

## THE ROLE OF EPISTEMIC MODALITY IN ENGLISH POLITENESS STRATEGIES

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### 0. PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

It is well-known that deontic modality (that is, the kind of modality which concerns obligation and permission) plays an important role in the expression of politeness in English: a directive, such as *Open the door*, can easily be softened by modal expressions, such as *You may open the door* or *You could open the door*. In this paper I will analyze the influence on politeness of another kind of modality which has received less attention in this respect: epistemic modality, that is, the kind of modality which concerns judgements about the truth of the propositional content of an utterance. The devices language has to express epistemic modality will be called "epistemic expressions." Epistemic expressions may specify several factors about someone's (normally the speaker or writer's) knowledge or belief in the truth of the proposition:<sup>1</sup>

1) the degree of *confidence* in the truth of the proposition, which may range from absolute certainty ("I *know* Mary's at home") through a higher ("I'm *sure* Mary's at home") to a weak possibility ("Mary *might* be at home"). From now on, I will call the expressions of the first two groups "strong epistemic expressions" and those of the last group "weak epistemic expressions." Strong epistemic expressions enhance the commitment of the speaker or writer (henceforth S) to the truth of the proposition, whereas weak epistemic expressions lower it.<sup>2</sup>

2) I will also consider as epistemic those expressions that do not indicate doubt with respect to the truth of the proposition, but to the linguistic *codability* of the knowledge S wants to transmit, as in "Mary's *about* six feet tall," "They started *sort of* chanting," because they weaken S's commitment with respect to the truth of the proposition by indicating the imprecision of S's knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

3) finally, there are other expressions which do not specify S's judgement towards the truth of a proposition, but the *(dis)agreement* of its truth or falsity (which is already known by S) with *previous expectations* that S had, or that S supposed the hearer or reader (henceforth H) to have. In other words, reality is confronted with a previous epistemic judgement of S or H:

(1) Of course Mary passed the exam

(the truth of the proposition agrees with S's (and H's) previous expectations)

(2) To my surprise, Mary didn't pass the exam

(the truth of the proposition disagrees with S's previous expectations).<sup>4</sup>

It may be noticed that modal expressions are grammatically diverse: they can be modal verbs (*must, may*), parenthetical expressions (*I think, I believe, I suppose*), adverbs (*really, certainly, perhaps*), adjectives (*sure, likely, probably*), indefinite adjectives or pronouns (which indicate that S does not know who the referent is: *someone, something*), tag questions (*"Fine day, isn't it?"*), hedges (*kind of, sort of, more or less*), even contradictions, which indicate that the propositional content is true, but only to some extent (*He is here and he isn't here* (implicature: "he is here, but he is no use to us").

Once I have made clear what I understand by *epistemic expressions*, I will specify that, as far as politeness is concerned, I will follow Brown and Levinson's (1987) approach, in which it is assumed:

that all competent adult members of a society have (and know each other to have)

(i) "face," the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting in two related aspects:

(a) negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction —i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition.

(b) positive face: the positive consistent self-image or "personality" (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants.

(ii) certain rational capacities, in particular consistent modes of reasoning from ends to the means that will achieve those ends. (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61).

Individuals are conscious that, in order to be polite, they have to fulfil others' positive and negative face needs, and at the same time they must protect their own, so that others are polite towards them. *Positive and negative politeness* are concerned with the satisfaction of individuals' positive and negative face needs respectively. However, S occasionally wants (or feels obliged) to make face-threatening acts (FTAs), that is, acts which involve a risk against the positive and negative face needs of H or, less commonly, about S's own face needs. To avoid the risk, S uses *positive politeness (PP) strategies* if positive face is threatened, and *negative politeness (NP) strategies* if negative face is threatened.

Like all speech acts, FTAs involve an exchange between S and H. I will divide them according to Halliday's (1985: 68-69) two criteria:

1) the commodity exchanged: goods and services vs. information;

2) the role that S assigns to her or himself in the exchange: giving vs. demanding. In so doing, S assigns the opposite role to H:

		Commodity exchanged:	
		Goods and services	Information
S's role in the exchange	giving	COMMISSIVE	STATEMENT
	demanding	DIRECTIVE	QUESTION <sup>5</sup>

The labels "commissive," "directive," "statement" and "question" are often considered as kinds of illocutionary acts,<sup>6</sup> so that we can say, for example, that a certain FTA is a directive, or that it has the illocutionary force of a directive.

