MITIGATED DISAGREEMENT IN LEARNER DISCUSSION FORA: A FACILITATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to focus on one aspect of English learners' pragmatic competence which can be efficiently developed through threaded discussions, i.e. on the dispreferred speech act of disagreement. The author shares her experience of using online discussion fora in Practical English classes designed for third-year students. She comments on the linguistic resources used by the students to express mitigated disagreement and, further, she discusses the role of the instructor in facilitating interactional coherence. The author reaches the conclusion that asynchronous discussion fora can be useful in developing English learners' pragmatic strategies, provided that online collaboration is carefully and wisely planned, and encouraged by a dedicated and enthusiastic instructor.

Keywords

asynchronous discourse, Concession, disagreement, mitigation

1 Introduction

Nowhere is the power of English as the *lingua franca* of the modern world seen more clearly than in cyberspace, where a great amount of online communication is in English. It is for this reason that academia, including English teachers, should not ignore the opportunities created by new communication tools, including the Internet and, in particular, asynchronous learning environments. Therefore, it is the goal of this paper to explore the possibility of incorporating asynchronous discussion fora into the Writing and Speaking curricula of English language departments with a view to developing the students' ability to defend their own standpoints while skillfully refuting opposing arguments. Put briefly, this paper aims to highlight the potential of threaded discussions to develop the participants' ability to mitigate disagreement, based on the author's experience of using discussion fora in Practical English classes designed for third-year students. Furthermore, it intends to show that mitigation is an interactional phenomenon which can be aptly described within the dialogic model of Concession.

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2 Perspectives on mitigation

The claim that linguistic mitigation in spoken interaction – seen as the 'softening' of an utterance – can be realised with the help of a wide range of grammatical and lexical devices does not lend itself to criticism. Well-established is also the view that suprasegmental phenomena, such as hesitation or pausing, and prosodic marking, including pitch and intonation variation, can have mitigating perlocutionary effects, not to mention language playfulness, humour and laughter which can be ascribed the role of mitigators, too.

Unsurprisingly then the very notion of linguistic mitigation clearly converges with the concept of politeness. Yet, as Fraser (1980: 344) puts it, "mitigation entails politeness, while the converse is not true", implying that mitigation is a special form of politeness occurring "only if the speaker is also being polite" (ibid.: 344). Consequently, mitigation is viewed as the speaker's intention to reduce the unwelcome effects of the production of a certain speech act. In a similar vein, Martinovski et al. (2005, as quoted in Czerwionka 2010: vi) define mitigation as "the modification of language in response to social or cognitive challenges (*stressors*) in contexts of linguistic interaction". On the other hand, Czerwionka (2010), who adopts the above-mentioned approach in her examination of Spanish data, proposes that the mitigation process be described at the discourse level as "a delay in communicating confirmed knowledge" (ibid.: 222) and as a form of "negotiation of the interlocutor relationship" (ibid.: vii). The scholar convincingly demonstrates why this phenomenon should be analysed in sequentially organised linguistic interactions, i.e. in dialogic discourse, rather than as isolated grammatical structures or lexical items (ibid.: 4). Further, drawing on interaction theory (Levinson 2006), communication theories (e.g. Clark 1996, Caffi & Janney 1994) and social psychological research on indirect language (Pinker 2007), Czerwionka (2010: vii) posits that mitigated language should be approached "as joint actions, dependent on the cooperation of speakers and listeners", stressing that "listeners create face-to-face linguistic interaction together in an online, moment-to-moment fashion" (ibid.: 48).

It is against this action-oriented perspective that, for the purpose of the present study, *mitigated disagreement* is understood as disagreement with, or at least adoption of a skeptical stance towards, part of the other interactant's utterance, while accepting other aspects of the same utterance. That, in turn, overlaps with the concept of *partitioning* (cf. Couper-Kuhlen & Thompson 2000) and the definition of the discourse-pragmatic relation of Concession (Couper-Kuhlen & Thompson 1999, Barth-Weingarten 2003) discussed later in this paper and proposed as a framework accommodating mitigated meanings which are realised and negotiated interactionally.

