Fulvia. It may sound naive, or even rude, but I can't suppress any longer. I just want to know how you manage to reconcile living like a millionaire with being a Marxist. (SW/MZ-FM/4/1)

1.6 Pragmatic idioms

Fraser (1990: 174) defines pragmatic idioms as "expressions for which there is no plausible inferential path leading from literal, direct meaning to the accepted basic pragmatic signal". Expressions such as *please, kindly* and *perhaps* or *maybe* belong to this group. Their usual position before an imperative sentence signals the speaker's intention that the sentence is to be taken only as a **request** or a **suggestion**.

Example 17

> Perhaps you would like to go back to the cable car with Mr Wainwright, Mrs Simpson while I catch up with my son's news. (PS-JS/8/3) [suggestion]

Example 18

> Would you switch the light on, please? (CHP/MZ-HS/1/1) [request]

Example 19

> I thought maybe I would sleep in here tonight. (CHP/MZ-HS/4/5) [suggestion]

Accordingly, not only do pragmatic idioms function as minimal lexical devices that signal how the illocutionary force of the utterance should be interpreted, but in respect to negative politeness they also increase the degree of politeness of an utterance, because they function as a means of politeness, softening the propositional content of the utterance.

There are two ways in which their function can be manifested. Whilst expressions such as *perhaps* or *maybe* typically indicate suggestions and thus contribute to the degree of politeness in that they make the utterance more **tentative**, expressions such as *please* or *kindly* work rather as polite **mitigators** purely softening the imposition carried out.

1.7 Hedges on politeness maxims

This type of **speaker-orientated** hedging device builds directly upon Leech's (1983) politeness maxims. They are represented by **conventionalized expres-**

sions, frequently sentence adverbials such as *I'm afraid*, *unfortunately*, *nothing personal*, *to tell you the truth*, *I must say*, or *you don't mean to tell me*.

Most frequently, the hedges in this group address the **Tact Maxim** ["minimize cost to other"], which confirms Leech's hypothesis (1983: 133) that not all of the maxims are equally important and that the tact maxim is ranked the highest.

Example 20

> Mary replies to Philip's question whether she would like to have sex with him.
> I'd just as soon not, to tell you the truth, Philip. Nothing personal, but I'm tired as hell. (CHP/PS-MB/4/5)

Obviously, hedges exploiting the Tact Maxim indicate a **violation of face.** This type of hedge seems to express that – as Brown and Levinson (1987: 172) say – "what is said on record might more properly have been said off record or not at all". In other words, these pragmatic hedges mitigate an FTA such as a **refusal** or **criticism** in the way they actually **openly admit** that they follow Grice's maxim of Quality, i.e. they are true despite the awareness of the fact that truthfulness may be felt by the addressee to be impolite.

Another type of hedge belonging to this group are hedges whose politeness function is encoded in **softening** FTAs that convey or react to news which may be felt to be bad or unpleasant by the hearer.

Example 21

> You don't mean to tell me that he's been cheating on you? (CHP/MZ-HS/7/1)

Example 22

> Explanation why they will not be able to meet.
> Unfortunately, I'm here till Friday. (SW/PS-JS/4a/5)

Table 1 Frequency of hedging devices (based on excerpted material).

Hedging devices	Freq.	%
Clausal mitigators	28	28.6
Subjectivity markers	20	20.5
Downgraders	17	17.3
Tentativizers	12	12.2
Performative hedges	8	8.2
Hedges on politeness maxims	7	7.1
Pragmatic idioms	6	6.1
Total	**98**	**100.0**

Conclusion

Pragmatic markers are very frequent linguistic means used in expressing negative politeness in English discourse, which confirms the claim that attenuation is a strongly culture-specific phenomenon in which the freedom from imposition is of a highest value. The analysis reveals that attenuation – the **reduction of face-loss** – which is the basic concept of this type of politeness, can be achieved via several strategies, namely emphasizing the addressee's freedom of action and his freedom from imposition, explaining the speaker's motives for carrying out an FTA, and lowering the authoritativeness and definitiveness of the utterance by increasing the degree of subjectivity, hesitation or vagueness, which signals to the hearer both that his privacy and freedom of decision are fully respected and that an item in focus is open to further negotiation. Other strategies build upon explicitly minimizing the size of imposition, refining its illocutionary force or softening an FTA with the help of conventionalized expressions.

Works Cited

Brown, P. and Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987.

Fraser, B. (1996). "Pragmatic markers". *Pragmatics* 6.2 (1996): 167–190.

Goffman, E. (1967). Interaction ritual: essays on face to face behavior. New York: Garden City, 1967.

Holmes, J. (1992). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. London: Longman, 1992.

Holmes, J. (1995). *Women, Men and Politeness*. New York: Longman, 1995.

Karttunen, L. (1977). "Syntax and Semantics of Questions". Hiz, H. ed. *Questions* (1977): 165–210.

Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics.* New York: Longman, 1983.

Levinson, S. (1983). *Pragmatics.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983.

Urbanová, L. (1999). "On vagueness in authentic English conversation". *Brno Studies in English* 25 (1999): 99–107.

Urbanová, L. (1995). "On the status of declarative questions in English conversation". *Brno Studies in English* 21 (1995): 59–65.

Watts, R., Ide, S. and Ehlich, K., eds. (1992). *Politeness in Language: Studies in its History, Theory and Practice.* Berlin, New York: Mounton de Gruyter, 1992.