

## The Use of Politeness Strategies in Academic Conversations as Represented in a Corpus Linguistics MOOC

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### Abstract

Although politeness strategies are widely used in various types of conversations, e.g., formal emails, business, hotel conversations, movies, and others, few works have dealt with politeness strategies in academic conversations. This study attempts to shed light on the use of politeness strategies in academic conversations and to relate these strategies to the relationship between the interlocutors: whether they have the same specialization or not. The study mainly draws on Brown and Levinson's positive politeness strategies and applies them to conversations. The data was collected by downloading conversations from a MOOC entitled "Corpus Linguistics: methods, analysis, interpretation," created by a team of corpus linguists at Lancaster College. It applies both a quantitative and qualitative approach to analyze the strategies. The results show that exaggeration tops the list of strategies with 23 utterances (23.5%) when the interlocutors have the same specialization. This indicates that each scholar has distinctive insights that another scholar only appreciates with the same specialization. When interlocutors have different specializations, the hierarchy of politeness strategies differs, albeit to some extent. Expressions of approval ranked first, with 11 expressions (25.0%). This indicates

that a scholar with little knowledge about a branch of knowledge almost agrees with the specialized speaker.

**Keywords:** *pragmatics; cooperative principle; politeness strategies; sociolinguistics; social interaction.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the last fifteen years, politeness studies have experienced a tremendous upsurge, both in the volume of work on the phenomenon and in the number of approaches to politeness in various fields. Numerous works have studied politeness strategies (Mansour, 2018; Sadeghoghli & Niroomand, 2016). Two relatively new journals specialize in publishing research on (im)politeness: the Journal of Politeness Research, founded in 2005, and the Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict, founded in 2013. In addition to these journals, there are also numerous book publications, including *The Pragmatic of Politeness* (Leech, 2014) and *Handbook of Linguistic (Im)Politeness* (Culpeper et al., 2016). Although politeness strategies in conversations have been widely studied, not enough attention has been paid to politeness strategies in academic conversations. Politeness Principle is usually applied and studied between teachers and students in school, parents and children, elders and younger people, and so on. However, the list of such studies lacks an approach to academic conversations. This study focuses on politeness strategies in academic conversations.

This study represents an attempt to examine the extent to which the conversations in Lancaster's MOOC entitled *Corpus Linguistics: method, analysis, interpretation* model the use of politeness strategies in academia by incorporating linguistic features such as, in Crystal's (1995) words, "specific discourse markers (please), appropriate tone of voice, tolerable forms of address (e.g., the choice of intimate vs. distant pronouns or first vs. last names" (p. 297). The study attempts to identify the politeness strategies used in the conversations and relate them to the relationship between the interlocutors.

In this study, Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies are applied to two conversations from corpus linguistics: Method, Analysis, and Interpretation MOOC. It focuses on positive politeness as a type of politeness strategy. The research questions are: First, what positive politeness strategies are used in the conversations? Second, Which strategies are used most frequently and which are used least frequently in the conversations? Third, What is the relationship between the interlocutors and the politeness strategies used?

Politeness is an interdisciplinary topic that sits between pragmatics and sociolinguistics. Crystal (1995) expresses this interdisciplinarity by defining politeness as a term denoting linguistic features associated with norms of social behavior (p.293). According to Brown & Levinson (1987), two types of politeness are related to two kinds of behavior. Negative politeness is the core of respectful behavior. Positive politeness is the core of typical and joking behavior (p. 129). This is consistent with linguists who claim that the use of corpora is becoming increasingly popular in politeness research (Culpeper 2011, Ruhi & Aksan 2015).