3 The marking of mitigation

As reported in the linguistics literature, language analysts studying mitigation have been focusing in particular on: "(1) linguistic devices or structures used to communicate a mitigated meaning; (2) effects on the interaction and interlocutors that are associated with language that mitigates; and (3) circumstances under which mitigating language is common" (Czerwionka 2010: 3). As regards the classification of mitigational devices, several proposals appear worth mentioning, amongst which Fraser's (1980) taxonomy should not go unnoticed. Fraser distinguishes the following categories of linguistic mitigators: 1) indirect performance of the speech act; 2) non-specific reference to the speaker/hearer; 3) disclaimers; 4) parenthetical verbs; 5) tag questions; and 6) hedges. On the other hand, Locher (2004, as quoted in Glaser 2009: 51) points to the mitigational dimension of such phenomena as: hedges, modals, requests for clarification and the repetition of the prior speaker's words. Somewhat differently, Haverkate (1992) takes the view that deictic categories – including time deixis (exemplified by the conditional) and person deixis (in the form of defocalisation realised as the pronoun *one*, agentless passive or the pseudo-inclusive *we*) – may be regarded as mitigating devices, too. Finally, Czerwionka (2010: vii) concludes that mitigation need not be linked to increased use of linguistic devices at all. In fact, she provides evidence to the contrary, identifying two recurrent mitigating discourse structures, rather than individual devices, associated with certainty and uncertainty contexts (ibid.: 140-141).

Also, it should be observed that, while not excluding other modes of communication, the foregoing discussion pertains mainly to face-to-face phenomena. In the case of online interaction, however, the repertoire of linguistic and extralinguistic means available to interactants is limited, as Internet discourse lacks the kinesic and proxemic features typical of face-to-face encounters. Therefore, to compensate for the absence of direct feedback and spontaneity, online users often resort to multimodal channels and rely on semiotic devices such as images or emoticons, which, observably, complement the linguistic resources used to convey attitudes, emotions and judgments. Obviously, in the case of asynchronous online discourse, entailing, by definition, limited immediacy and a time-lag in communication, the postponement of responses to prior messages may not be interpreted unambiguously as a mitigating factor. Furthermore, it may be justifiably claimed that regardless of the type of communication, mitigational devices tend to co-occur. Following this train of thought, it is proposed that these discernible discourse patterns be analysed as schemata constituting the dialogic model of Concession.

4 Concession as a mitigational strategy

Unlike earlier approaches to concessivity analysed as a "static" semantic-syntactic phenomenon, the action-oriented view on Concession (Couper-Kuhlen & Thompson 1999, Barth-Weingarten 2003) entails the cooperation of two speakers, who – at least in the prototypical realisation of the relation – carry out the three subsequent moves, i.e. *claims (X)*, *acknowledgments (X')* and *counterclaims (Y)*, interactionally. Obviously, as various combinations of these moves are possible, even where the other interactant is absent, the dialogic dimension and the potential of the relation to manage preferred and dispreferred arguments cannot be denied.

Accordingly, Table 1 shows some of the possible realisations of the Cardinal pattern (the mitigation-disagreement schema), in which the dispreferred speech act of disagreement (counterclaim) is prefaced by a mitigator in the form of an acknowledgment.[1] Given the lack of fixed "concessive markers" and the resultant flexibility in the selection of lexical and grammatical devices, acknowledgments can be realised, for instance, as affirmative sentences signalling various degrees of certainty (*It may be true that...; Well, I think the idea could...; I'm certain that ...*) or statements in which the speaker restricts the validity of a claim (*I only partly agree....*). Countermoves, on the other hand, can take the form of statements including contrastive markers (*yet to my knowledge, not everywhere*), questions asking for clarification (*but on the other hand do you really think...?*), suggestions (*but maybe ....?*) or assertives conveying strong opinions (*I strongly believe ...*).

