6. ATTENUATION

6.1 Hedging as Weakening the Illocutionary Force

In authentic conversation, the need for sharing and avoidance of conflict play a significant role in the consequent modification of the illocutionary force of individual speech acts. The semantic interpretation of attenuation proceeds with regard to the Cooperative Principle and the Politeness Principle, drawing on Palmer (1990), Coates (1987), Holmes (1984,1995) Brown-Levinson (1987) and Kempson (1990).

Patterns of semantic indeterminacy labelled **modification of the illocut-ionary force** in informal English conversation represent two counteracting notions, namely attenuation, primarily oriented towards the elimination of conflict in communication, and accentuation, primarily directed towards the establishment of solidarity and mutual agreement.

Attenuation, sometimes called hedging, is a procedure which results in **the weakening of the illocutionary force** in situations which would otherwise lead to a 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 Principle.

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 and power relations).

Chart 5: Functions of Attenuation in Discourse

referential function	affective function
lack of commitment to truth conditions, lack of competence to make a judgement	adherence to social norms disclaiming the validity of a judgement for social reasons

It can be argued, however, that the two above-mentioned functions coexist and their split would be felt as artificial (Coates 1987.130). Nevertheless, the contextual approach to the interpretation of pragmatic devices shows that the **referential meaning** is superimposed in certain contexts, in others the **affective meaning** becomes foregrounded.

Pragmatic means are **context-sensitive**: the same pragmatic means can be interpreted as means of attenuation in certain contexts, while in others as

accentuation devices. *I think* is a transparent example, the function of which largely depends on its prosodic manifestation.

Example 52:

> **attenuation:** *I think I am quite good at abstracting myself really* (S.1.8 549)
> **accentuation:** *because I think you have to supply something yourself to the picture* (S.1.8.480)

In the case of accentuation the verb *think* carries a stress or booster, or even a nucleus. In the example of accentuation introduced above, *think* is reinforced by a booster.

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. The final disambiguation of the relevant meaning is provided solely by the context.

More intimate and "sensitive" topics foster the use of affective means, whereas matter-of-fact topics require the use of pragmatic means with primarily referential meanings. A crucial role is also played by the interlocutors because their **gender** modifies the illocutionary force. This difference in speech behaviour is inherently encoded in social roles and the difference in status between men and women.

In my previous contribution (1994.11) I expressed the view that informal conversation is primarily a negotiation between speakers. Consequently, it can be argued that **meanings in conversation are not primarily truth-conditioned**. They are rather assumptions based on judgements and degrees of commitment which are subjective (Palmer 1986.57-65).

The **high degree of subjectivity** expressed in informal conversation is, on the one hand, felt to be an advantage, namely as the speaker's ability to express his/her views; on the other hand, it is felt to be a limitation in the sense that the speaker's opinion is not generally acceptable, since it is subjective and biased.

These opposing tendencies can be exploited in authentic conversation. Face-to-face conversation can reflect either a high degree of **assertiveness**, or a high degree of **reservation and modesty**. The generally accepted, conventionalized form of reservation and modesty is labelled **negative politeness**; the conventionalized form of expressing solidarity which has a facilitative function is labelled **positive politeness**. (For the definition of negative and positive politeness, see Brown and Levinson 1987.)

6.2 Classification of Attenuation Markers

A wide range of modified meanings has been identified in texts S.1.3 and S.1.4, all of them being **context-sensitive**. The line of demarcation between the

individual markers may be difficult to draw, because the implied meanings can participate in several different categories simultaneously. For example, a consideration may show traces of both detachment and negative politeness.

Attenuation is a discourse tactic which is closely connected with tact, modesty and generosity. In general it complies with the requirement for **acceptability** of human speech behaviour. Negative meanings are not conveyed by means of attenuation, unless rendered with a tinge of irony, sarcasm or contradiction.