So as to analyze the use of epistemic expressions in politeness strategies, I have first divided the politeness strategies into their two basic kinds: negative and positive.<sup>7</sup> Then I have divided the epistemic expressions into strong and weak, according to the strength of S's commitment to the truth of the proposition. I have proceeded to analyze the individual strategies which belong to each of the four groups, indicating, among other things, the situations in which they are likely to occur, and whether they are mostly found in directives, commissives, statements or questions. In each case it is specified whether the strategy is borrowed from Brown and Levinson (1987) or it is proposed here. Finally, I have also considered the patterns of a PP strategy followed by an NP strategy, as well as the strategies speakers normally use in two cases where there is some conflict between more than one face need: answers to invitations, and contradictions.

## 1. EPISTEMIC MODALITY AND NEGATIVE POLITENESS

As we have already seen, negative face concerns the wish that persons have not to be imposed upon. The FTAs which affect NP consist, therefore, in that S puts some pressure on H to do something for her or him. NP strategies are thus mostly used to protect H's negative face in expressing *directives*, although, as we will see, this is not true for all the cases.

### 1.1. NP strategies which make use of weak epistemic expressions

a) *Be conventionally indirect.*<sup>8</sup> S uses this strategy so as to leave it apparently open to H whether or not to perform the act S wishes H to do, by stressing her or his insecurity about the "felicity conditions."<sup>9</sup> However, the epistemic expressions are so conventionalized that the directive seems quite straight, the choice given to H being purely formal:

(3) You could perhaps pass me the salt. (Bl 135)<sup>10</sup>

(4) I'd like to borrow a cup of flour if I may. (Bl 142)

b) *Don't presume / assume.* S also leaves apparently open to H the decision whether to comply with the directive or not, by indicating lack of security not only about the felicity conditions (as in a)), but also about H's will to do S the favour. The expressions are more indirect than those used in a). They are often more subjective (*I think, I suppose...*), so that S does not appear to be imposing on H:

(5) I wonder if you can help me in this difficult task.

(6) I think you shouldn't smoke. (cf. "Don't smoke").

(7) You must go to the market tomorrow, I suppose.

(S does not seem to be the source of H's obligation to go to the market, but appears to be merely reporting it).

c) *Be pessimistic.* This strategy is used when S wants to emphasize (more strongly than in a) or in b)) the fact that S does not take for granted that H will fulfil the demands expressed in the directive. The epistemic expressions used for this strategy are, then, very weak, and they tend to cooccur:

(8) I don't suppose there'd be any chance of you... (Bl 174)

(9) Perhaps you'd care to help me. (Bl 175)

(10) I was wondering if you could help me in this difficult task.

In this strategy epistemic expressions are meaningful, so that H does not think they are a mere formality, but that they do give her or him an excuse not to be imposed upon by S. Then it may readily be deduced that this strategy is more likely when the FTA is serious, whereas Strategy a) is more often used for small favours, such as passing the salt during a meal or closing the door.

Strategies b) and c) may also be found in the expression of *commissives*. Here S is likely to be in a position of inferiority with respect to H, and the strategies help S to give a sensation of modesty in her or his claim that s/he can help H:

(11) I wonder if I could help you. (Strategy b)

(12) I don't suppose I'll be able to solve your problem, but I could try. (Strategy c)

S can also be pessimistic about a third person's (usually superior to S in status) having done something for her or him:

(13) I suppose the editor's not been able to read my script yet.

d) *Communicate S's wants not to impinge on H.* Here S not only does not take for granted that H will do what is indicated in S's directive (as it occurred in Strategies a), b) and c)), but also communicates to H explicitly that it is not S's particular wish to impose on H. Here it is usual to *impersonalize S and H* (see Brown and Levinson (1986) NP Strategy 7), which can be done by means of impersonal epistemic expressions, which lack subjectivity and thus permit S not to state explicitly that it is s/he who formulates the FTA, and/or that it is addressed to H.

(14) It appears / seems (to me) that someone is trying to open the front door.

(implicature: "please go and see what is happening").

S may also pretend not to know who s/he is referring to, by replacing the pronouns "I" and "you" by indefinites:

(15) I can't guess who has left the bathroom in a mess.

(16) Some one (I know) has left the bathroom in a mess.

(implicature in both cases: "you have left the bathroom in a mess, so (please) clean it").

