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MODIFICATION OF THE ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE

I. INTRODUCTION

In authentic conversation, the need for sharing and avoidance of conflict play a crucial role in the consequent modification of the illocutionary force of individual speech acts. In the present study the semantic interpretation of the modification type 'hedging' is proposed, with regard to the omnipresent cooperative and politeness principles.

My interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation draws on Palmer (1990), Coates (1987), Holmes (1984, 1995), Brown–Levinson (1987) and Kempson (1990).

The material under investigation is taken from the London–Lund Corpus (LLC) S.1.3. and S.1.4. (tentative analysis).

In my study 'The Notion of Indirectness in English Conversation' (1994.7–15) attention has been drawn to the high degree of tentativeness, vagueness and uncertainty which is reflected in a high frequency of occurrence of indirect questions serving the function of confirmation in spoken discourse. The underlying aim is the maintenance of the social contacts. The character of the analysis is based on the relationship between the form and function of indirect questions in spoken discourse.

The present study deals with the semantic interpretation of the modification of the illocutionary force in informal English conversation. The pragmatic devices utilized for this purpose are based on the dichotomy hedge versus booster, representing two counteracting forces – ATTENUATION (primarily oriented towards the elimination of conflict in communication) and ACCENTUATION (primarily oriented towards the establishment of solidarity and mutual agreement).

ATTENUATION (or HEDGING) is a process which results in the weakening of the illocutionary force in situations which would otherwise lead to the loss of face (either for the speaker or for the listener) and which would thus make communication untenable mainly due to the infringing of the politeness princi-

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ple. According to Holmes (1995:3) another dichotomy enters this process, namely the distinction between the REFERENTIAL and AFFECTIVE functions of language. With regard to this distinction attenuation in referential contexts is rather caused by a lack of information, i.e. uncertainty, whereas in emotive contexts attenuation is determined by tact (social distance, power relations).

REFERENTIAL FUNCTION uncertainty, assumption, lack of commitment to truth conditions, lack of competence to make a judgement

AFFECTIVE FUNCTION tact, detachment, disclaiming the validity of the judgement for social reasons

It can be argued, however, that the two above–mentioned functions co–exist and their separation would be felt as artificial (Coates, 1987:130). Nevertheless the contextual approach to the interpretation of pragmatic devices shows that it is the referential meaning which is superimposed in certain contexts, in others the affective meaning comes to the foreground, thus making the individual pragmatic means context–sensitive. Moreover, the same pragmatic means can be interpreted in certain contexts as means of attenuation, in others as cases of ac-centuation (a clear example is represented by the omnipresent *I think* depending largely on its prosodic manifestation).

It is true, however, that there is no clear–cut difference between the functions of a relatively closed set of pragmatic means which frequently occur in informal conversation and the final disambiguation of the relevant meaning in a certain situation is provided solely by the context.

More intimate and 'sensitive' topics definitely determine the use of effective affective means, whereas matter–of–fact topics require pragmatic means with primarily referential meanings. Crucial role is also played by the interactants – their GENDER modifies the illocutionary force differently. This difference in speech behaviour is inherently encoded in social roles and the status of men and women. In my previous study (1994.11) I have expressed the view that informal conversation is above all negotiation between speakers and thus it can be argued that the meanings are not primarily truth–conditioned – they are rather assump-tions based on judgements which are highly subjective. The high degree of subjectivity expressed in informal conversation is, on the one hand, felt to be an advantage (THE ABILITY TO EXPRESS ONE'S VIEWS), on the other hand it is felt to be a limitation by the speaker (MY OPINION IS SUBJECTIVE) – this dilemma can be utilized in conversation in a high degree of assertiveness versus a high degree of reservation and modesty. The conventionalized form of reser-vation and modesty is labelled NEGATIVE POLITENESS, the conventional-ized form of expressing solidarity has a facilitative function and is labelled POSITIVE POLITENESS.

II. RESULTS OF THE INVESTIGATION

S.1.3. is a conversation between two females (female undergraduate, age c.36 and female undergraduate, age c .30) and a male undergraduate age c.36. The topic is connected with university life. From among the three speakers speaker A (female undergraduate, age c.36) provides the bulk of conversation, sharing her experience with the two other interlocutors who do not make a substantial contribution – they follow her closely and provide frequent backchannelling.

