# Some Pragmatic Markers of Politeness Used in English to Smoothen Communication

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**Abstract**

In all the languages, speakers use certain pragmatic markers to save themselves from impolite and face-threatening acts. In order to minimize impoliteness and face-threatening assertive, commissive and directive speech acts, speakers use certain pragmatic markers that contribute to indirectness, tentativeness and optionality. Through making utterances indirect, tentative, optional and less forceful, these pragmatic devices lessen the force of impositions. The present paper is an attempt to prepare an inventory and to explore the pragmatic markers of politeness which are used as hedging devices to soften the force of commands which if used in a direct and blunt manner may mar the communicative goals.

**Keywords:** Pragmatic markers, Hedging devices, Indirectness, Tentativeness, Optionality, Directives

**Introduction**

In the present globalized world, the aim of communication has not remained confined to the encoding, comprehensibility and intelligibility of the message but has gone beyond

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that. Communication becomes an act that is performed for fulfilling some goal or motive by the speaker. Hence, unless the speaker's goal is fulfilled, the aim of communication is not achieved. Therefore, in order to achieve the goal of communication, adoption of some cooperative and politeness strategies to avoid conflicts and offence to the hearer and to smoothen the communication process becomes necessary.

In interpersonal communication, speakers use some pragmatic devices – lexical as well as grammatical – to hedge a conflict that may arise between interlocutors due to direct and blunt assertive, directive and commissive speech acts. According to Searle (1975), Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983), indirect illocutions raise the degree of politeness.

Prof. Leech regards indirect illocutions more polite "because (a) they increase the degree of optionality, and (b) because the more indirect an illocution is, the more diminished and tentative its force tends to be" (1983:108). He recommends hedging impositions, providing options and avoiding cost to the hearer as some means to avoid impoliteness.

According to Searle, "Politeness is the most prominent motivation for indirectness in requests, and certain forms tend to become the conventionally polite ways of making indirect requests"(1975:76).

The present paper, therefore, aims to explore some linguistic devices in English used by the speakers to smoothen the communication process by hedging face-threatening communicative acts and to soften them in order to achieve the intended goals of communication.

**Approximators**

In an interpersonal discourse, sometimes speakers avoid exact details and do not provide exact particulars about persons, places, things, numbers, size or quality of something. They do this to avoid causing offence to the listeners by being direct, absolute and blunt.

In English *about, almost, approximately, something, perhaps, thousands, up to, more or less*, etc, are the words which belong to the category of approximators as they do not provide any final, specific and precise information.

Quirk and Greenbaum think that approximators "serve to express an approximation to the force of the verb"(1973:218) and "imply a denial of the truth-value of what is denoted by the verb" (1973:219).

Thus, when a speaker escapes providing precise and exact information in order to avoid bluntness and consequent offence to the listener, he uses approximators to smoothen a conversational exchange. In such cases, approximators are used as hedging device to save an utterance from being impolite by avoiding any direct and absolute information that

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may hurt the feelings of the listener. They, instead, contribute to tentativeness, open-endedness, inconclusiveness, and lead to guessing and speculations by the addressee.

Carter and McCarthy believe that approximators contribute to vagueness. Vagueness is motivated and purposeful and simply keeps options open. They write, "Being vague is an important feature of interpersonal meaning and is especially common in everyday conversation… Vague language softens expressions so that they do not appear too direct or unduly authoritative and assertive" (2006:202).

In the following examples, 'so', 'about' and 'a lot' are used as approximators to avoid giving exact information in order to soften the assertive.

1. How much time will you take to learn your lesson? I shall take twenty minutes or so.
2. How much time will you take to wind up your presentation? I'll take about five minutes.
3. How much will it cost us? It won't cost a lot.

**Modals**

Sinclair (1990) regards the use of modals a goal-directed activity and extends the study of modals to pragmatics. He observes, "Modals are often used to produce a particular effect, and the modal you choose depends on several factors, such as the relationship you have with your listener, the formality or informality of the situation, and the importance of what you are saying" (1990:218).

**Strategy to Avoid Offence and Imposition**

A strategy to avoid offence and imposition on the addressee is to make an assertive, commissive or a directive less forceful, and to make them tentative, indirect and optional.

Modals which have great communicative potential are widely used in interpersonal rhetoric as hedging devices to ease the effect of an impositive to smoothen the communication process.