### ***Politeness and pragmatics***

Pragmatics is the systematic method of understanding language use in context. It explains aspects of language that go beyond the primary meaning of words, phrases, and sentences. According to Mansour (2016), pragmatics traces its origins to the work of Paul Grice on the cooperative principle (CP) and to the work of Stephen Levinson and Penelope Brown (1987) on Politeness Principles (PP) (p. 395). the cooperative principle states that interlocutors cooperate to achieve rational communication in a successful conversation. Grice (1975) identifies four maxims, namely quality, quantity, relevance, and manner, that facilitate cooperative communication and thus ensure rational communication. These maxims imply that participants should speak sincerely, provide sufficient information, be relevant, and

be transparent. Adherence to these maxims leads to effective communication and creates an atmosphere of politeness and intimacy.

However, the pragmatic aspect directly related to politeness strategies is Politeness Principle introduced by Leech (1983) to illustrate how politeness works in conversations. He defines Politeness Principle as forms of behavior that establish and maintain politeness. He argues that politeness is an essential component of successful communication. As he puts it, 'unless you are polite to your neighbor, the channel of communication between you will break down, and you will no longer be able to borrow his mower' (1983: 82). He proposed six maxims for PP. These maxims are:

**Tact Maxim:** *Minimize cost to others. Maximize benefit to others.*

**Generosity Maxim:** *Minimize benefit to self. Maximize cost to self.*

**Approbation Maxim:** *Minimize dispraise of others. Maximize praise of others.*

**Modesty Maxim:** *Minimize praise of self. Maximize dispraise of self.*

**Agreement Maxim:** *Minimize disagreement between self and others. Maximize agreement between self and others.*

**Sympathy Maxim:** *Minimize antipathy between self and others. Maximize sympathy between self and others.*

On the other hand, the work of Brown & Levinson (1987) is essential to the discussion of politeness. Orecchioni (1997) claims, "It is impossible to talk about politeness without referring to the theory of Brown and Levenson. (p. II). Brown & Levinson began their study with an article they considered an attempt to present a universal model of how speakers attempt to save face by using various forms of politeness toward listeners. They state that the speaker should have a high linguistic and pragmatic competence level to avoid misunderstandings between interlocutors during the interaction. According to Tanck (2002), speakers may appear fluent in a foreign language because of their linguistic competence, but lack pragmatic competence, so they cannot produce socially and culturally appropriate

language. People must carefully choose appropriate expressions that clearly express their thoughts and feelings. Politeness in social interaction situations can be defined as the means used to show that the interlocutor is aware of the faces of others.

### ***Politeness and the concept of face***

A central concept of politeness is the face. In this context, face represents self-image, self-esteem, and respect in the community. Brown and Levinson (1987) assert that two desires govern people: (a) to be free from imposition, negative politeness, (b) to be valued, and positive politeness. A negative face refers to the basic human demands for freedom of action, freedom from imposition, the right not to be disturbed, and the preservation of personal space. One can avoid the negative face of a listener by reducing interference with his values and actions. He can also linguistically soften the degree of overt intrusiveness by using expressions such as 'I am sorry to bother you', but..., would you mind..., etc.

A positive face, on the other hand, refers to a person's desire to be accepted and respected. You can keep an addressee's positive face by supporting their self-esteem and self-image as much as possible. For example, a positive face is preserved by appreciative expressions such as "I just love your new look with those jeans," "Have a nice day," etc. (Trauth, 1995).

