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THE MANAGEMENT OF CONFLICT IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION: THE PRAGMATICS OF CERTAIN SYNTACTIC STRUCTURES

In this paper I examine correlations between meanings of a number of English syntactic structures and their usages as mitigation markers in workplace discourse. These are the whimperatives (the (bare) imperative, *can/could you* and *will/would you* patterns) and the non-factive and modal constructions (*I think, P* and the *must/would* frames). Basing my research on genuine linguistic examples, and working within the theoretic frameworks of Natural Semantic Metalanguage and Politeness Theory, I show how the particular configurations of illocutionary components in the semantic formulae for the given patterns may account for the motivation in their systematic use as mitigation markers in business communication.

Key words: disagreement, fact-threatening act, illocution, locution, mitigation marker, modal verb, non-factive verb, politeness, request, whimperative

1. Introduction

We may consider workplace discourse as a tug of war between two attributes – efficiency and politeness. The first relates to an immanent necessity of having work done. To the largest extent this is accomplished through verbal communication, and this, in turn, may bring about disagreement. In order to minimise this negative but unavoidable side of the coin, and yet be able to express one's attitudes (in terms of the speaker/addressee and speaker/utterance relations), one learns how to apply some basic rules of the social game at work in a particular environment. In other words, one learns how to be nice. The second attribute is then that of showing politeness.

This paper is about verbal mitigation markers I broadly define as linguistic phenomena, both lexical and grammatical, which, regardless

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of other functions they may have on transactional or interactional levels of communication, also partake in the process of lessening an impact of the illocutionary force of their host-utterance for politeness purposes. In particular, the paper explores pragmatic meanings of certain syntactic structures which have acquired the status of mitigation markers through their systematic and routine employment in workplace discourse. The syntactic constructions the paper specifically deals with are various whimperative patterns with action verbs as in (1), and the patterns with modal and non-factive verbs as in (2) and (3), respectively:

(1) Could you please verify if schedules are missing from the display.
(2) I would say this should be monitored for a while since it looks like only the same PC is having the problem.
(3) We need an update to give the agent something to give to the customer. I think a month is long enough to wait keeping in mind the PTR has been opened since April.

My analysis is based on the data collected over a two-year period in a French-based multinational company that uses English as its lingua franca. The data are representative of both spoken (face-to-face and telephone conversations) and written discourse (electronic mails and telexes).[1] They additionally comprise front-stage and back-stage interaction (Goffman 1959) among native and non-native speakers of English.[2]

The main theoretical frameworks within which this study is couched are the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), a semantic theory that has developed a notational system for the representation of meaning based on natural language with an underlying assumption that human concepts are innate (see, for example, Wierzbicka 1991 and 1996), Goffman's (1959) view of the self as an interactive construction developed through the notion of face and expanded in Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987) through a set of conversational strategies aimed at avoiding potential face-threatening acts (FTAs).[3]

1 Some data were taken from software called *Win@proach*, which has the characteristics of both written and oral media; for instance, the use of graphic symbols and the possibility of spatial and temporal transmission are combined with on-line processing, greater or lesser informality and linguistic features typical of spoken discourse.

2 Front-stage interaction is more formal in style than back-stage interaction. It is used, for instance, in talk with clients. Back-stage interaction, by contrast, shows in-group membership.

3 The paper presupposes readers' familiarity with the basic concepts and principal assumptions of the respective theories. However, certain notions are briefly presented in footnotes either because of their references to some other approaches or because they might not be salient enough.

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2. Whimperative patterns with action verbs

Whimperatives are linguistic forms that combine properties of both imperatives and interrogatives. Even though there is no one-to-one mapping between a linguistic form (i.e. a sentence type or structure) and a speech act it is used to perform (i.e. an illocutionary force or communicative function),[4] imperatives typically encode directives (or requests for actions) while interrogatives standardly encode questions (or requests for information):

(4) Switch on the PC.
(5) Is the PC switched on?

The bare imperative (without extensions), as in (4), simultaneously signals two things to the addressee: that the speaker considers a certain state-of-affairs to be desirable, and that it is the addressee who is supposed to bring it about. The interactional meaning of an imperative sentence type might be NSM-formulated in the following way:

(6) I say: I want you to do something (e.g. switch on the PC). I think: you will do it because of this.

Although uses of the bare imperative in social encounters may be gradual across cultures (i.e. from the socially least acceptable to a socially acceptable form), they clearly represent marked forms of communication: the speaker is allowed to assume much while leaving the addressee little leeway. This makes the bare imperative a straightforward case of a bold-on-record FTA.