Table 6: Classification of Attenuation Types

Scale of Modified Meanings	S.1.3	S.1.4
negative politeness	39	29
assumption, consideration	19	23
unspecified reference	13	20
detachment, reservation	16	18
depersonalization	4	1
self-evaluation	5	7
non-commitment	5	30
conversational gambit	8	8
afterthought	7	7
positive politeness	1	0
sarcasm	1	0
contradiction	1	0
Total	**119**	**143**

Text S.1.3 is a conversation between three interlocutors:
  A = a female undergraduate aged c.36
  B = a female undergraduate aged c.30
  C = a male undergraduate aged c.36
Text S.1.4 is a conversation between two males:
  A= a male academic aged c.48
  B= a male academic, age c.48

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 phenomena is connected with the modesty principle. It is a requirement in social communication that the speaker should not sound authoritarian or boastful. Thus conversation displays a noticeable tendency towards softening or minimizing the assertiveness of some speech acts, making them more interactive.

Negative politeness is frequently connected with sensitive topics. The process of **conventionalization** of this strategy is typical of **negative politeness cultures** which are also called standoffish cultures. Cultures of this type are reserved and distant. The British culture is an example of a negative politeness culture.

Example 53:

> *but I (don't) think I particularly want that one* (dislike) (S.1.4.788)
>
> *I mean it would be a bit out of place somehow* (refusal) (S.1.4.482)
>
> *(and) I don't think it's sensible* (disapproval) (S.1.4.685)
>
> *I (don't know whether I'll) drink coffee at this time of day if there were any tea* (preference) (S.1.4.17)
>
> *particularly (I think) you probably like the sort of clothes I like anyway* (a modest guess) (S.1.3.78)
>
> *I wrote it reasonably well* (modest self-evaluation) (S.1.3.127-128)
>
> *this is just what I think at the moment* (modesty) (S.1.3.361-362)

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

Assumption, consideration

It has already been mentioned that informal conversation is based on assumptions rather than assertions. Pragmatic means convert assertions to **tentative assertions** as possible interpretations of events. Utterances in conversation tend to be interpretive, not descriptive (see Kempson 1990).

Epistemic modals are means which enable speakers to make 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 contributes to shaping the opposite meaning, i.e. disclaiming the responsibility for the judgement. In the majority of cases the meaning of utterances is primarily referential.

Example 54:

> *I suppose (it's) but I suppose it'll be up on the boards tomorrow* (S.1.4.1120-1125)
>
> *I probably (have done)* (S.1.4.1132-1133)
>
> *came with the faculty of arts perhaps* (S.1.4.1135)
>
> *so I presume it is for anybody in the faculty of arts* (S.1.4.1141)
>
> *and presumably he's got something equally fatal* (S.1.4.1042)
>
> *or perhaps it is lung cancer* (S.1.4.1043)

Unspecified reference

Vagueness in conversation is a phenomenon which is closely connected with **implicitness**. It is not always necessary or possible to make explicit references to the extralinguistic 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 prop-word *thing* meaning anything are typical components of informal English conversation.

Example 55:
> *you know the sort of thing* (S.1.4.160)
> *(it's) sort of quite harmless* (S.1.4.876)
> *I've got the list upstairs (sort of thing)* (S.1.4.1170)
> *it's not like a lecture on Chaucer or or Eliot (or something of that kind)*(S.1.4.706-710)
> *as though it's a kind of communal line on this* (S.1.4.667)

Non-commitment
The speaker does not have a sufficient amount of reliable information when making a judgement; he/she feels the need to signal the lack of information using pragmatic markers such as *perhaps, probably, I think,* conditionals etc.

Example 56:
> *the painting's in Madrid I think it's not in London* (S.1.4.440-441)
> *I don't think Gillian or Ingeborg are on the board this year* (S.1.4.750-753)
> *I could take perhaps the Oresteia* (S.1.4.1203)
> *they're probably people who've left pictures here* (S.1.4.507)
> *I (think it would be a) much perhaps he's got more* (S.1.4.555-556)

Indecision is much more frequent in S.1.4 (male conversation) than in S.1.3 (females prevail). The proportion 30:5 bears witness to the **high degree of tentativeness** of the speaker's remarks in S.1.4. The main reason for **preferred tentativeness** is the speaker's non-commitment in matters which are either sensitive or marginal.