X' ***YES,*** ***(mitigation)***	***Y*** ***BUT...*** ***(disagreement)***
It may be true that they are allowed, [DOWNGRADED AGREEMENT]	*yet to my knowledge, not everywhere.* [CONTRAST]
Well, I think the idea could be reasonable, [DOWNGRADED AGREEMENT]	*but on the other hand do you really think teachers would devote time to such things?* [ASKING FOR CLARIFICATION]
I'm certain that it isn't true for everyone, [DOWNGRADED AGREEMENT]	*but maybe before posting anything we should think twice?* [SUGGESTION]
I only partly agree with that view, [RESTRICTING THE VALIDITY OF A CLAIM]	*I strongly believe that a real love between mature people wouldn't fail because of Facebook.* [INSISTING]

Table 1: Cardinal Concessive pattern

Though decidedly less frequent, the reversed pattern (the disagreement-mitigation schema) can also be exploited to combine mitigation and disagreement, as demonstrated in Table 2. Here, the sequence opens with a preposed counterclaim in the form of a straightforward disagreement (*I don't agree...*) or a clear-cut statement (*In my judgment the issue is not a simple thing.*) followed by mitigating language which 'softens' the speaker's stance (*well, on the other hand...; but of course you're right ...*).

Y ***I DON'T AGREE,*** ***(disagreement)***	***X'*** ***BUT (OF COURSE) ...*** ***(mitigation)***
I don't agree with you. [DISAGREEMENT]	*Well, on the other hand this is reality.* [BACKING DOWN]
In my judgement the issue is not a simple thing. [INSISTING]	*but of course you're right that it could mean disappointment.* [BACKING DOWN]

Table 2: Reversed Concessive pattern

In light of the foregoing observations, it should also be stated that since there is no closed-set catalogue of linguistic resources associated solely with concessivity, whether a given pragmatic marker assumes concessive meaning or not depends on the context in which it is used. Such is also the case with mitigational devices, whose illocutionary effect depends largely on the environment in which they occur. Given the above, it will be argued later in this paper that the interactional model of Concession is a useful analytical tool with which to approach linguistic mitigation at the discourse level, drawing on examples from non-native asynchronous discourse. In what follows then a review of the recurrent mitigational structures resorted to by students participating in online threaded discussions will be offered. It will also be shown how asynchronous learning environments can be exploited to aid the development of English students' pragmatically appropriate use of language and to enhance their argumentative skills.

5 Online discussion fora in ELT instruction

As a hybrid mode of communication, asynchronous online discourse combines features of spoken and written production (cf. Crystal 2004: 48). On the one hand, it is predominantly text-based, on the other, it is loosely structured as compared with pre-Internet written communication. On the whole, asynchronous e-encounters, including threaded discussions, enable a free flow of information

and a symmetry between the role of a sender and that of a receiver (Grzenia 2006: 94), which obviously lessens the communicative distance between the interactants. At the same time, however, due to fragmentation, lack of linearity and the time-lag between responses, asynchronous production is marked by the lack of spontaneity and may be perceived as distant and antagonistic (Crystal 2004: 40). All in all, despite the participants' inability to produce immediate feedback, asynchronous discussions can be exploited as settings in which advanced English learners may effectively develop their interactional competence with a view to transferring their skills to real-life communication situations.

Remarkably, asynchronous discussion fora exemplify a type of interaction which enables time-and-place flexibility and broad participation not restricted to linear discussions as well as providing learners with time to reflect and time to compose and review their contributions (Nichols 2009: 7). As such, online fora may be successfully interwoven into ELT curricula, supplementing and enhancing face-to-face communication or even replacing some classroom instruction (cf. Bonk & Graham 2006). However, to ensure meaningful application of asynchronous discussion fora in ELT curricula, and more specifically to counteract silence and to prevent topic drift, online facilitators must first design the online discourse framework and then define the role they are to play in virtual encounters.