On the other hand, the interrogative, when it encodes a direct speech act, as in (5),[5] is interactionally neutral. In English, for example, the bare imperative may take a mitigator, as in (7), but the interrogative in (8), which has a direct structure-function correlation, may not:

(7) Please switch on the PC.
(8) *Please is the PC switched on?

In other words, mitigation is neither necessary nor obligatory to make the interrogative a socially acceptable form. The interrogative, in fact, signals two things to the addressee: that the speaker wants to know about a certain state-of-affairs, and that she assumes the addressee to be knowledgeable about it and willing to comply. The interactional meaning of an interrogative sentence type might be captured by illocutionary components along the following lines:

4 Refer, for example, to Levinson's "literal force hypothesis" (1983: 263).
5 Direct speech acts are, for instance, questions such as *Where is the conference room?* and pre-questions such as *Do you know where the conference room is?*.

(9) a. I don't know.
b. I want to know.
c. I want you to say.

Given that questions require verbal responses,[6] both the speaker and the addressee partake in the responsibility for the social encounter.

Whimperatives are similar to imperatives in presenting states-of-affairs as desirable from the speaker's point of view; that is, the first component of (6), 'I say: I want you to do something', is maintained. They differ from imperatives in that the speaker does not assume (or, at least, pretends not to assume) that the addressee has to comply with the speaker's wants; that is, the second component of (6), 'I think: you will do it because of this', is absent. This, I argue, constitutes the first mitigating layer of whimperatives.

With interrogatives, whimperatives share not only the form, but also the second pair part of adjacency question-answer pairs, namely, the underlying illocutionary component 'I want you to say'. They differ from genuine questions in that the speaker is knowledgeable about a certain state-of-affairs; that is, component (9a), 'I don't know', is absent. Still, by putting the desirable state-of-affairs in an interrogative frame, the speaker appears to have maintained the component. This, I argue, constitutes the second mitigating level of whimperatives.

Given the aforesaid properties, whimperatives are likely to be widely used in workplace discourse. In contrast to the military, or similarly, organised environments, one does not normally go about issuing orders (or commands) in business communication. On the other hand, work has to be done and this information needs to be communicated. It is not surprising, therefore, that a request should be the most commonly used speech act to this purpose. However, requests are potentially face-threatening, and therefore they must be mitigated. In Anglo-American business communication, which is mainly avoidance-based (i.e. oriented towards deference), whimperatives prove to be a readily available linguistic source of mitigation. They are instances of "preventive practices" (Goffman 1959: 13) or "other-oriented principles" (Kerebrat-Orecchioni 1997: 15).

The following linguistic patterns are standardly used to frame requests (with or without the pre-verbal *please* or *kindly*): the *bare impera-*

6 In conversation-analytic approaches to discourse, questions and answers form adjacency pairs where questions as first pair parts always select next action in the form of answers as second pair parts. Their absence is therefore, noticeably missing (cf., for instance, Atkinson and Heritage (1984) and Sacks (1992)).

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tive pattern in (10a), the *will you* pattern in (10b), the *can you* pattern in (10c), the *would you* pattern in (10d) and the *could you* pattern in (10e).

(10) a. (Please/kindly) do x.
b. Will you (please/kindly) do x?
c. Can you (please/kindly) do x?
d. Would you (please/kindly) do x?
e. Could you (please/kindly) do x?

Judging by the regularity of use, some of the patterns in my data were highly favoured interactional strategies for hedging requests:

(11) Please do not multi-address your telexes as these departments have nothing to do with these problems.
(12) I kindly ask you for a favour to solve all problems existing, because we did not join 12 European BSPs in order to avoid automated ticketing for the carriers we have agreements
with, but to have them benefit from their participation in the All American Airpass by having them issued.
(13) Can I ask you to look at the following booking. It received the US after splitting from the parent PNR.
(14) Can you please verify with your sources and advise quoting the PTR in your reply.
(15) Could you please clarify if schedules are missing from the display.
(16) Would you please revert back to us asap with the information on the progress of your investigation. We urgently need to give a status.
(17) I was wondering if you can help me with this NOREC reservation.

In face-to-face back-stage interaction, the *will you* and *can you* patterns without the pre-verbal *please/kindly* were the most frequently used forms. In face-to-face front-stage interaction, both native and non-native speakers preferred the *could you* pattern without the pre-verbal *please/kindly*. Non-native speakers additionally hedged the act of asking as in (13), while native speakers alternated the *could you* pattern with a pseudo-conditional such as (17).