This lack of knowledge of the referents is sometimes so obviously false that it can be funny, for example when it is used by mothers to command their children. Paradoxically, such an indirect strategy as d) may be found in very informal contexts.

e) *Be ambiguous.* This is the most indirect NP strategy. When S chooses it, S wants her or his utterance to be ambiguous, so that H may or may not understand that the FTA has the illocutionary force of a directive. The illocutionary force of (17b) and (18b) cannot be said to be unambiguously a directive, in contrast to the force of (17a) and (18a):

(17a) Tidy your room, please.

(17b) I think it would be a good idea for you to tidy your room.

(18a) Papers must be handed in before December.

(18b) It appears (to me) that papers must be handed in before December.

Strategy e) may also be used in *questions*, especially in questions about delicate topics, an answer to which is compromising for H. Strategy e) makes the illocutionary force doubtful: the utterance may be considered as a question, but also as a statement about S's mental state of doubt, so that H can decide whether to answer or not:

(19) I wonder if John has lost his job.

f) *Avoid disagreement* 1. <sup>11</sup> This strategy, unlike the NP strategies seen up to now, is used in the elicitation of *statements* (not in *directives*). H is normally of higher status with respect to S. As Givón (1990: 823) says, "in communicating to an interlocutor of higher status, one downgrades one's own subjective certainty." Weak epistemic expressions serve S to soften her or his assertion when S believes that H holds a contrary belief:

(20) Perhaps you may wish to consider an alternative... (Givón 1990:822)

(21) I'm not sure about that, maybe... (Givón 1990: 822)

## 1.2. NP strategies which make use of strong epistemic expressions

Strong epistemic expressions are not easily found in NP strategies because these strategies often involve *tentativeness* (which is mainly achieved by weaker expressions) on the part of S. However, there is one NP strategy in which, contrariwise to what happened in the others, strong expressions are more polite than weak ones. It is the case of apologies:

g) *Apologize*. S expresses her or his reluctance to the impingement on H (as in d)). Epistemic expressions tend to be highly subjective, because S stresses that it is s/he who is going to make the FTA (directive), and who doubts about its convenience for H. The stronger the epistemic expression is, the stronger S's reluctance to impinge on H seems. Here are different examples of epistemic expressions used in apologies:<sup>12</sup>

– admit the impingement:

(22) I'm sure you must be very busy, but... (BL 188)

(23) I know this is a bore, but... (BL 188)

– indicate reluctance:

(24) Look, I know I've come to the wrong person, but...

– beg forgiveness:

(25) I hope you'll forgive me if... (BL 189)

– promise that S will do her or his very best not to let that kind of situation happen again. In this way, S makes optimistic epistemic judgements that H will not be further impinged on:

(26) I promise you that this will never happen again.

## 2. EPISTEMIC MODALITY AND POSITIVE POLITENESS

PP concerns positive face, that is, the human wish that one's wants should be thought as desirable. PP plays a remarkable role in the two ways of exchange of goods and services (S stresses that s/he is collaborative towards H in *commissives*, or supposes that H is going to be collaborative towards S in *directives*), and also in the exchange of information (especially when S makes *statements* about S's own opinions: positive face needs motivate both S's and H's desire that their opinions should be respected).

### 2.1. PP strategies which make use of strong epistemic expressions

h) *Notice, attend to H (H's interests, wants, needs, goods)*. S suggests that s/he does not take into account only S's situation and wants, but also H's, thus making a statement about H, concretely a *deduction* about H's wants. Strong epistemic expressions are often used: then S's certainty about what s/he says about H is stressed, and therefore S appears to be more polite. These strategies are often followed by a commissive or a course of action which could be taken by both S and A:

(27) I can guess how tired you are. Let me drive now.

(28) You must be hungry, it's a long time since breakfast. How about some lunch? (BL 103)

i) *Presuppose/raise/assert common ground*. This PP strategy is very similar to h), but is stronger in that S does not merely deduce S's wants, but claims *knowledge* of them.

(29) I know you like rock cake. How about a small piece?

Strategies h) and i) may also serve S to claim knowledge of H's feelings. S's purpose is then to give empathy, not to suggest a subsequent course of action:

(30) I can imagine how hurt you must feel now.

(31) A: Oh, this cut hurts terribly, Mum.

B: Yes dear, it hurts terribly, I know. (BL 119)

The ways of expressing interest in H by rules h) and i) are adequate only when H can feel that S's concern for H is polite, and not that S is intruding in H's privacy. The use of these strategies is therefore much more likely between intimates than when the relations are more distant.<sup>13</sup> Imagine how one would feel if a neighbour that one meets about once a month said the following:

(32) You must have been out this month, because I have not seen you draw the curtains of your home these days.