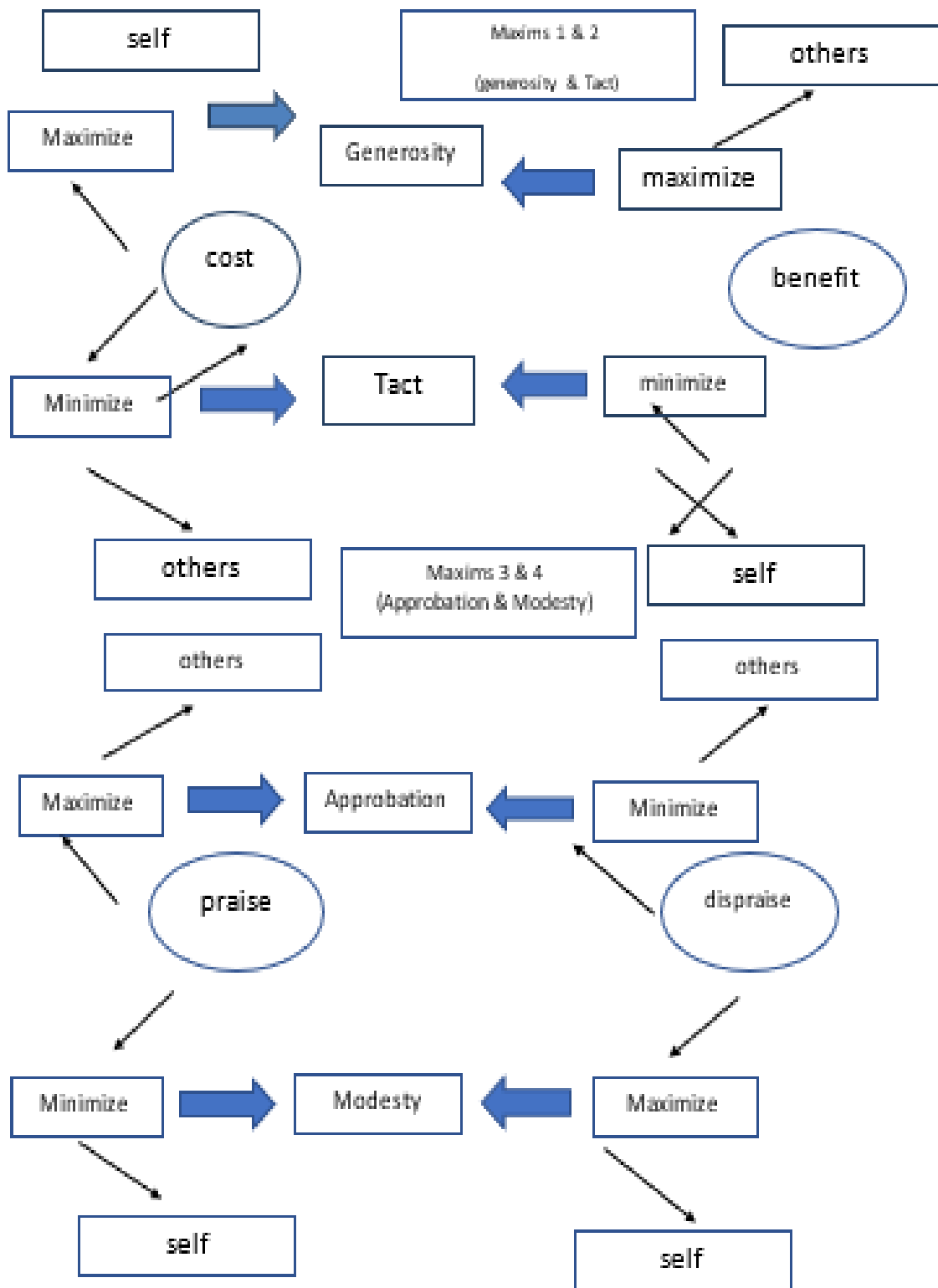


Figure 1 Leech's first four maxims (generosity, tact, approbation, modesty)

One of the most recent studies on politeness that apply Leech's maxims and is related to academia was introduced by Nurdiyani & Sasongko (2022). They apply Leech's maxims to study student politeness in sending Whatsapp messages to lecturers. He finds that five of Leech's six maxims are used in messages. The five maxims are the tact maxim, approbation maxim, modesty maxim, generosity maxim, and agreement maxim. The modesty maxim is the most widely used compared to the other maxims.

### ***Politeness and sociolinguistics***

According to Scovel (1998: 38), sociolinguistics studies why we say what to whom, when, and where. This means that politeness strategies are related to the texts' context. Crystal (1997, p. 297) claims that politeness is a term that denotes linguistic features associated with norms of social behavior related to concepts such as politeness, rapport, respect, and distance. Eelen (2001, p. 1) explains that politeness is a phenomenon that represents a link between language and the social world. According to Mansour (2016), interlocutors must consider politeness in social interaction. Tamra (2018) investigates how social groups Buginse use various politeness strategies to express their refusal. For example, they start refusal by the word "IYYE" which means "yes".