Consequently, teaching presence – involving the instructional design and organisation of the course, facilitating discourse and direct instruction (Nichols 2009: 29) – is one of the parameters which should be asserted at the very onset of online activity in order to encourage student participation and, ultimately, to achieve the desired educational outcome. Understandably, depending on their availability and resources, e-tutors may determine their style of communication and opt to assume the role of an online *monitor*, *facilitator* or *teacher*. While online monitors make few contributions and, in principle, mark their presence only at the beginning of the discussion, facilitators occasionally make themselves visible by posting initial messages and by providing feedback and encouraging student participation throughout the discussion. On the other hand, the most active of the three types of tutors, online teachers, are highly visible and are involved in the ongoing management of messages as well as interactions with individual participants, or even e-mail exchanges (ibid.: 38-39). Naturally, whichever the approach, online instructors are supposed to set clear goals and specify expectations in order "to establish the required degree of collaborative community" (ibid.: 29) amongst the participants. But above all, they are expected to 'infect' their students with enthusiasm and involvement.

Surely, one of the challenges awaiting online tutors is that of message management and online activity assessment. To counteract an unmanageable backlog of posts, instructors may set realistic time frames allowing the students to research the topic and then to participate in the discussion itself. Similarly, specifying the frequency of logging and skim reading the messages can also facilitate online tutoring, not to mention the fact that the assignment of a reasonable number of participants to a single task proves fruitful, too. Unsurprisingly, evaluating each student can also become an insurmountable task. Therefore, much in line with constructivist approaches, it is advisable that instructors encourage not only the students' consistent interaction, but also higher-order thinking which involves self-reflection and peer evaluation. Likewise, specially designed rubrics, enabling evaluation and comparison of interactivity in different settings, are useful in online discourse assessment and can improve the quality of online discussions, too (Nichols 2009: 30).[2]

The challenges aside, the advantages that online discussion fora bring to ELT instruction should not be overlooked either. It must be acknowledged then that they add variety and enhance in-class learning. For instance, they enable shy and less proficient students (or those with speech impediments) to shed inhibitions and to have a say in class discussions, responding to arguments rather than to forceful personalities. As a result, 'lurkers' are more likely to participate in discussions and express their views, and even disagreement. Worth highlighting is also the supportive role of asynchronous environments in developing English learners' autonomy and research skills alongside language proficiency and pragmatic appropriateness. Having said that, it will be shown later in this paper how English students realise the dispreferred speech act of disagreement in online interaction and which discourse structures are the most visible in their e-arguments.

6 The realisation of mitigated disagreement in learner discussion fora

In the study reported below, the following questions were asked: 1) How is mitigated disagreement realised in non-native asynchronous online discourse? 2) What linguistic devices do students use to express mitigated disagreement in online interaction? and 3) Are the mitigational devices used by students organised in Concessive schemata?

The analysis was based on data collected from five threaded discussions carried out by Polish third-year students who attended either a Speaking and Writing course or a Speaking and Listening course. In the case of both programmes, the blended learning mode was adopted, i.e. contact hours were complemented by

online activities. During the class meetings, the students practised argumentative techniques (orally or in writing) and special emphasis was placed on the strategy of concession and refutation. As for their online activity, it comprised threaded discussions accompanied by online videos featuring effective argumentation techniques, designed for self-study.

The length of the discussions varied from 19,077 to 131,057 words and the number of posts per discussion ranged from 33 to 147. About 25 participants were assigned to a single online task and the time allotted to each of them was a month. The discussions included one non-threatening topic assigned by the instructor and discussed by three different groups (*What are the risks of using social networking sites like Facebook?*) and two topics which were selected by the students themselves (*Should Poland become a secular state?* and *Should women be allowed to serve in combat roles in the armed forces?*).

As regards teaching presence, the instructor adopted the low-visibility model and assumed the role of *facilitator*. To this end, the tutor provided online discussion guidelines, posted the 'welcome' message introducing the topic and then contributed occasional messages (e.g. with links to external sources); however, she chose not to moderate the discussion as such. After the discussions were closed, during a class meeting, the instructor provided general feedback on the student online activity.