Strategy i) can also be used to claim S's own positive face needs instead of H's: then S claims H's knowledge not about the details of the story S is going to tell (which only S can know), but of that kind of situation in general (examples: BL 120):

(33) I really had a hard time learning to drive, you know.

(34) I'm just walkin' down the street, you know; and I damn near get run over...

Sometimes, S wants to emphasize her or his surprise at an uncollaborative attitude of H's, who has not respected S's positive and/or negative face wants. This use of Strategy i) is not polite, because S stresses H's lack of collaboration:

(35) Why haven't you told me before? I expected you to know (PP of H towards S) I was interested in it.

(36) I'm sure you knew it was my place. (I expected you to know which my rights are (PP of H towards S), and to obey them (NP of H towards S)).

j) *Exaggerate H's qualities.* S states that S had never thought that the proposition could be true, because it is incredibly good for H. Commonly, an ability of H is exaggerated (37) or S's surprise about some fact unfavourable to H is highlighted, so that S implicates that H is too worthy to deserve that fact (38). Epistemic expressions which contrast the real truth or falsity of a proposition with previous expectations are common here.

(37) I never thought a garden could be so well kept.

(38) I'm surprised you didn't pass the exam.

k) *Downgrade S's qualities.* A fact is again contrasted against previous expectations. In this case, S humbles her or himself to pretend to be inferior (or, at least, not superior) to H, thus fulfilling H's positive face wants:

(39) Gosh, I was sure I flunked that exam! (accepting congratulations)

l) *Intensify interest to H.* S indicates that what S is going to say will be a surprise to H, something unusual, and, therefore, a matter of interest. S does not express her or his own epistemic judgements about the proposition, but states those of H (that is, H's ignorance of what S will say):

(40) Do you know what I dreamt of last night?

(41) Guess what I heard about her.

(42) You just can't imagine what I went through at the customs!

Epistemic expressions used in Strategies j), k) and l) normally have a *high subjective value*: S emphasizes that the epistemic judgements are her or his own (in j) and k)) or H's (in l)).

m) *Seek agreement.* In this case, S uses strong epistemic expressions to stress the fact that s/he does agree with H.

(43) She looks very happy.

Yes, she certainly does.

(44) Do I look all right in this shirt?

Yes, you look really great.

*Tag questions* often seek H's agreement. In this case, S uses them mostly in mid-utterance, as a check for the taken-for-grantedness of what is being said:

(45) I think the most difficult thing is that when you love someone half the time you forget their faults don't you still maybe love them but I mean... (Coates 1988)

However, when the content of the proposition is unfavourable to S, tags have the opposite function: they indicate H that s/he must negate the truth of the proposition in order to fulfil S's positive face needs:

(46) I'm getting fat, aren't I?

(47) I look old for my age, don't I?

Negative questions play a similar role to tags; by using them, S presupposes that H is going to elicit an affirmative answer, thus sharing S's feelings or judgements:

(48) Don't you think it's marvellous?

(49) Isn't it a beautiful day?

When S supposes H's view is different from her or his own, S may seek agreement by claiming to be objective, thus implicating that H has no point in disagreeing with S. This claim of objectivity can be achieved in several ways:

- stress the general acceptance of S's ideas:

(50) anyone can see that...

(51) it's common knowledge that...

- stress the difference between appearance and reality: in these cases, a weak epistemic expression is followed by a strong one:

(52) you may think... but I'm pretty sure that...

(53) it may seem... but actually...

(54) on the surface it appears as if... but the truth of the matter is obviously...

When agreement has been achieved because S yields to H's opinion, S states it explicitly, so as to make it clear that agreement has been achieved, but tends to use some expression to justify S's own change of mind (in other words, the modification of S's epistemic judgement about the truth of the proposition), in order not to give the impression that s/he is weak (thus fulfilling her or his own positive face needs):

(55) now that I think about it...

(56) on second thought...

n) *Avoid disagreement 2*. S's main aim is not to seek agreement, but to avoid a conflict which could be motivated by a divergence of opinion but, at the same time, S does not want to yield to H's viewpoint. S is likely to use expressions with a high subjective value, indicating that her or his epistemic judgement is strong but personal (*my guess is, I honestly feel, I'm positive, to my mind, to the best of my knowledge...*).<sup>14</sup>

o) *Be optimistic*. This strategy, which is opposite to c) "Be pessimistic," serves S to fulfil S's own positive face wants. This strategy, unlike all the previous PP strategies, refers to the exchange of goods and services: more concretely, it is used to demand them (therefore, to elicit *directives*). Here S imposes upon H, but wants H not to think that S is ordering H, but that S sees H as a collaborator:

(57) Look, I'm sure you won't mind if I borrow your typewriter.