In written communication, native speakers favoured the bare imperative pattern prefaced with *please* as in (11). When non-native speakers opted for the bare imperative prefaced with either of the adverbs, the head of the construction was usually the verb *do* as in (18) and (19):

(18) Please/kindly do the needful.
(19) Please do all the necessary.

Otherwise, non-native speakers preferred the *could you* pattern with the pre-verbal *please/kindly*. When native speakers opted out from the bare imperative pattern, they either employed the *could you* pattern with the pre-verbal *please*, or hedged the act of asking as in (20):

(20) Can I ask you to please do x.

In what follows I examine my data in terms of semantic formulae that might be posited for the patterns. Wierzbicka (1991: 205-206) proposes a number of illocutionary components for the semantic structures of the bare imperative, the *will you* and *would you* patterns, as in (21) – (23):

(21) *Do x.*
(e.g. Reinstate the booking segment.)
I say: I want you to do x (e.g. reinstate the booking segment).
I say this because I want you to do x.
I think: you will do x because of this.

(22) *Will you do x?*
(e.g. Will you notify Erding?)
I say: I want you to do x (e.g. notify Erding).
I say this because I want you to do x.
I don't know if you will do x.
I want you to say if you will do x.

(23) *Would you do x?*
(e.g. Would you revert on the progress of you investigation?)
I say: I would want you to do x (e.g. revert on the progress of your investigation).
I say this because I want you to do x.
I don't know if you would do x if I said I wanted you to do x.
I want you to say if you will do x.

Similarly, the semantic structures in (24) and (25) represent the *can you* and *could you* patterns:

(24)*Can you do x?*
(e.g. Can you configure the terminal?)
I say: I want you to do x (e.g. configure the terminal).
I say this because I want you to do x.
I don't know if you can do x.
I want you to say if you can do x.

(25) *Could you do x?*
(e.g. Could you purge a mnemonic?)
I say: I would want you to do x (e.g. purge a mnemonic).

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I say this because I want you to do x.
I don't know if you could do x if I said I wanted you to do x.
I want you to say if you can do x.

The first two components in the formulae reflect the locutions and illocutions of the speech acts. The locution of the *will you* and *can you* patterns is identical to that of the bare imperative pattern, indicating the speaker's commitment to the desired state-of-affairs. In contrast, the *would you* and *could you* patterns suggest the speaker's tentativeness about the desired outcome. The illocutionary component is identical in all five patterns given the speech act of requesting. The bare imperative pattern, however, differs from the rest in that it suggests the speaker's highest confidence in the addressee's bringing about the desired outcome so that a verbal response appears not to be necessary ('I think: you will do x' vs. 'I don't know if ...'). The *would/could you* patterns differ from the *will/can you* patterns in the speaker's lesser confidence about the desired outcome, and are therefore phrased rather tentatively (cf. 'I don't know if you would/could do x if I said I wanted you to do x'). Finally, the *will/would you* patterns differ from the *can/could you* patterns in terms of what the speaker is focusing on – the addressee's willingness or ability to bring about the desired outcome.

What correlations may be drawn between the meanings of the patterns and the ways they are actually used? The *will/can you* patterns, which indicate that the speaker is fairly confident of the desired outcome, are typical mitigators of informal back-stage requests in face-to-face interaction.[7] In contrast, the tentative character of the *could you* pattern makes it a more forceful mitigator in front-stage interaction where team spirit is not at work and more is at stake; moreover, the speaker is less confident in her ability to ensure the desired outcome. Because it is more relevant to the speaker to know whether the addressee is the right person to submit the request to, it is the *could you* pattern (not the *would you* pattern) that is regularly employed. The interactional meaning of the pattern *Can I ask you to do x* is similar to the *could you* pattern: uncertainty about the outcome and verbal response requirements are spelled out in the speaker's questioning the very possibility of even stating a request. The rather elaborate pseudo-conditional *I was wondering if you can do x* serves the same purpose. Two patterns were particularly salient in the written mode of interaction: the prefaced bare imperative pattern and the *could you* pattern enriched with the mitigating adverbs

7 Cf. the following example *Can you please stop commenting entries that don't belong to your area*.

please or *kindly*. It is as if two extremes on the scale of elaborateness for politeness purposes were at work. The use of the *could you* pattern with one of the pre-verbal mitigators (or the alternative pattern *Can I ask you to please do x*) is not surprising given the linguistic practices traditionally associated with the written mode of communication, which is more formal and elaborate in comparison with unplanned, spoken discourse. The politeness intensifier *kindly* (or *please*) has the function of an illocutionary adjunct modifying the performative verb *ask* as in 'I now want to ask you something kindly', and has no reference to the manner of the action the speaker wants the addressee to perform (the speaker is, as it were, paying double deference to the addressee).