Detachment, reservation
The expression of negative attitudes such as **objection, criticism, disapproval, dissatisfaction** and **reservation** is frequently rendered by means of 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 further discussion and for the modification of points of view" (1987.122).

Example 57:
> *but I just thought it was horrifying* (S.1.3.908)
> *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* (S.1.3.289-292)

I think something ghastly happens to them (S.1.3.912-913)
I don't think it's sensible (S.1.4.685)

Depersonalization

is detachment expressed in an impersonal way by means of the expression *one*. In this way the judgement made sounds anonymous. In this particular context the interpretation gives evidence of role-based or social class-based approach with indications of social distance.

Example 58:

or one wonders whether it's that way round or whether it's the other way round (S.1.3.1175-1176)
I mean one hears talk of biological needs but physiological almost denies any question of gender (S.1.3.744-747)

Self-evaluation

is represented by comments on the speaker's behaviour in a situation which is embarrassing, or otherwise difficult to cope with. The speaker's intention is to express an apology, or to make an excuse.

Example 59:

having had this glass of sherry I was a bit woozy (S.1.3.667-669)
and I don't know where I got this from (S.1.3.676)
I mean I'd reached the point where I thought (well) if they if what would I do if they offered me this thing (S.1.3.869-871)

Conversational gambit

This function is frequently fulfilled by *I mean* used as a transition element. This expression can be considered a **pragmatic marker proper**, which is used as a conversational gambit opening a new topic, or suggesting a different viewpoint.

Example 60:

I mean I've got a thing anyway about academic women (S.1.3.910-911)
I mean I I the very first person I met before lunch (S.1.3.959-961)

Afterthoughts

Remarks which amplify the meaning expressed previously can have a mitigating function. They are explanatory, specifying the circumstances of the speech event.

Example 61:

the interview was it was all right I mean I handled it like a competent undergraduate (S.1.3.305-307)

Positive politeness

The expression *sort of* is used in requests which show interest and curiosity on the part of the speaker. In face-to-face conversation it is polite to show insight into the speaker's problems. Attenuation can be utilized either in expressing detachment, which is much more frequent, or in expressing involvement.

Example 62:

elicitation: *there were questions that I couldn't cope with and I said so*
response: *what sort of questions* (S.1.3.314-316)

Sarcasm

Example 63:

was (sort of) you know expressing great animate – animated interests in in these theories about diet and eggs (S.1.3.1111-1113)

Contradiction

Example 64:

she is not a bit the way she is at college (S.1.3.1229)

Clusters of attenuation markers reinforce the individual meanings mentioned above and create a genuine impression of **mutuality** and **reciprocity**.

Example 65:

I thought I wonder how far you can carry this principle (S.1.3.1131-1132)
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 (S.1.4.615-620)

6.3 Types of Attenuation in Discourse

The analysis of texts S.1.3 and S.1.4 shows that attenuation is a strategy which is abundant in informal English conversation. Although the repertoire of attenuation devices is relatively limited in scope, it allows of a subtle differentiation of meaning in relevant contexts.

The proposed dichotomy referential versus affective meaning has proved useful in the sense that certain context-situated meanings such as assumption, conversational gambit, lack of specification are more **referential**; on the other hand, negative politeness, detachment, self-evaluation, non-commitment, depersonalization, sarcasm and contradiction are primarily **attitudinal**. Attenu-

ation modifies either the **logical or the emotive meaning in conversation**. It can convey either **detachment** or **involvement**, thus providing alternatives in the interpretation of the utterance meaning. **Oscillation of meaning** is a noticeable feature of attenuation devices, which makes them pragmatically utilizable in a large number of specific contexts.