Among the general observations made was that regarding the quality of text production. Predictably, the students' spelling and punctuation were far from perfect. Similarly, their grammar and vocabulary use left much to be desired. Next, with respect to timing, it was noted that most of the messages were contributed in a last-minute rush just before the deadline. Further, with respect to topic integrity and interactional coherence, it was observed that more often than not the discussions diverged into sub-threads, while many of the questions asked by the students in the course of the discussion were left unanswered. In some cases, the discussions simply died out after a day or two. Still, on the positive side, it must be acknowledged that the students often supported their views with quotations from external sources or provided links to related videos, press articles and statistics. Naturally, to increase the strength of their arguments, they also relied on real-life examples. Sadly, though, they did not refer to the assigned sources at all. Yet, in sum, the debates were inspiring and stimulating, and generated more agreement than disagreement.

Evidently, in most cases, the students refrained from outright disagreement. Instead, they mitigated their messages, if these contained arguments which might be opposed or frowned upon by the rest of the debaters. Generally, various patterns of mitigated disagreement were recognised (between 10 and

25 sequences per thread), as evidenced by Examples 1 through 5. Yet, similarly to face-to-face interactions, by far the most frequent was the acknowledgment-counterclaim schema (Examples 1 and 2), in which disagreement was prefaced by a mitigator. Thus, the students expressed agreement or partial agreement only to reduce its force with a counterclaim, whether in the form of a statement or a loaded question, i.e. an accusation rather than an information-seeking device (cf. Barth-Weingarten 2003: 125), signalled with a contrastive marker *but* or *however*.

(1) (FB_2)

Move		**Function**
X'	*Asia,* ***I'm happy*** *you've decided to bring up this matter.* ***It is really alarming*** *that one can be laid off because of the pictures he/she uploads.*	downgraded agreement (mitigation)
Y	***However, isn't it that*** *we are responsible for safeguarding ourselves and thinking about the repercussions our decisions may have?*	asking for clarification

(2) (FT_P)

Move		**Function**
X'	*Justyna, I agree with you that a priest has the same right as other people to express his opinion*	downgraded agreement (mitigation)
Y	***but why*** *do they do it during performing a sermon?*	asking for clarification

Reversed patterns were reported less frequently than Cardinal schemata; yet, the interactants occasionally organised their arguments in such a way so as to be able to put forward their preferred claims first and to mitigate them with subsequent arguments aligned with the prior speaker's views. As can be seen in Examples 3 and 4, the pattern, composed of a varying number of moves, accommodated alternate acknowledgments and counterclaims (Example 3) or incorporated repeated moves (Y Y – X' X'), as illustrated by Example 4. Thanks to such an arrangement of arguments, the potential unwelcome effect of disagreement was in all probability reduced.

(3) (FB_3)

Move		Function
Y	*Referring to what both Gaba and Basia said,* ***I think*** *that burdening teachers with responsibility for bringing dangers of the social networks to students' attention* ***is too much****.*	insisting on one's position
X'	***Of course****,* ***one can say that*** *such things should be brought up during so called 'lekcja wychowawcza' (a form period in English, but as far as I know it differs from polish 'lekcja wychowawcza')*	preempting disagreement (mitigation)
Y	***but*** *teachers usually deal with administrative work during such lessons.*	showing a contrast
X'	***However, I think*** *that smuggling some issues concerning social networks into lessons* ***is not a bad idea.***	backing down (mitigation)

(4) (FB_1)

Move		Function
Y	***I don't agree with you****, not everybody has FB account. Some people aren't interested in others' FB life. I used to have FB account and I'm happy without it!*	insisting on one's position (straightforward disagreement)
Y	***It bothers me*** *that every information posted on FB can be used for making money.*	change of focus
X'	***Well, on the other hand*** *this is the reality of market economy.*	backing down (mitigation)
X'	*FB needs to earn mony and they will use the information that we give them for free.* ***So maybe*** *before posting anything* ***we need*** *to think twice?*	clarification + making a suggestion (mitigation)

It should also be underlined that amongst the message-structuring resources preferred by the students was the strategy of 'framing', i.e. of inserting segments from previous posts into a new message containing counterclaims (cf. the underlined segments). Given the lack of linearity manifested by divergence into many sub-threads and the multilogic nature of online discourse in general, the strategy proved to be particularly useful in establishing coherence and shifting emphasis as well as in the strategic juggling of claims and counterclaims (Example 5).