In English society, an illocution that compels the addressee to act as per the wishes of the addresser is regarded as inherently impolite. Speakers use modals in interrogatives to signal optionality, tentativeness and indirectness. The addressee is given full freedom to decline the offer or command if he pleases to. The options provided to the hearer save impositives and commissives from being impolite. The speaker lessens the force of an impositive by using a modal in a question pattern tactfully and hedges the offence that may be caused by a directive or a commissive.

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As we see in examples No. (1), (2), (5) and (6), use of modals aids a speaker to remain non-committal and distances him from any direct impositions. When modals 'may', 'might', 'can', 'could', 'will', and 'would' are used as directives for seeking permission from the addressee and 'will', 'shall', 'would' for ascertaining the willingness of the addressee and 'shall' for the offer of help to the addressee, the speaker tones down a direct impositive and saves it from its inherent face-threatening quality.

1. May I have your attention please?
2. Might I just kiss you before we begin?
3. Can I be of service to your honour?
4. Could I have a word with him, miss?
5. Will you favour this gentleman with your company at supper?
6. Shall we take a stroll in the garden?
7. Would you bless me before I go?

**Indefinites**

Words which are used to refer to indefinite quantity or numbers of something without providing precise information are called indefinites. *Some, any, all, several, anybody, everybody, nobody, anyone, everyone, no one, one, someone, anything, everything, nothing, something*, etc. are used in English to refer to indefiniteness.

In many communicative situations, the speaker, instead of directly naming a person by using a proper noun or instead of using a personal pronoun, uses indefinite pronoun either when he does not know the name of a person, place or thing or due to pragmatic reasons does not want to name them. Therefore, substitution of nouns and personal pronouns by using indefinites is a strategy to make the communicative act less imposing, forceful and threatening.

Patil regards the use of indefinites as generalizing device and writes, "One important way of minimizing the face-threatening act of complaining and criticizing is to state the act as a general rule a social norm, regulation, or obligation. This again is based on pronoun avoidance. The speaker does not impose but, rather draws attention to the existence of a general rule which sometimes is almost proverbial and epigrammatic" (1994:176). According to him, by using indefinites as a generalizing device, one can hedge accusations by making them tentative advice. He writes, "Impersonalizing a criticism makes it less coercive and less threatening" (1994:174).

1. Some are engaged in unjust, selfish and even hellish deeds. One should not waste one's precious life in such type of ugly acts. One can't behave in any way one likes.

In this example the addresser indirectly criticizes the deeds of the addressee by making the criticism impersonal through the use of indefinites 'some', 'one', 'such' and 'any'.

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2. There are just a few things, you don't know. And I'll tell you one of them.

In this example the addresser avoids a direct assertion and hence uses indefinites 'few' and 'one'.

3. I know that I have so many officers in my factory. I can't ask anyone to sweep the floor. I have to be careful. If I ask, I'll insult somebody.

In this example, the addresser uses indefinites 'so many', 'anyone' and 'somebody' to avoid naming a person in order to save the utterance from impoliteness.

**Passives**

In English passives are generally used when a speaker either does not know the name of the agent or due to pragmatic reasons does not want to name them. Agentless passives are used to shift the attention from the agent to the action performed.

Sometimes due to pragmatic reasons the speaker hides the identity of the person or thing responsible for the action as he is either afraid in naming the agent or has some selfish motive in not mentioning his name.

According to Carter and McCarthy, "Reference to the agent(s) may be omitted in order to deflect possible criticism, because it may be embarrassing/ inappropriate to mention the agent, or because it may be necessary to omit such reference (2006:799). Passives are used as politeness strategies to hedge the agent from any unpleasant job done by him.

According to Prof. Z.N. Patil, "In English the passive often implies politeness. Since pointing at people is avoided in most cultures to increase politeness, the agent is deleted. Because the agent is directly connected with the action, it is associated with the responsibility of the action. The passive ascribes no personal responsibility to the addressee. The passive is very often used when there is something unpleasant to be expressed. This comes about because with the passive one always has the option of deleting the agent and therefore assigning blame to anybody" (1994:173).

Passives, therefore, can be used to facilitate a goal directed communication which needs some unpleasant expressions to be avoided.

In many communication situations, avoidance of blaming somebody for performing some unpleasant tasks becomes essential to smoothen the process of communication. In such cases, passives are used as hedging devices to hide the names of the agents or unpleasantness associated with them. In many societies due to respect for elders and superiors, the young and the junior in order to show respect to them do not name them and instead use passive expressions. Similarly in some social relations also naming is

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generally avoided as we see in the relations of husbands and wives in many social segments of Indian society.

1. I was falsely accused. Believe me. I am innocent.
2. I was made a coward in this home.
3. We were punished for no fault of ours.
4. I have been told that she deceived me.