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

Data were collected by downloading the scripts of two conversations held by Tony McEnery, a professor in corpus linguistics in a MOOC entitled Corpus Linguistics: Method, Analysis, Interpretation, offered by the English Department of Lancaster University at [www.futurelearn.com](http://www.futurelearn.com). The study relies on these two conversations because they are publicly available, increasing traceability and improving the possibility of future studies' replication.

To analyze the data, 18 positive politeness strategies were applied to 144 politeness expressions distributed across the two conversations. The strategies are determined by using four techniques: First, the researcher applies Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies as a model to examine the conversations. As for seeking agreement as one of Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies, the researcher uses the term 'expressing agreement' and adds two elements to Brown and Levinson's methods of agreement: summarizing as a way of agreement, and expressing confirmation of what is said, such as yes, etc. However, when expressions of the agreement are repeated, the researcher treats them as another strategy of politeness, namely, exaggeration.

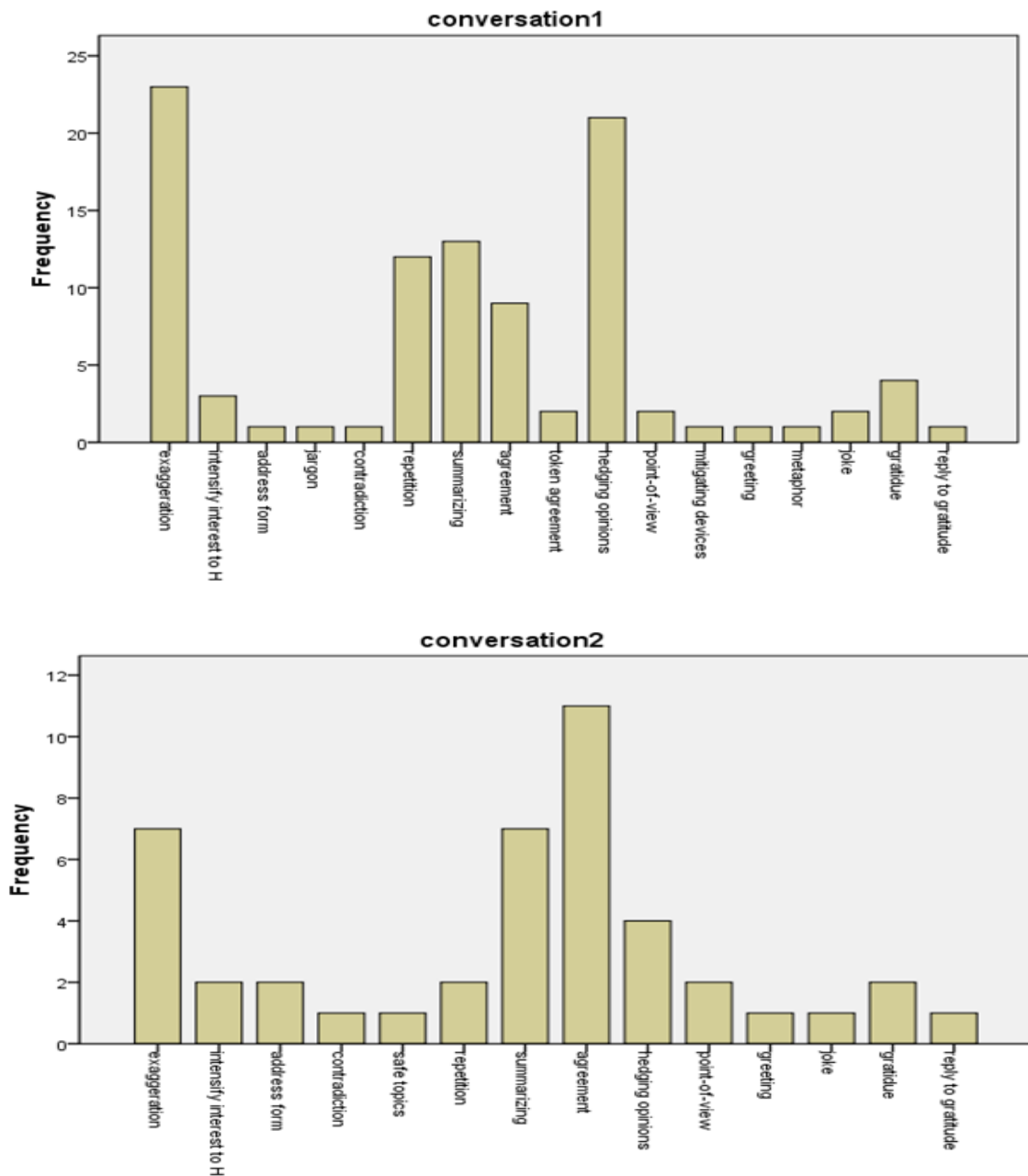
The use of mitigating utterances is the second type of politeness strategy examined in the study. According to Yule (1996, p. 56), mitigating devices include requests that begin with patterns such as 'can you', 'could you', 'will you', and 'would you'. In addition to these two strategies, the researcher notes that many greetings in conversations are considered a form of politeness (Almoaily, 2018). Finally, metaphors are also considered a strategy of politeness (Yang, 2015), which is examined in this study. The politeness phrases are extracted and classified according to these strategies.