(5) (FT_W)

Move		Function
X	I think women have a great chance to contribute to military	
Y	***In what way?***	asking for clarification
X	*Maybe GENERALLY women are physically weaker than man, but it certainly isn't true for everyone.*	
Y	***The data*** *from reports and court testimonies of American military academies (West Point, the AFA)* ***show us something completely different****.*	showing a contrast
X	*I think that those women that actually want to serve in army are quite strong and know what to expect - I mean, otherwise why would they do that?*	
X'	***Yeah, let's let 'em enroll****.*	backing down
Y	***But only under the condition*** *that they will be subjected to the same field trainings on exactly the same difficulty level as those designed for men.*	restricting the validity of a claim

To conclude, rather than produce unstructured arguments randomly, the students consistently followed argumentative patterns occurring in face-to-face settings. As predicted, the arguments were far from chaotic and they were strategically organised. Further, even though there was no direct face threat and the interactional context was low-stake, the students tended, whether intuitively or consciously, to mitigate posts containing dispreferred arguments. They evidently strived to project a favourable self-image and to collaborate with others. This might be partly accounted for by the fact that they knew each other well, as they were all fellow students attending the same classes outside virtual reality. Also, no abusive language was reported which might be attributed to the fact that the students knew the course requirements and so their posts were expected to meet the criteria of academic discourse. Worth mentioning is also the fact that, prior to the launch of each discussion, the students received online discussion guidelines which they were supposed to follow. Needless to say, the debaters were explicitly instructed, amongst other things, to refrain from abusive or offensive language. Finally, the discussions were set up by the instructor who could at any time access and verify the content of the debaters' messages, which must have affected the students' interaction patterns, too.

7 Conclusions

As has been shown in the foregoing discussion, the claim that linguistic mitigation at the discourse level can be successfully analysed with the help

of the dialogic model of Concession holds true. What became obvious in the analysis was the overlap between the concept of mitigated disagreement and that of Concession as well as the similarity between the related pragmatic functions. In their posts, the students used a wide range of mitigators which were organised in evident schemata. Clearly, cardinal patterns (mitigation followed by disagreement) were preferred to reversed schemata (disagreement followed by mitigation). Amongst the individual mitigating devices which stood out were, for instance, epistemic modal verbs and evaluative adjectives alongside contrastive and restrictive markers. Interestingly, the participants frequently used first names, especially diminutives, to signal informality and familiarity. As diminutive names lessened the distance between the interactants, they could therefore be interpreted as mitigators, too. On the other hand, somewhat surprisingly, semiotic devices (e.g. emoticons or images) were scarcely used and their mitigating role seemed to be insignificant in the data analysed.

As regards the integration of asynchronous learning environments into Practical English curricula with the aim of developing English students' pragmatic competence, it must be reiterated that online discussion fora are useful tools which, as it seems, should supplement in-class interaction, especially as English has established itself as the *lingua franca* in different types of discourse, including online communication. Hence, academic teachers should not underestimate the potential of cyberspace, which, for many, is gradually becoming the primary space of socialisation and education. As such, it offers functionalities, which, if wisely used, may equip students with the effective communicative skills that are so desirable during confrontational encounters in and outside virtual reality. Asynchronous discussion fora are therefore one of the available spaces where English learners can develop their argumentative tactics and hone their rhetorical skills in meaningful interactions.

Endnotes

[1] The examples are taken from the learner discussion threads under analysis.

[2] Examples of marking rubrics can be found in Appendix A in Nichols (2009).

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