What might be surprising, however, is the strategy of native speakers to use the prefaced bare imperative. This is mainly due to two factors: one relates to the channel itself, the other to the impersonality of interaction. Modern means of communication, such as electronic mail or SITA telex, impose an almost telegraphic interactional style where clarity and efficiency largely figure as the most valued attributes. Given that requests are intrinsically face-threatening, mitigation is not entirely dispensable, but is managed now according to the new requirements. The mitigated bare imperative seems to serve this purpose well.[8] Further, in my data, it was typically a department that was being addressed. Even in cases where a particular individual was addressed by his/her name, the addressee was unknown to the speaker and was, in fact, approached as a representative of the department to which a request was submitted. The fact that potential face-losses and need for redress are reduced in impersonal encounters may account for the use of less complex linguistic patterns such as the mitigated bare imperative. To support my assumption, once correspondence was established with the addressee, the *could you* pattern with either of the adverbs was regularly employed in reissued or new requests since the addressee was no longer regarded as unknown to the speaker.[9] Similarly, the *would you* pattern with the pre-verbal *please* was favoured in reissued requests when the mitigated speech act was aimed at the addressee's willingness to reply, as in (26):

8 As communication channels evolve, linguistic practices and interactional strategies will necessarily be adjusted to reflect the changes, and the mitigated bare imperative may well become the most widely used pattern with non-native speakers as well.

9 The *could you* pattern with the mitigating adverbs was favoured in impersonal interaction where once issued request was not responded to. Ranking of the imposition (R) is relatively high in reminders if we regard them as indirect challenges. This means that they have to be mitigated with an elaborate linguistic construction.

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(26) Would you please revert asap on the progress of your investigation.

In such cases, the underlying illocutionary component of the speech act is in fact 'I want you to say if you will do x' and not, for example, 'I say this because I want you to do x'.

3. Patterns with modal and non-factive verbs

Modal and non-factive verbs are typical exponents of epistemic modality. In other words, they do not contribute to the truth-conditions of the proposition expressed by an utterance; rather, they modify the illocutionary force and specify the speaker's attitude to the propositional content. This makes them a potential linguistic source of mitigation.

Two patterns frequently occurred in my data: the modal frame *I must say, P* and the non-factive frame *I think/guess/believe P*.[10] The two constructions are similar in that the speaker expresses her subjective assessment of a factual matter but hedges her commitment to what she is saying. They differ, however, in two important respects. On the one hand, the disclaimer 'I don't know', which is present in the non-factive frame, is absent or, at least, irrelevant in the modal frame. What is, though, relevant in terms of mitigation, is the marked absence of the component 'I know' so that a possibility of accusing the speaker of a faulty assertion is thereby precluded. On the other hand, the two frames differ with respect to which illocutionary component the hedged assertion is attached. The modal frame has the assertion directly embedded in the act of saying. In the non-factive frame the assertion is attached to the non-factive verb, which is, in turn, embedded in the act of saying.[11] The construction with non-factives is therefore more tentative (hence more mitigative) because the assertion is, so to speak, doubly "filtered". Not surprisingly, it is, by far, more regularly employed in comparison with the modal frame.

In my data, the construction with non-factives was mainly used to mitigate disagreements and requests. Excerpts (27) – (31) illustrate:

(27) A: Are we comfortable that we're processing based on the industry standards or is this something which should be looked at?
B: Good question. A, I think you need to look at this one. It comes in the same area as the NAR or ARNK if the arrival segment is cancelled in a PNR.

10 Following Grice's (1989) quality maxim, Brown and Levinson (1987: 164) call such constructions "quality hedges". The quality supermaxim, according to which the speaker's contribution should be truthful, is spelled out in two submaximes, namely, the speaker should not say what she believes to be false and for what she has no adequate evidence.

11 For a more detailed semantic analysis of modal and mental verbs see Wierzbicka (1991).

(28) We need an update to give the agent something to give to the customer. I think a month is long enough to wait keeping in mind the PTR has been opened since April.

(29) I agree that the sell message and the FLIFO information do both state that this flight is for connection purposes only. However, I still think that the availability display is misleading.

(30) Anyway, I think this has nothing to do with the TPF because messages two and three were processed in the correct moment assuming message one had not arrived yet.