S.1.4. is a conversation between two males (male academic, age c.48, male academic, age c.48). The topic of conversation is professionally oriented (lecturing, students, pictures, the start of the conversation is a casual chat). The contributions of the two colleagues are fairly equal in length and importance.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS
Modification of the illocutionary force has been investigated in the category ATTENUATION. With regard to attenuation a wide range of meanings has been identified, all of them being context–sensitive and intentional.
Scale of Modified Meanings S.1.3. S.1.4.
NP negative politeness 39 29
A assumption, consideration 19 23
V vagueness, lack of specification 13 20
D detachment, reservation, disapproval, objection 16 18
DP depersonalization 4 1
U self–evaluation 5 7
UN uncertainty, indecision 5 30
I introduction of a new topic 8 8
AE additional information, explanation 7 7
PP positive politeness 1 –
S sarcasm 1 –
C contrast 1 –
Total 119 143

NP NEGATIVE POLITENESS reflects the need to avoid face threatening acts, such as refusal, disagreement, objection, dislike, disapproval, criticism, disregard etc.

Another category of negative politeness manifestations is connected with the modesty principle. It is a requirement in social communication that the speaker should not sound authoritarian or boastful. Thus there is a noticeable tendency to soften and reduce the assertiveness of some speech acts and make them more interactive.

Negative politeness is also connected with sensitive topics. Conventionalization of this strategy is typical of NEGATIVE POLITENESS CULTURES (also called standoffish cultures) which are reserved and distant in behaviour.

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Example 1

S.1.4.   788 *but I (don't) think I particularly want that one* (dislike)

482 *I mean it would be a bit out of place somehow* (refusal)

685 *(and) I don't think it's sensible* (disapproval)

17 I *(don't know whether I'll) drink coffee at this time of day if there were any tea* (preference)

S.1.3. 78 particularly (I think) you probably like the sort of clothes I like anyway (a modest guess)

127–128 *I wrote it reasonably well* (modest self–evaluation)

361–362 *this is just what I think at the moment* (modesty)

The comparison of the two above–mentioned analyzed texts shows that the conversation in which women prevail more sensitive issues are being discussed and the occurrence of negative politeness is more frequent. The single sex conversation in which only men participate is more matter–of–fact and the meanings expressed via attenuation are rather referential than affective. The frequency of negative politeness in the latter conversation, however, still remains relatively high.

ASSUMPTION, CONSIDERATION

It has already been mentioned that informal conversation is based on assumptions rather than assertions. Pragmatic means which convert assertions to tentative assertions (or rather assumptions) express one of the possible interpretations of events, one possibility from the set of mental representations of the reality. Utterances in conversation tend to be interpretive, not descriptive (see Kempson, 1990).

Epistemic modals are the means which enable making assumptions. According to Palmer (1990:50) 'The function of epistemic modals is to make judgements about the possibility, etc., that something is or is not the case.' Apart from making a judgement, the use of epistemic modals also enables the opposite meaning, i.e. disclaiming the responsibility for the judgement. In the majority of cases the meaning of the utterances is primarily referential.

Example 2

S.1.4.   1120 –1125 *I suppose (it's) but I suppose it'll be up on the boards tomorrow*

1132 –1133 *I probably (have done)*

1135 *came with the faculty of arts perhaps*

1141 *so I presume it is for anybody in the faculty of arts*

1042 *and presumably he's got something equally fatal*

1043 *or perhaps it is lung cancer*

VAGUENESS, LACK OF SPECIFICATION

Vagueness in conversation is a phenomenon which is closely connected with implicitness. It is not always necessary to make explicit references to the extra-

linguistic reality and specify details. Hints expressed by means of markers such as *sort of, kind of, something like that,* and the frequent occurrence of the word *thing* meaning anything (a prop–word) are attributes of informal English conversation.