After sorting the politeness expressions by strategies, quantitative and descriptive qualitative approaches were applied. The quantitative approach presented objective data that could be communicated through numbers to determine the frequency of politeness strategies used in conversations. It was used to answer research questions 1 and 2 about the strategy used in conversations and to determine the most and least frequently used strategies. The qualitative approach was used to present the quantitative data in written words. It was used to answer research question 3 about the relationship between interlocutors and politeness strategies.



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Figure 2:** The politeness strategies and their frequency in individual conversations are shown in the following charts



The Charts illustrate some differences in the frequency of strategies within each conversation. Conversation one, which related to general linguistics, contained 17 strategies. Conversation two, which is related to forensic linguistics, contained 14 strategies. It was found that four methods were missing in conversation two compared to conversation one, namely jargon, token agreement, mitigating reasons, and metaphors. On the other hand, conversation one lacked one strategy, namely safe topics.

Depending on the frequency of the strategies in each conversation, the study classifies the strategies into ranks. Then, a qualitative approach is used to explain the difference in rank between conversation 1 and conversation 2. The classification of the strategies according to ranks is shown in table 1.

**Table 1: arranging strategies into ranks according to the frequency**

Rank (R)	Conversation 1			Conversation 2		
	Strategy	frequency	Percent	Strategy	frequency	percent
1	Exaggeration	23	23.5	Agreement	11	25.0
2	Hedges	21	21.4	Exaggeration	7	15.9
				Summarizing	7	15.9
3	Summarizing	13	13.3	Hedges	4	9.1
4	Repetition	12	12.2	Address form	2	4.5
				Intensifying H's interest	2	4.5
				Repetition	2	4.5
				Point-of-view	2	4.5

				Gratitude	2	4.5
5	Agreement Expressions	9	9.2	Contraction and ellipsis	1	2.3
				Safe topic	1	2.3
				Greeting	1	2.3
				Jokes	1	2.3
				Reply to gratitude	1	2.3
6	Gratitude	4	4.1	-----		
7	Intensifying H's interest	3	3.1	-----		
8	Joke	2	2.0	-----		
	Point-of-view	2	2.0			
	Token agreement	2	2.0			
9	Jargon	1	1	-----		
	Contraction and ellipsis	1	1			
	Mitigating devices	1	1			
	Greeting	1	1			
	Metaphor	1	1			
	Replying to gratitude	1	1			
	Address form	1	1			
Total		98			44	

