

## Mitigating Mechanism of Discourse Markers

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### Abstract

Of all the discourse markers functioning in discourse, mitigators are pointed out as one of the significant pragmatic categories among all the discourse markers. Fraser (1980) initiates the topic of mitigation and reveals its intimacy with politeness. Caffi (1999) further points out that mitigation is functional to smooth the speech acts that may impose face threat to the interlocutors, for instance, risks of self-contradiction, refusal, losing face, conflict and so forth. Under these circumstances, DMs with mitigating force serve as good candidates for monitoring interpersonal relation, emotive distance between interlocutors.

**Key words:** Discourse markers; Politeness; Mitigation mechanism

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### INTRODUCTION

Earlier linguists have exerted great efforts into syntactic and semantic analyses of discourse markers. Various classifications, approaches and functions have been proposed for analyzing the use of discourse markers. Of all the discourse markers functioning in discourse, mitigators are pointed out as one of the significant pragmatic categories among all the DMs. It is in the 1980s when Fraser initiates the notion of mitigation and reveals its intimacy with politeness that the studies into

the mitigating force of discourse markers (i.e. mitigators) have come on the scene ever since. Caffi (1999) claims from a more relation-oriented perspective that mitigation focuses on manipulating relational and emotive distance between interlocutors.

### 1. STUDIES ON MITIGATION

The etymology of the term “mitigation” can be traced back to Latin where “mitigare” meant “to make mild or gentle”. The nominalization “mitigation” is linked mainly with environmental sciences and contexts (e.g. risk mitigation, earthquake mitigation, bicycle hazard mitigation, mitigation of erosion damage, etc.).

In the pragmatic context, “to mitigate” is described as “rhetorical devices, which soften the impact of some unpleasant aspects of an utterance on the speaker or the hearer” (Danet, 1980, p.525). Similarly, Fraser (1980, p.344) defines that mitigation is used “to ease the anticipated unwelcome effect”. He mentions number of mitigation structures, such as directives performed by indirect means, distancing devices, such as disclaimers (see also Overstreet & Yule, 2001), immediacy in the information structure, parenthetical verbs (e.g. guess, think, feel), tag questions, and hedges. All these “indicate intentions to involve mitigation” (Fraser, 1980, p.345) but are not to be identified with mitigation itself. Fraser(1980) restricts that there are two basic types of mitigation: self-serving (driven by fear to cause discomfort to self) and altruistic (driven by fear to cause discomfort to others). Thus, according to him, congratulations or praise cannot be mitigated because they do not have the unwelcome effect.

Holmes (1984, p.345) explains the interest in mitigation with the observation that “researchers are most familiar with “negative-politeness culture”, where politeness and mitigation devices such as hedges are used for avoidance of disagreement. He builds on Fraser

and describes mitigation as a kind of attenuation, which is the opposite of boosting of meaning. Attenuation and boosting are described as strategies for modification of illocutionary force. He claims that mitigation can be understood only in contrast to boost. Mitigation is thus used to reduce anticipated negative effect of a speech act. Finally, he distinguishes between modification of attitude to a proposition (e.g. modal expressions) and/or modification of attitude to a hearer, which apply both to mitigation and boosting.

Flowerdew (1991) defines the function of mitigation as indication of interpersonal exchange beyond the truth condition. He adds terms such as *mitigator* and *mitigated*, extends the idea of modification to the speech act of defining in classroom settings, and describes mitigation as a pragmatic strategy for modification of meaning similar to politeness and indirectness.

Perez de Ayala (2001) mentions mitigation in relation to negative face (and politeness) and distinguishes between private and public face: Its assumed function is to minimize threat to face and avoid conflict. However, she concludes that in the British parliament's Question Time sessions the politicians use politeness to pick conflict, to attack and threaten each other rather than to avoid and diminish the threat to other's face.

Martinovski (2006), through analyzing mitigation in court, claims that mitigation can not be defined simply as a strategy for avoidance of disagreement but rather as a way of coping with disagreement (and other forms of stress such as guilt, penalty, accusation), facing it, anticipating it and/or accepting it.

Caffi (1999) adopts a more relation-oriented stance. Through the empirical study on doctor-patient and psychotherapeutic conversations in Italian, Caffi defines mitigation in terms of responsibility management in discourse, involving cognitive and emotive aspects. Similar to Holmes's idea, she views mitigation as weakening or downgrading of interactional parameters, which affect allocation and shuffling of rights and obligations. In this sense, mitigation affects the interactional efficiency on one hand and the monitoring of relational, emotive distance between interlocutors on the other. Caffi's category of mitigation devices or strategies is based on three different scopes of mitigation: proposition (bushes), illocution (hedges), and utterance source (shields). Caffi (1999, p.905) points out "cautiousness is a result of uses of bushes, hedges, and shields", expressing avoidance to define relationship, leading to emotive distancing and relational distancing.