**Question Tags**

Question tags are used in conversational exchanges when a speaker first makes a statement and then asks the listener to confirm it.

According to Carter and McCarthy, "Question Tags are used to check or clarify information, or simply to involve the listener in a more interactive way" (2006:547).

Sinclair believes that tags are used by a speaker to check the opinion, belief about something, to check whether a listener agrees with his suggestion and also to show the speaker's reaction to something that someone has just said or implied(1990:433-34).

Many statements in conversations are uttered by speakers with hesitation and tentativeness. When a speaker is not confident about the definiteness, relevance and truthfulness of his statement, he uses question tags to seek confirmation from the listener.

In interpersonal communication, Tag questions also perform the pragmatic functions of hedging and softening the utterance. Particularly in directives, tags are used to tone down the force of commands and to make them sound like a request.

Use of Question Tags provides options and choice to the listener to decline the directives. In directive speech acts in order to save an utterance from being impolite a speaker employs Tag questions to make the impositive less forceful. Tags are used as Tact Maxim to facilitate the speaker in achieving the conversational goals through hedging and softening a direct command and imposition.

1. Don't go through it all again, will you?
2. Try to get hold of yourself, will you?
3. Don't surround us, will you?
4. You're not going to believe that, are you?
5. Come and eat your breakfast, won't you?

**Conditional Clause 'If'**

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Conditional clauses are generally used in English for referring to real as well as hypothetical conditions and their consequences. However, conditional clauses beginning with 'if' also perform pragmatic functions.

According to Carter and McCarthy, "'If' clauses do not always mark conditions; they can be used to issue polite directives, especially in spoken contexts, where the if-clause often stands alone and typically involves a modal verb" (2006:757).

'If' clause also contributes to uncertainty and eases the force of assertives and directives. When a conditional clause beginning with 'if' is put into the beginning of a sentence and is used to consult the wishes of the hearer by providing him option to act as per his wishes, it functions as face-saving device and softens the face-threatening act.

In such cases the face-threatening proposition is put at the end of a sentence. It is evident from the below given examples that 'if' as a conditional clause is put in the beginning of a sentence for permission seeking purpose to hedge directives and to serve the purpose of politeness. Use of 'if' as a conditional clause tones down the force of a command and makes them mild ones by functioning as a hedging device.

1. If you kindly allow me, I'll have a meeting with you in the evening.
2. If you will permit me, I'll bring Mohan along with me.
3. If you do that for me, I'll get rid from this mess.
4. If you do me a favour, I'll recover from bankruptcy.
5. If you help me solve this exercise, I'll score good marks.

**Impersonal 'It'**

Impersonal 'It' is used in place of proper nouns and personal pronouns to tone down the force of an assertion or a commitment caused by the presence of an agent denoted by nouns or pronouns I/We. Impersonal 'it' functions to make the subject/action of the proposition agentless/nameless and as a result makes the assertion or the commitment less imposing.  It lessens the force of an assertive or a commissive and softens the imposition compelled by the personal agent/ subject.

Carter and McCarthy regard that "Anticipatory 'it' is frequently used in passive voice clauses with or without an explicit agent to create an impersonal structure. This enables writers/speakers to distance themselves from assertions" (2006:286). According to them, "Propositions may be hedged by the use of impersonal it-constructions with passive voice which enable the writer/speaker to avoid the more direct commitment to a proposition which a first person I/We + active voice may create" (2006:283). 'It' when used  as an anticipatory subject/ dummy subject functions as a hedger when it hides the actual subject or a delayer when it comes in the forefront and sends the actual subject in the background.

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1. It breaks my heart to know what your father did to you.
2. It slipped my mind that I had pneumonia that day.
3. It seemed impossible that he hates you so much.
4. It has been brought to my notice that she misguided me.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I explored some of the pragmatic markers of politeness – approximators, modals, passives, question tags, indefinites, conditional 'if' and impersonal 'it'. This brief study confirms the observation of Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983) that indirectness raises the degree of politeness and lessens the effect of face-threatening assertives, commissives and directives.

The above-mentioned pragmatic markers investigated in this study confirm that indirectness, tentativeness and options provided to the listeners increase the degree of politeness as they lessen the force of impositives by respecting the wishes of the listeners.

The inventory of the pragmatic markers prepared in this paper can be further improved by pursuing a more detailed study of this type. The same type of study may also be carried out in other languages to prepare inventory of pragmatic markers of the same sort so that such inventory can be pedagogically explored to improve the communicative competence of the students.

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