Table 1 shows 98 utterances of politeness strategies in conversation 1 and 44 in conversation 2. In R1, there are 23 utterances (23.5%) of the exaggeration strategy in conversation 1 and 11 (25%) of the agreement strategy in conversation 2. In R2, there are 21 utterances (21.4%) of hedging and seven utterances (15.9%) of exaggeration, and seven utterances (15.9%) of summarizing. In R3, there are 13 utterances (13.3%) of summarizing in conversation 1 and 4 utterances (9.1%) of hedging in conversation 2. In R4, there are 12 utterances (12.2%) of repetition in conversation one and five strategies in conversation 2, namely address form, intensifying H's interest, repetition, point-of-view, and gratitude, with two utterances (4.5%) each. In R5, there are nine utterances (9.2%) of expressions of agreement and five strategies in conversation 2, namely contraction and ellipsis, safe topics, greeting, jokes, and response to gratitude, with one utterance each (2.3%).

After discussing the frequency of strategies and the most and least frequently used strategy in the conversations studied, here are some politeness strategies used in the conversations and their analysis.

### **Exaggeration**

#### ***Examples:***

#### **Conversation 1**

***08:18 - 09:07***

McEnery: *So the pragmatic noise of English 400 years ago was somewhat different from the pragmatic-* Culpeper: [Absolutely, absolutely.]

#### ***Analysis***

The interviewer, McEnery, said the first sentence to the interviewee, Culpeper. Culpeper is interested in discovering what the conversation was like 400 years ago and how it was different from conversations nowadays, especially in using pragmatic noise. McEnery commented that the conversation regarding pragmatic

noise was very different, and the interviewee attempted to show his complete agreement by exaggeration as he repeated the word 'absolutely'. This indicates that exaggeration may be used when an interlocuter expresses the same idea the other interlocuter is convinced with.

## **conversation 2**

**13:06 – 13:28**

Hardaker: *Could somebody have hopped on and quickly sent a message?*

McEnery: *Good point.*

Hardaker: *So, lots of problems with proof and jurisdiction, which I think need looking at.*

McEnery: *Well, [that's absolutely fascinating.]*

## **Analysis**

McEnery commented on Hardaker's illustration on using corpus linguistics to pursue forensic linguistics. McEnery was highly impressed by this use of corpus tools to give a piece of linguistic evidence to help the jury to decide whether someone was guilty or innocent. He expressed many expressions of exaggeration that reveal his direct astonishment by asking, 'how on earth are linguists involved in this'?

## **Agreement expressions**

### **Examples:**

#### **conversation 1**

**08:18 – 09:07**

Culpeper: *The one that popped up quite frequently is fie– fie on you, that sort of thing. It's the words expressed by someone who's very angry with what somebody else has been doing.*

McEnery: [Yeah, and that would be a different word nowadays.]

### ***Analysis***

Culpeper gives an example of the words used in conversations 400 years ago fie-fie. He explains it is used to express anger. McEnery agrees with that, and having the same linguistics background, he completes that the word may have undergone a semantic change.

### **Conversation 2**

***04:48 - 05:11***

Hardaker: *So if you told me, do you like Mary and John? And I said, well, I like Mary. And I haven't said anything about John, but the implicit message is that I don't like that person.*

McEnery: *It could also be something as simple as me saying oh, it's a bit chilly in here.*

Hardaker: *Exactly.*

McEnery: *I'm hoping that you'll switch on the-*

Hardaker: *The heating, or do something else.*

McEnery: [Yes, I agree with that proposition.].

### ***Analysis***

McEnery said this sentence when he and Hardaker discussed pragmatics' importance in forensic linguistics. Pragmatics helps a forensic linguist to understand the implicit meaning and what is between the lines in the speech of the person under investigation. McEnery agrees since he shares Hardaker in studying pragmatics as a branch of linguistics.