## 2. THE STUDIES OF DISCOURSE MARKERS AS MITIGATORS

Researchers investigating politeness identify particular DMs as mitigators, labeling them variously as

downgraders, reluctant markers, hesitation prefaces or discourse lubricants (Kotthoff, 1993; Lakoff, 1975; Pomerantz, 1984). Among the discrete studies which mentioned the use of mitigators, the observed are those that show hesitation and uncertainty such as *uh*, *I think*, *I guess* etc. in English and 恩, 我想, 我觉得 etc. in Chinese. Bach (1999) refers discourse markers as utterance modifiers in his study and in his list of categorization, there are mitigatives with their lexical items as *I hate to bother you*, *sorry that I have to ask you*. His study is rather pragmatic than syntactically-oriented because he claims that what those markers modify is not the sentence but the discourse. Ran Yongping (2003), the leading figure in the study of discourse markers in China mentions the use of utterance-filler *well* as a mitigator in his *A Pragmatic Account of the Discourse well*:

A: We'll all miss Bill and Agatha, won't we?

B1: Well, we'll miss Bill.

B2: We'll miss Bill.

In this example, B2 is less acceptable than B1 because obviously, we can infer that B did not like Agatha. However, in order to avoid disagreement and save A's face, B1 added an utterance-filler *well* to answer the question to mitigate the threat to A's face.

Another Chinese scholar Huo Yongshou (2005) suggests some specific categories of discourse markers which can function as mitigators. Respectively they are tag questions; discourse markers showing speakers' degree of uncertainty; discourse markers exploited to appeal to the hearer; discourse markers used to confine the propositional content; evidential markers and etc.. For example:

Open the door, will you?

好吧, 李医生, 我就倚老卖老的说了, 你和耿林的感情已经到尽头了。

If I'm not wrong, the book was lent to Eliza last week.

I'll call in after lunch if you like.

Technically, you're wrong.

刘某的作用-根据张某的供述-只是替张转交一些钱给钱某罢了。

—I hope we will be able to transfer you still tonight, if possible.

## 3. MITIGATING MECHANISM OF DISCOURSE MARKERS

### 3.1 Mitigation and Politeness

Fraser (1980) points out that "it is difficult to construct a case where the speaker is viewed as impolite but having mitigated the force of his utterance", thus revealing the intimacy between politeness and mitigation. He restricts that there are two basic types of mitigation: self-serving (driven by fear to cause discomfort to self) and altruistic (driven by fear to cause discomfort to others). There are other researchers (Holmes and Perez) in the

field of mitigation who examine mitigation in relation to politeness. In Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1978), politeness is viewed as face saving management which includes positive and negative faces of both the speaker and the hearer. If a person says something that represents a threat to another individual's expectation regarding self-image, it is described as a face-threatening act (FTA). Alternatively, if some action is interpreted as a threat to another's face, the speaker can say something to lessen the possible threat. This is called a face-saving act. With the same property of protecting face in both mitigation and politeness, it can be concluded that the mitigators ultimately function to avoid facing threat either to the speaker or to the hearer.

To sum up, there are basically two types of face-saving acts concerned, self-oriented protection (from apology, self-contradiction, confession etc.) and other-oriented protection (from disagreement, order, request, refusal, advice, warning, complaint etc.). The use of mitigators to achieve mitigation thus can be described as the use of mitigators to lessen the face threat or manipulate the communicative distance in much face-to-face interaction. What discourse markers can be used as mitigators can be identified according to what face-threatening acts the discourse markers are applied to avoid. The mitigators, to conclude, serve in two functional directions: either self- or other-oriented.

### 3.2 Mitigating Mechanism

In examination of mitigators with their functions in practical use, the question presented is how to classify mitigators through their functional uses. This categorization by now is an indefinite, vague field. Basically mitigators are utilized to mitigate face-threatening speech acts for the sake of self-protection or other protection. Caffi (1999) proposes a mitigating mechanism, composed of three mitigation devices so as to provide an in-depth view of the functional features of mitigators. As has mentioned above, researchers investigating politeness or mitigation have identified some particular markers as mitigators, labeling them variously as downgraders, reluctant markers, hesitation prefaces or discourse lubricants (Kotthoff, 1993; Lakoff, 1975; Pomerantz, 1984). In this paper, the author makes a tentative pragmatic categorization of those mitigators in the light of Caffi's (1999) three scopes of mitigation, respectively bushes, hedges and shields.