(58) You'll lend me your lawnmower for the weekend, I hope.

Strategy o) is adequate when S is in a position of equality with respect to H. If H is in a position of superiority, the familiarity that this strategy involves could make H feel that S is treading on her or his rights; if H considers s/he is an inferior to S, H would consider S's camaraderie as inadequate.

The strategy of being optimistic may be used, like that of being pessimistic, in predictions about a third party. Then it may be said that Strategy o) is used to elicit "educated guesses." By using strong epistemic expressions, S enhances her or his concern about others' welfare, implicating that s/he shares one of H's values (to be glad about others' qualities or welfare), and therefore s/he fulfils H's PP needs:

(59) That'll be Marilyn: She said she would ring at six.

(S stresses Marilyn's punctuality)

(60) I'm sure he'll be all right again in a couple of weeks.

## 2.2. PP strategies which make use of weak epistemic expressions

p) *Avoid disagreement 3*. S may diminish the force of a statement expressing disagreement by means of weak epistemic expressions (usually *hedges*), so that S appears not to be fully compromised with the truth of the proposition:

(61) I really sort of think/hope/wonder... (BL 116)

(62) I don't know, like I think people have a right to their own opinions. (BL 116).<sup>15</sup>

q) *Understate*. S may utter an understatement in accepting a compliment, so as to appear to be more modest, or not inferior to H, thus fulfilling H's positive face wants:

(63) H: What a marvellous place you have here.

S: Oh I don't know, it is a place. (BL 219)

r) *Be ironic*. Weak epistemic expressions are ironic when it is obvious that they have lost their literal meaning, i.e., that S believes the statement to be true (or false), and they serve S to appear to be more indirect. However, the true effect of irony is often the opposite: weak epistemic expressions are often used together, and such a great insistence on doubt suggests that what S pretends is to focus on the truth (or falsity) of the proposition (examples (63) and (64): BL 122). Irony can also be expressed by the pretension not to know who or which the referents of the proposition are (examples (65) and (66): BL 226):

(63) I think maybe John just might be a little bit of a genius.

(64) It's not as if I warned you or anything.

(65) Looks like someone may have had too much to drink.

(66) Perhaps someone did something naughty.<sup>16</sup>

s) *Be vague*. S may pretend not to be sure about her or his knowledge or about its codability. The difference between this strategy and q) "Be ironic", lies in that S uses epistemic expressions with the opposite effect: to downtone, not to stress, the truth or falsity of the proposition.

Strategy s) is often used when the transmission of the information contained in the statement involves a certain degree of responsibility. The reasons why speakers avoid full commitment to the truth of the proposition in such cases are stated in Givón's (1990: 824) "hazardous information principle":

a. Knowledge is power, but power is responsibility.

b. Information may be coveted, it may also be hazardous and socially destabilizing.

c. Transmitting new information may yield a clear social advantage, but it also incurs some risks.

c [sic]. Therefore, being identified explicitly as the author of information may be unwise, and must be avoided.

Here are examples of good news, about which S emphasizes the fact that s/he is not sure, because making a mistake would be considered as a serious *faux pas*:

(67) I believe Mrs Robinson has won a million pounds at the football pools.

(68) It seems as if the Smiths are moving to a better house.

However, Strategy s) is mostly used when S wants to say something negative (and consequently delicate) which may concern H directly, or a third person. S fulfils H's positive face needs suggesting that s/he shares one of H's values ("be tactful when talking about delicate topics"):

(69) She looks very sort of maternally really. (Coates 1988)

[Speaker describes old friend she had recently met].

(70) It could be the case that Helen divorced last year.

S can also use this strategy to satisfy S's own positive face wants instead of H's, when S is afraid of being depreciated (which would mean a breach in S's positive face needs of being appreciated by others):

(71) Maybe what I did was wrong. [BL 159]<sup>17</sup>

[S knows that what s/he did was wrong without any doubt].