(31) To a certain extent I totally understand this because you wouldn't like the agent to start meddling with the TST or the itinerary in general after a PTA has been set up. But I think the problem could occur again when an agent lets the airline take control of the PNR.

In particular, the factor P (sometimes in combination with the factor D)[12] governed the use of the non-factive frame in the manner not dissimilar to the role of the mitigating particle *just* (see Mišković 2003). Although this construction has the same core configuration of illocutionary components, which verb will actually be used as the head depends on particular lexical-conceptual meanings of non-factives.[13] In workplace discourse, *think* seems to be the most widely used verb, most likely because it is reason rather than credo or hunch that is implied as lying at the core of hedging.

Two modals - *must* and *would* - regularly occurred in the modal frame as excerpts (32) and (33) illustrate:

(32) We've got two examples with approximate times so Coverage can check the ICM tape. I must say, however, that I've seen this several times in the past and it's always been because of a faulty keyboard, a "heavy-handed" user, or an overly sensitive keyboard, which causes multiple ETs to be sent.

(33) I would say this should be monitored for a while since it looks like only the same PC is having the problem.

The *must* frame was used to mitigate disagreements, the *would* frame to mitigate unsolicited recommendations (there were no cases in my

12 According to Brown and Levinson's face-saving model of politeness phenomena (1987), the strength of an FTA is measured (and redressed) against three independent, culturally-sensitive social variables: the social distance between the speaker and the addressee (the factor D), the relative power of the addressee over the speaker (the factor P) and the absolute ranking of imposition (the factor R).

13 This is the reason why I am reluctant to consider them synonymous.

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data where the opposite applied). This finding, I argue with Wierzbicka (1991: 237-238), can be explained in terms of the difference in the illocutionary components of the respective frames, in particular, with the presence of the component 'If I wanted (at all) to say something about it I would say P' in the *would* frame. Furthermore, as I already said, the absence (or irrelevance) of the disclaimer 'I don't say I know it' in the *must* frame, is implied in the *would* frame. This makes the construction with *would* epistemically more distant, or interactionally, the speaker is less committed to what she is saying. Although disagreements and unsolicited recommendations are both potentially face-threatening, the latter are less so; hence, lesser need for the speaker to commit herself to the assertion.

4. Winding up

Several generalisations can be made on the use of whimperative patterns and patterns with modal and factive verbs in workplace discourse for politeness purposes.

Perceiving direct requests as potentially face-threatening acts, both native and non-native speakers make recourse to whimperatives as a linguistic means for redressive action. The *can/could you* pair is clearly favoured over the *will/would you* pair, the latter exhibiting greater restrictions on occurrence. This has been accounted for by the difference in their respective semantic structures. Whereas native speakers show preference for elaborate whimperatives in front-stage talk-in-interaction, non-native speakers prefer elaborate whimperatives in written and impersonal forms of interaction. The mitigated bare imperative, which is, in fact, a quasi-whimperative, may be on its way to become the favoured linguistic pattern in written business communication.

The modal and non-factive patterns both highlight the relationship between the speaker and her utterance by hedging the force of an assertion so that it appears less assertive. This interactional strategy lends itself useful in cases when potential face-losses may arise out of disagreement (other-oriented strategy) and in those when the speaker wants to save her face if her statement turns out to be faulty (self-oriented strategy). As such, both constructions are part of preventive practices.

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ИЗБЕГАВАЊЕ СУКОБА У ПОСЛОВНОЈ КОМУНИКАЦИЈИ: ПРАГМАТИКА ИЗВЕСНИХ СИНТАКСИЧКИХ СТРУКТУРА

Резиме

У овом раду испитујемо односе између значења извесног броја синтаксичких структура у енглеском језику и њихове употребе у пословном дискурсу. Радом су обухваћени тзв. вимперативи (према енг. сливеници *whimperatives,* која је настала комбинацијом префикса *wh* и речи *imperative*), то јест структуре које истовремено испољавају карактеристике упитног и заповедног начина (нпр. конструкције can/could you и will/would you), као и структуре с модалним (must и would) и нефактивним глаголима (think). На основу корпуса, који је током двогодишњег истраживања прикупљан у једној мултинационалној компанији која послује на свим континентима и користи енглески језик као lingua franca, и користећи се основним теоријским постулатима и методологијом теорија које су поникле на англоамеричком подручју (Natual Semantic Metalanguage и Politeness Theory), показујемо везу између конфигурација илокуционих компоненти у семантичким формулама за анализиране структуре и мотивације која стоји у основи употребе ових структура у пословној комуникацији.

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