This research paper takes an interpersonal perspective to look at mitigators in everyday communication. The study operates on a pragmatic level and adopts a more relation-oriented stance, which coincides with Caffi's (1999) research viewpoint on mitigation. She points out mitigation is functional to smooth interactional management in that it reduces risks for participants at various levels, such as the risks of self-contradiction, refusal, losing face and so forth. She goes on to promote a

mitigating mechanism including three mitigation devices: bushes, hedges and shields. Inspired by this mechanism, the author categorizes mitigators into the three mitigation devices in accordance with the different functional uses of mitigators: self-oriented or other-oriented. What follows are clear explanations of each mitigation device and which mitigator goes with which mitigation device:

#### (a) "Bushes"

Bushes are explained as approximators, signal that this condition is not fully satisfied. It decreases the weight of imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1978) of the directive and reduces the scalar dimension of illocutionary force, being labeled as "obligation on the hearer". Therefore, bushes affect the parameter of 'precision' and minimize the seriousness of the problem. Associated with the mitigating force of discourse markers, "bushes" in this paper is illocutionary force indicators with which the speakers intend to mitigate for the sake of self-orientation. The mitigating force is usually achieved by making personal assumptions or expressing doubts about the propositional content of one's own remark on speech acts, such as offer of apology, accepting compliment, self-contradiction and confession. The representing mitigators in speech context are *I think, I guess, I assume, if I could*, 我的意思是, 我觉得, 我希望 etc.. To conclude, these are mitigators in the form of first-person, basically "-I-" mitigators.

#### (b) "Hedges"

Hedges function as illocutionary force indicators and they are used by the speaker who assumes the hearer to be a rational partner who cannot be forced to do something that she/he does not fully understand. The mitigating force may be carried out by a consultative device *if you like*, a supportive postponed moving and through probabilite which weakens the speaker's degree of certainty about the proposition, "who knows", "maybe". In the use of mitigators, "hedges" are illocutionary force indicators with which the speakers intend to mitigate for the sake of other-orientation on speech acts such as making an order, a request, giving advice, refusal, showing complaint, disagreement and warning such as *you know, if you like, if you want*, 依你看, 你瞧, 恕我直言. They are mitigators in the form of second person, basically "-you-" mitigators.

#### (c) "Shields"

In shields, there is backgrounding, objectivization, defocalization, or even deletion of the utterance source with an 'impersonalization mechanism' such as the use of *so to speak, let's say, by the way, for example, what's more, incidentally*, 依据, 听说, 正常来说, 顺便提一下, 话说回来, 诚然, 吧, 啊 etc.. In a word, they are mitigators not referring to any particular person. In this paper, mitigators other than "-I-" mitigators and "-you-" mitigators belong to the category of 'shields'. In this case, the illocutionary force of mitigators as "shields" work for the purpose of both self-orientation and other-orientation.

To sum up, this categorization of mitigators according to the mitigating mechanism has its advantage in that,

first the property of “impersonalization mechanism” of “shields” distinguishes itself from “bushes” and “hedges”. So long as the mitigator is exclusive of the use of “I” and “You” personal pronoun, it is within the category of “shields”. And secondly, from functional perspective, each category holds its own functional use. “Bushes” are basically a category of mitigators functioning as self-oriented protection markers while “hedges” function for the sake of other-oriented protection. “Shields”, regarding to its property, can be both self- and other-oriented. Based on this categorization, interlocutors are free to adopt any device with the use of mitigators to achieve a mitigated speech act.

#### 4. IMPLICATION AND LIMITATIONS

This paper, through a theoretical analysis of the use of mitigators in communication, endeavors to classify how discourse markers are used as mitigators and the intimate relationship between mitigation and politeness on the one hand, and also the mechanism of how discourse markers are used with mitigating forces, with the adoptions of “bushes”, “hedges” and “shields”, shows that the mastery of the pragmatic uses of mitigators can facilitate cross-cultural communication

To sum up, the author is convinced of the need to investigate the development of the use of mitigators in speech. Therefore, this paper intends to arouse the learner’s interest and awareness of the importance of these “small words” that exist substantially in interpersonal communication and can affect our second language learning.

The factors contributed to successful communication are complicated, that is why I choose this topic to examine how successful communication is realized through the use of DMs in regard to their mitigating force. Mitigators are among one of the forms in achieving politeness for the reason that mitigators are frequently used in oral discourse and so they can facilitate the smoothness of the communication and therefore achieve successful communication.

As second language learners, it is important to first recognize the discourse markers with mitigating force in the utterances, and understand their intentions and functions in manipulating interactional distances. Moreover, much attention should be paid to the differences between Chinese and English mitigators in order to adopt them appropriately and accurately to express the speakers’ intended meaning.

All this requires the teaching of mitigators to language instruction because the awareness of the mitigating forces in discourse markers could absolutely add to promote a better and thorough understanding of not only syntactical features of this group but more importantly, to acquire them with their pragmatic features concerning how mitigators can work to achieve

politeness. And the functions with which the mitigators are used to achieve wait for further explanation and instruction in class with contextual information but not a list of those mitigators.

Mitigators are used to manipulate the face, which are actually applied in different speech acts with potential face threatening factors. But the explanation of under which specific speech acts the mitigators might be used to achieve politeness is inadequately explained. So, the analysis into the specific application of mitigators under certain speech acts is desirable. Further study can also be done on the functional feature of mitigators, with different distributional character and use of frequency as well as the analysis of different language structures and construction mechanisms to achieve certain communicative purposes.

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