## **Hedging**

### ***Examples:***

#### **conversation 1**

**12:44 - 13:25**

Culpeper: *And he argues that they're not simply naturalistic but developed conventionally through conventions you share in a particular culture or society. [And I think that's exactly right.]*

### ***Analysis***

The hedge was said by the same speaker, Culpeper, commenting on Darwin's words he mentioned to assert his agreement with McEnery when the latter claimed that there is an intrinsic property of negativity to fricatives or so called guttural. Since McEnery mentioned his view firstly Culpeper uses a hedge to reveal that she shares McEnery the same view, however, he may not have the same knowledge as McEnery. Hedges imply that the speaker seeks the addressee's agreement. That is why McEnery replies by saying 'we agree completely'.

#### **Conversation 2**

### ***Example:***

**01:28-01:59:**

Hardaker: *You can be looking at interviews by police. Are they abusing their power? How are they getting answers? Things like these.*

McEnery: [OK. So you're sort of looking at the evidential base to some extent?]

### ***Analysis***

McEnery replied to Hardaker when she explained to him how to we can use linguistics in general to approach legal or criminal data. McEnery wanted to check

his understanding of what the speaker has already said. He used two expressions related to the hedge 'sort of' and 'to some extent'.

## **Summarizing**

### ***Examples:***

#### **Conversation 1**

**05:55 - 06:43**

*Culpeper: It includes back-channeling. But often, they are much more focused on a particular emotional meaning.*

McEnery: [So back-channeling is usually where we're indicating, yes, I'm listening. But you're saying there's an extra bit of meaning on top of it. So "ahh" might be, I'm listening, but I don't agree with you.]

### ***Analysis***

Culpeper gave an example of his findings about what the conversation was like 400 years ago in English. One feature he analyzed was pragmatic noise such as ahh, uhh, etcetera. Firstly, McEnery thought that pragmatic noise is synonym to back-channeling features. However, Culpeper explained that pragmatic noise includes back-channeling, but they focus much on emotional meaning. McEnery wanted to show his agreement by summarizing and giving an example of what Culpeper said. For example, one may say 'yes' as a back-channel to what the speaker said, but actually, he does not mean to agree with the speaker, instead, 'yes' here may have an extra meaning. It may mean yes; I'm listening but I disagree with you. That is why Culpeper, in reply to McEnery's summarizing, asserts that he does mean this by saying 'yes, exactly.

#### **Conversation 2**

**03:09 - 03:49**

*Hardaker: - Linguistic analysis by itself, forensic linguistics by itself, is almost never going to be sufficient to decide guilt or innocence. It's going to be one factor in, with*



*hopefully hundreds of other details. So, it's the weight of evidence. And this points in the same direction, or it casts doubt.*

McEnergy: [So it's really like any other piece of evidence.]

### ***Analysis***

McEnergy was arguing with Hardaker about the reliability of building someone's freedom on linguistics per se. Hardaker asserted that linguistics is insufficient to decide whether someone is innocent or guilty. So, McEnergy summarized Hardaker's view by commenting that it is just one piece of evidence among others. Then Hardaker agrees with McEnergy's view by saying 'yeah. Effectively'.

### **Repetition**

#### ***Examples:***

#### **Conversation 1**

***03:52 – 04:17***

Culpeper: *But the nice thing is it's not the only source of information. So you've got that. But then, if you take a play, a script, dialogue in a play– OK, it's fictional. It's a construction. But what they're trying to do is animate the dialogue–*

McEnergy: *In a speech-like way.*

Culpeper: [In a speech-like way. In fact, speech-like] *is exactly the term that I use to talk about these texts.*

### ***Analysis:***

Culpeper explained from where he can get texts containing English conversations from 400 hundred years ago. Firstly, he said he gets texts from court records. Then he adds another source, namely, play scripts, in spite of being fictional. McEnergy interferes with Culpeper and agrees with him by asserting that even it is fiction, it is speech-like. Culpeper agrees by repeating the same words of

McEnergy, asserts his agreement by repeating the words again, and adds that he uses the exact term.