Example 3

S.1.4.   160 *you know the sort of thing*

876 *(it's) sort of quite harmless*

1170 *I've got the list upstairs (sort of thing)*

706–710 *it's not like a lecture on Chaucer or or Eliot (or something of that kind)*

667 *as though it's a kind of communal line on this*

UNCERTAINTY, INDECISION

The speaker often does not have a sufficient amount of information when making a judgement and he feels the need to signal the lack of information via language means.

Example 4

S.1.4.   440 –441 *the painting's in Madrid I think it's not in London*

750–753 *I don't think Gillian or Ingeborg are on the board this year*

1203 *I could take perhaps the Oresteia*

507 *they're probably people who've left pictures here*

555–556 *I (think it would be a) much perhaps he's got more*

The expression of uncertainty is much more frequent in S.1.4 (male conversation) than in S.1.3. (females prevail). The proportion is 30:5.

DETACHMENT, RESERVATION

The expression of negative attitudes such as criticism, disapproval, dissatisfaction, reservation, objection, distance is frequently connected with attenuation. Mitigation complies with the wish of the speaker not to be on record, not to show commitment very openly in public. As Coates puts it '...it is important for speakers to avoid making outright assertions: each speaker must allow room for futher discussion and for the modification of points of view.' (1987:122)

Example 5

S.1.3.   908 *but I just thought it was horrifying*

289–292 *well I would have thought after seven years they ought to chuck her out in the world and say go and do some teaching or something*

912–913 *I think something ghastly happens to them*

S.1.4. 685 *I don't think it's sensible*

DEPERSONALIZATION

is detachment expressed in an impersonal way by means of the expression *one* (in this way the judgement is made anonymous). In the given contexts the

interpretation gives evidence of role based or social class based features with indications of social distance.

Example 6

S.1.3.   1175–1176 *or one wonders whether it's that way round or whether it's the other way round*

744–747 *I mean one hears talk of biological needs but physiological almost denies any question of gender*

SELF–EVALUATION

is represented by comments on the speaker's behaviour in a situation which is embarassing or otherwise difficult to cope with.

Example 7

S.1.3.   667–669 *having had this glass of sherry I was a bit woozy*

676 *and I don't know where I got this from*

869–871 *I mean I'd reached the point where I thought (well) if they if what would I do if they offered me this thing*

INTRODUCING A NEW IDEA (SUBJECT)

This function is frequently fulfilled by *I mean* which is used as a switch to another issue. It can be considered a pragmatic marker proper used as a conversation gambit.

Example 8

S.1.3.   910–911 *I mean I've got a thing anyway about academic women*

959–961 *I mean I I the very first person I met before lunch*

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, EXPLANATION

Remarks which amplify the meaning expressed previously (afterthoughts) can have a mitigating function.

Example 9

S.1.3.   282–284 *which meant that they you know they must have been at least in their second research year*

POSITIVE POLITENESS

The expression *sort of* is used in requests which are connected with showing interest and curiosity. It is polite to show involvement in the speaker's problems.

Example 10

S.1.3.   314–316 *there were questions that I couldn't cope with and I said so what sort of questions*

SARCASM, CONTRAST

are rare in the analyzed texts.

Example 11 (sarcasm)

S.1.3.   1111–1113 *I was (sort of) you know expressing great animate – animated interests in in these theories about diet and eggs*

Example 12 (contrast)

S.1.3. 1229 *she is not a bit the way she is at college*

Clusters of hedges appear which intensify the individual meanings mentioned above.

Example 13

S.1.3.   1131–1132 *I thought I wonder how far you can carry this principle*

S.1.4.   615–620 *and I said to him you know one of the things that'd it seems to me it would be convenient if we could all if we could you know set more or less agree together*

III. CONCLUSION

The tentative analysis of the texts from LLC shows that ATTENUATION (HEDGING) is a strategy which is frequent in informal English conversation. Although the repertoire of the hedging devices is relatively limited in scope, it enables a very subtle differentiation of the meaning in relevant contexts. The dichotomy REFERENTIAL versus AFFECTIVE meaning has proven useful in the sense that certain meanings (uncertainty, assumption, introduction of a new idea, vagueness) are more referential in character, on the other hand negative politeness, detachment, self–evaluation, depersonalization, sarcasm, contrast are definitely primarily attitudinal.

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