### 3. THE PATTERN: PP STRATEGY + NP STRATEGY

When S feels obliged to perform an FTA which involves an imposition on H, S has a variety of means at her or his disposal to achieve a better condition to perform the FTA. Among these means there are several combinations of strategies, which consist of a *statement* that contains a PP strategy (often realized by a strong epistemic expression) followed by a *directive* containing an NP strategy (often realized by a weak epistemic expression):

**3.1. Start flattering H.** S decides to enhance first H's positive face needs, so that S feels flattered and therefore more disposed to be imposed on by S:

(72) I know you're very good at English... (PP). You might possibly help me translate these three pages (NP).

**3.2. Start claiming H's knowledge about S's needs.** S fulfils her or his own positive face needs, supposing H is a collaborator:

(73) You know I've been very tired these days (PP), so I wondered if I could take a couple of days off (NP).

### 4. CASES OF STRATEGIES IN CONFLICT

In ordinary conversation, it is not difficult to find coincidences of two (or more) face needs which require opposite linguistic means to be fulfilled. S can manage to satisfy all of them by the use of certain specific devices. Here I will deal with two of these cases, in which epistemic expressions play an essential role: immediate answers to invitations, and contradictions.

**4.1. Immediate answers to invitations** often include weak epistemic expressions. S prefers not to state her or his acceptance or refusal immediately, because an immediate acceptance would mean a risk against H's negative face wants (that is, giving little importance to S's imposition on H) whereas an immediate refusal would

not be satisfactory for H's positive face wants (H would feel rejected). Here is an example of how S accepts, but uses epistemic expressions to weaken the force of her or his acceptance:

(75) H: I'll give a tea party tomorrow. Will you be coming?

S: Oh, I don't think I should. That's too nice of you. What time will it be starting?

H: About seven o'clock. Does that time suit you?

S: Oh yes. As far as I know, I haven't got any other engagement, so I could join you...

**4.2. Contradictions** indicate that S cannot be telling the truth, since nothing can be true or false at the same time. The use of contradictory statements is frequent when there is a conflict between two or more face needs, or between a face need and sincerity.

(76) H: Are you upset about that?

S: Yes and no. I am and I'm not.

In (76), S wishes to fulfil both H's positive face wants (according to which S should not say s/he is upset, because H would have to pretend to share S's feelings so as to be collaborative) and S's positive face wants (which make S want her or his own feelings to be taken into account).

Other contradictions may resolve a conflict between H's positive face needs (in this case, H's dislike of criticising other people) and S's wish to be truthful. For instance, one might say of a drunken friend to a telephone caller:

(77) Well, John is here and he isn't here.

### 5. CONCLUSIÓN

For a better understanding of the following exposition of the conclusions that have been arrived at from what has been set forth above, I consider it appropriate to write an index of the NP and PP strategies which may be realized by means of epistemic expressions:

a. NP strategies which make use of weak epistemic expressions

a. *Be conventionally indirect*

b. *Don't presume / assume*

c. *Be pessimistic*

d. *Communicate S's wants not to impinge on H*

e. *Be ambiguous*

f. *Avoid disagreement* 1

b. NP strategies which make use of strong epistemic expressions  
g. *Apologize*

c. PP strategies which make use of strong epistemic expressions

h. *Notice, attend to H (H's interests, wants, needs, goods)*

i. *Presuppose/raise/assert common ground*

j. *Exaggerate H's qualities*

k. *Downgrade S's qualities*

l. *Intensify interest to H*

m. *Seek agreement*

n. *Avoid disagreement 2*

o. *Be optimistic*

d. PP strategies which make use of weak epistemic expressions

p. *Avoid disagreement 3*

q. *Understate*

r. *Be ironic*

s. *Be vague*.

From the analysis carried out hitherto, it may be concluded that the relationship between the different kinds of

a) speech acts (directive / commissive / statement / question);

b) politeness strategies (NP / PP); and

c) types of epistemic expressions (strong / weak),

can be summarized by the following chart, where each letter stands for its corresponding strategy in the index (notice that certain strategies appear in two places):

b) strategies and c) epist. expr.	NP Strong	NP Weak	PP Strong	PP Weak
a) Speech acts				
directives	g	a,b,c, d,e	o	
commissives		(b,c)	(h,i)	
statements		h,i,j,k, l,m,n,o		p,q,r,s
questions		e		

The chart above corroborates the following conclusions which were hinted by the analysis:

A) the kinds of speech acts where politeness strategies are more likely to be found are *directives* and *statements*.