## **Conversation 2**

**02:36 – 03:09**

Hardaker: *So based on what I've come up with, it's for them to make the decision.*

McEnergy: *But that's buck-passing a bit.*

Hardaker: *That is buck-passing. So the secondary, which I think is really crucial, is that we need to not be too qualitative about our analysis.*

## **Analysis**

In reply to McEnergy's inquiry about the responsibility upon the shoulder of the forensic linguist on whose decision someone may be freed or sent to prison, Hardaker illustrates that the linguist is not responsible because he just tells his findings, and the jury is responsible for deciding. McEnergy considers this as a type of buck-passing or escaping responsibility, and Hardaker agrees and admits that by repeating McEnergy's same words.

## **CONCLUSION**

In academic conversations, the type of strategies varies according to the relation between the interlocutors, whether they share the same background and specialization or not. When the interlocutors share the same specialization, as in conversation 1, we find specific strategies come at the top of the list of strategies. According to the study, such strategies include exaggeration with 23 utterances (23.5%). This may be unexpected because it is supposed that when two scholars have the same specialization, they share common knowledge. To some extent, some surprising information may motivate the addressee to use exaggerated utterances. However, in conversation 1, exaggeration is the most frequent strategy between the interlocutors who share the same specialization, reflecting twofold insights: firstly, each scholar has distinctive insights that another scholar only appreciates with the

same specialization. Secondly, exaggeration may be used strategically to agree with a more effective motivating method, as in saying, 'I absolutely agree'.

Then, in the second rank, we have hedges with 21 utterances (21.4%). This shows that scholars always attempt to avoid imposing their views on other scholars with the same specialization. Scholars use hedges to give each other a space to express their views. On the third rank, we summarized with 13 utterances (13.3 %). Summarizing is used not only to show agreement but also to express the view in other words, that helps the learner to understand the view under discussion completely. In the fourth rank, we have repetition with 12 utterances (12.2%). In the fifth rank, we have agreement expressions with nine utterances (9.2%). This percentage may be low since specialized scholars are expected to agree because they ultimately learned the same theories and principles. Nevertheless, agreement is not always the main prevailing strategy among scholars with the same specialization. In most cases, despite having the same background of knowledge, each scholar has his insights and perspectives, which distinguish him from others.

On the other hand, when the interlocutors have different specializations, even if, to some extent, the hierarchy of politeness strategies differs. In conversation 2, agreement expressions rank first, with 11 utterances (25.0%). This may show that when someone has little knowledge about a branch of knowledge, the best politeness strategy is to agree with the speaker to give him space to express his expertise and viewpoints. While exaggeration is in the first rank in conversation 1 as representing conversations between two scholars in the same specialization, it comes in the second rank in conversation 2 as representing conversations between two scholars from different branches. Summarizing is also in the second rank here, while it is in the third rank in conversation 1. Hedges are in the third rank in conversation 2, while it is in the second rank in conversation 1. Therefore, it is noteworthy that three main strategies come in the top of both conversations:

exaggeration, hedges, and summarizing. While agreement expressions are a distinctive feature of conversation 2 as it comes in the first rank, the agreement comes in the fifth rank in conversation 1. The least frequent strategies used in the conversations are greetings, contractions, and replies to gratitude. As for greetings and replies to appreciation, they are used less frequently because, in most cases, they are used once in each conversation, in the beginning, and at the end, respectively. Contractions are not used so many because they may obscure meaning and cause difficulty in understanding to the addressee if he is not in the same specialization or to the audience even if the interlocutors have the same specialization. Finally, three strategies are peculiar to conversation 1: token agreement, metaphor, and mitigating devices. The token agreement is not used in Conversation 2 because, in most cases, when the interviewer has a different specialization from the interviewee, he never denies his knowledge or disagrees with him. Metaphor is used to shine new light on utterances, and this is done as a result of a mutual understanding between scholars of the same specialization. As for conversation 2, there is only one strategy peculiar to conversation 2: safe topics. The interlocutors use this strategy to create a friendly atmosphere since they do not have common background regarding their specialization.

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