B) *Statements* is the most suitable speech act for *PP strategies*, which is logical, since the transmission of information may:

1) give S an opportunity to stress her or his attention to H or to flatter H, so that H feels that S is appreciating her or him (Strategies h, i, j, k, l, m, n and o). In this case, S uses *strong* epistemic expressions to emphasize her or his commitment to the truth of the proposition;

2) involve a certain degree of responsibility, especially when the topic is delicate and H's (or less commonly S's) needs to be appreciated are likely to be threatened (Strategies p, q, r and s). Here S avoids full commitment to the proposition by the use of *weak* epistemic expressions. Nevertheless, it must not be forgotten that in Strategy r ("Be ironic") weak epistemic expressions can ironically enhance S's commitment to the truth of the proposition although the topic may be delicate.

C) Unlike statements, *directives* easily threaten H's negative face needs not to be imposed upon, and are consequently prone to be realized by means of one of the *NP strategies* which make use of *weak* epistemic expressions (a, b, c, d, e). These strategies permit S to insist that s/he does not take for granted that H will comply with the directive.

D) Besides the common patterns described in B) and C) above, both statements and directives can realize other kinds of politeness strategies:

a) *Statements* may concern *negative politeness* (Strategy f: "Avoid disagreement 1") when S assumes that H will see S's disagreement with H as a threat to H's right that her or his ideas or opinions should not be questioned, when H is in a position of superiority with respect to S.

b) *Directives* readily admit *strong* epistemic expressions in two cases:

1) in *apologies* (Strategy g), where the strong expressions do not insist on H's performing the FTA, but on S's consciousness about that FTA. In fact, this NP strategy shares an interest in H's needs with PP strategies h) and i), the difference being only that in g), but not in h) and i), the expression of concern towards H is motivated by an ensuing threat of H's negative face needs by S. As an illustration to this difference, epistemic expressions in apologies are often followed by a directive (78, 80) while in Strategies h) and i) they are usually followed by a commissive, or a suggestion of a course of action which (S claims) would be beneficial for H (79, 81):

(78) You must be very tired, but could you possibly help me clean this carpet?  
(NP Str. g): "Apologize"

(79) You must be very tired. Let's sit down and have a cup of tea. (PP Str. h):  
"Notice, attend to H..."



- (80) I know you're very tired, but could you possibly help me clean this carpet?  
(NP Str. g): "Apologize".  
(81) I know you're very tired. Let's sit down and have a cup of tea. (PP Str. i):  
"Presuppose / raise / assert common ground")

2) when S, in uttering the directive, does not stress S's imposition on H, but S's hope that H will be collaborative and consequently will not refuse to do S the favour (PP Str. o): "Be optimistic".

E) *Commissives* and *questions* seem to be much less often realized by politeness strategies. The grounds of this fact may well lie in that these kinds of speech acts are not very likely to menace H's face needs. Concerning *commissives*, politeness strategies are mainly used in the following two cases:

1) when S wants to soften her or his presupposition that s/he can perform the action which (s/he claims) will be beneficial for H, putting stress on her or his modesty (Strategies b) and c));

2) as we have seen, commissives often follow those statements which contain PP Strategies h) and i).

The only politeness strategy found in *questions* is NP Strategy e), which is adequate when the information S asks H to give her or him concerns a delicate topic. S does not make explicit whether s/he is addressing the question or merely expressing a mental state of doubt about something, so that H can decide whether to supply the information or not.<sup>18</sup>

I hope to have given a hint of the importance of the role that epistemic modality plays in the expression of politeness in English. A suggestion for further research would be to make a more systematic review of the different politeness strategies, in search of a finer classification, and then to test the real frequency of each of the strategies in spoken and / or written language by means of corpora, as well as the frequency of epistemic expressions in each strategy. The importance of epistemic modality in the expression of politeness would then be measured not only in qualitative, but also in quantitative terms.

## NOTES

1. I will consider as "epistemic" all the expressions that Chafe (1986) considers "evidentials" except for some of his expressions of "sensory evidence" and "hearsay evidence," like "He *sounds* like he's mad" or "It *is said* he's mad," because these do not give by themselves any indication about S's commitment towards the truth of a proposition. They may implicate it (as in (1)) but this implicature can be denied (2):

- (1) He sounds like he's mad. (impl: "I believe he's mad")  
(2) He sounds like he's mad, but I know he isn't.

2. Some epistemic expressions, such as *really* and *I think*, can function both as weak and strong epistemic expressions, that is, they can be used either to lower (1) or to enhance (2) S's commitment to the truth of the proposition:

- (1) Do you really believe her?  
He's drunk again, I think.  
(2) You look really well.  
I think the girls are terrific.

3. Cf. Coates (1987:118-120), where *sort of* is also analyzed as an epistemic expression.

4. I consider expressions of previous expectations as epistemic, in contrast to expressions of sensory and hearsay evidence, because here on epistemic judgement is logically *implied*, not only pragmatically *implicated*. Logical implications, unlike pragmatic implicatures, cannot be denied in any case. Compare the following examples:

- (1) It is said John is ill, but I've never believed it.  
(2) \*Of course John is ill, but I never believed it up to now. [implication of of course: S previously believed that John was ill]

5. I have preferred to use the label "directive" and its matching term "commissive" instead of Halliday's labels "command" and "offer," because "directive" is normally used in the literature to refer to all the speech acts in which S demands H something, whereas "command" is reserved for the strongest directives; in which S's imposition on H is most direct.

6. The term "illocutionary act," which was first introduced in Austin (1962), refers to the different things S can do in saying something. It may be considered that the four major kinds of illocutionary acts are the four terms proposed in the chart, which could be described as follows:

- a) commissive: giving / offering to give goods and services;  
b) directive: demanding goods and services;  
c) statement: giving information;  
d) question: demanding information.

7. I have decided to consider NP before PP because I believe that it will be more pleasant for readers to proceed from the negative to the positive than to go the other way round.

8. Brown and Levinson (1987) group the strategies into different "broad mechanisms." For my purposes, I do not find this grouping necessary. The strategies set up in this paper correspond in some cases to Brown and Levinson's 1) "broad mechanisms" (then they are in bold type, italicized and underlined); 2) individual strategies (in bold type and italicized); 3) subcases of individual strategies (italicized only). Strategies not borrowed from Brown and Levinson (1986) are marked in bold type and no italics.

9. The term "felicity conditions," which applies to speech acts in which S wants to do something, was first used by Austin (1962). What it includes is thus summarized in Levinson (1983: 229):

- A. (i) There must be a conventional procedure having a conventional effect  
(ii) The circumstances and persons must be appropriate, as specified in the procedure  
B. The procedure must be executed (i) correctly and (ii) completely

C. Often, (i) the persons must have the requisite thoughts, feelings and intentions, as specified in the procedure, and (ii) if consequent conduct is specified, then the relevant parties must so do permit H to do it.

The felicity conditions mainly concerned in NP strategies are A(ii) and C(i).

10. From now on, I will use the "BL" abbreviation to indicate that an example is quoted from Brown and Levinson (1986), independently of its consideration as an instance of the same category as in this paper, or of a different one. The following number is that of the page where the example is set in the book.

11. The strategy "avoid disagreement", borrowed from Brown and Levinson (1987), is located in three different places in my analysis. I will assign a letter to each, as if they were three different strategies, although they could also be considered as subtypes of a single one.

12. The first three substrategies of "Apologize" are Brown and Levinson's (1986: 187-190); the fourth is mine.

13. In other words, the higher Brown and Levinson's (1987) D ("social distance") variable is, the fewer cases of Strategies h) and i) are likely to be found.

14. These are some of Keller's (1981) "gambits." Keller defines gambits as semantic introducers which give clues about S's conversational strategies.

15. The only difference between this strategy and f) "Avoid disagreement 1" consists in that here S's motivation to use the strategy lies in S's concern not with H's negative face needs, but with H's positive face wants (in this case, H's wish that her or his ideas should be respected).

16. Cf. the use of indefinite pronouns in NP Strategy d) "Communicate S's want not to impinge on H," where their effect is also ironic.

17. A similar effect is achieved by S's use of weaker quantifiers than the ones S should use to express all s/he knows about something, so as to fulfil either S's or H's positive face needs:

(1) Sometimes I didn't remember to do the dishes. (S never remembered to do the dishes)

(2) Sometimes you didn't remember to do the dishes. (H never remembered to do the dishes).

S may also decide later to tell the truth. It may then appear that S incurs in a contradiction, but this is not the case: S gives priority first to face, later to sincerity:

(3) I ate some of the biscuits, in fact all of them.

18. NP Strategy e) shares with PP Strategies p), q), r) and s) the likelihood to be used when handling delicate or compromising topics. The former strategies are used when S supplies the compromising information, while Strategy e) is appropriate when S wants H to supply information of this kind.

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