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EVALUATION IN INSTITUTIONAL TALK

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Abstract: *The paper starts from the assumption that evaluation is a pervasive linguistic phenomenon which provides information about speakers and their environment. Using as its theoretical framework the four main types of evaluation identified by Higgins and Slade for casual conversation, the paper applies them to analyse a telephone conference recorded in a multinational company, where English is lingua franca. Its aim is to identify similarities and differences between evaluative language used by Romanian and foreign speakers of English.*

Key words: *institutional talk, appreciation, affect, judgement, amplification.*

1. Theoretical Framework

Evaluation is a pervasive part of language, functioning at different levels and being expressed in a variety of ways. Linde (166) claims that it plays a major part in every day communication, expressing one's self, action and environment. Evaluation brings together the linguistic and the social levels, in other words the analysis of the situation in which the interaction takes place involves discourse and interactional structures as well as the operational demands (Linde 170).

This paper starts from Eggins and Slade's concepts related to the evaluation of casual conversation, but uses these concepts to analyse types of evaluation in institutional communication, which is defined as talk aimed at solving professional tasks. The authors present appraisal, involvement and humour as the three main areas of interpersonal semantics. Appraisal, the attitudinal colouring of talk, includes evaluation, which the two authors further classify into four categories, namely appreciation, affect, judgment and amplification, all related to attitudinal meanings of words used in conversation (125).

Appreciation is basically related to personal evaluations made by speakers about people, objects, entities and can be subdivided into reaction (whether we like an object), composition (concerned with the texture of a text or process) and valuation (the evaluation of the content of the message). Affect relates more to feelings and can express happiness/ unhappiness, in/security and satisfaction/dissatisfaction. Thirdly, judgments express evaluations about the ethics, morality or social values of people's behaviour and they can refer to social sanction or social esteem. Fourthly, amplification, which helps speaker grade their attitude, can be subclassified into enrichment, augmenting and mitigation. Eggins and Slade conduct a fourth stage analysis of a personal conversation by identifying the appraisal items, classifying them, summarizing appraisal choices and finally interpreting them.

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The conclusions they reach relate to social values, contributions to the group cohesion, patterns of dominant speakers, ways of perceiving the world, more generally how people share their perceptions and feelings about the world, each other and material phenomena (143).

2. Analysis of the Telephone Conference

Eggins and Slade's four types of evaluation are used to analyse a telephone conference recorded in a multinational IT company that brings together foreign and Romanian employees and where English is used as lingua franca[1]. None of the participants is a native speaker of English. The purpose of the analysis is to identify differences of use of evaluative language between the two groups.

There are five participants in the meeting – four Romanians, R1 being the manager and R2, R3 and R4 team members, while F1, the team leader, is a foreigner. The four Romanian employees are in Romania, while the team leader works abroad. The telephone conference lasts 34 minutes and it ends abruptly because of the disconnection of the line.

The content of the discussions can be divided according to the team leader's interlocutor rather than the topic. Thus, after the general introduction made by F1 and R1 the discussion moves to professional issues: welcoming a new team member, a discussion between R2 and F1 related to issues that R2 wants to clarify, then a discussion between F1 and R3 mainly related to purchasing software, and finally a few more questions that R2 asks F1. The conversation ends abruptly, without the participants' taking their leave.

The type of evaluation used most frequently during the telephone conference both by the Romanian and foreign participants is amplification (speaker grading his/her attitude) – 28 instances. The best represented type is mitigation, 19 instances, out of which 13 produced by Romanians and 6 by the team leader.

Mitigation is used by participants to downplay the negative issues raised during the conversation.

For example R1 expresses his surprise at a connection that was not made as planned, but he downplays it by resorting to "a little bit" twice and laughing to ease the possible tension:

e.g. R2: …. I I was a little bit confused because uhm when we last spoke in B, I was told that we'll you'll route the connections of the board so uhm uhm [laugh] uhm (3) this was a little bit in contradiction with with uhm what I saw in the four dot one uhm dot nineteen.

Another instance is illustrated in the next example, where R2 accounts for his slow progress by stating that he is "just" about to understand the digital part:

e.g. R2: and that's why I'm making uhm uhm slower progress than I expected
er I er examined the schematics and now uhm I'm uhm I'm just uhm I'm about to understand digital part

There are two instances where negation combines with augmentation, which actually downtones the statement

e.g. R3: but uhm the last few days I don't study very much if uhm in these days I think.

Mitigation is achieved as a combination of "few" and the use of "I think", which makes the message more indirect.

The second one occurs when R3 explains to the team leader why he has not finished one of his tasks: he has not found an appropriate programme "yet" and it seems that he cannot make "complex connections" on the gap. By combining "not" with augmentation ("very complex") R3 actually resorts to mitigation;

R3: and I don't uhm don't make very complex connected so on gap

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F1 uses mitigation for similar purposes, he talks about a difficult situation using "basically" twice:

e.g. F1: uhm because [unclear] a difficult solution and basically it's basically it's uhm the CN two dash one and we can use that for every board

Augmenting is used more frequently by Romanians (6 times) than F1 (2 times).
F1 uses it (too difficult) to justify his decision of not starting a discussion about a particular issue

e.g. F1: let's not introduce that because because that's too difficult

On the other hand, Romanians use augmenting in order to emphasise the high speed of their actions (right now) or to explain why they did not do some of the tasks: (even, too)

e.g. R2: because at the moment I can't even I can't even open the files
because I have a message of too many connexions.

Enrichment is used only once by R3 to state that no more programmes are necessary for the time being:

e.g. R3: CORP is more than enough for the moment.

Next in terms of occurrence is appreciation (speaker's personal evaluation), which is used for 27 times. Out of them, valuation is used for 17 times, 13 times by F1 and 4 times by Romanians. F1 often evaluates the message conveyed by the other participants, or the situation described. For instance, when R2 describes what he did about the schematic diagrams, F1 concludes with "ok, that's good", an instance of valuation.

e.g. R2: yes the schematic diagrams I examined, uhm the digital part uhm the vsp in ihm lca part most of it I uhm familiar now this with this CN two schematic
F1: ok that's good.

Another instance of appreciation is F1's reaction to R2's future plans ("that's good" uttered twice):

e,g. R2: ok I'll forward you a copy of the e- mails I uhm I er wrote as soon as the uhm this uhm conference finishes
F1: yeah, that's good, that's good

F1 evaluates longer messages or evaluates situations, while Romanian speakers tend to evaluate products or, very seldom, situations:

e.g. R2: the kit is fine
R3: they explained to me very well.

An interesting case occurs twice during the conversation - R2 asks F1 to evaluate his understanding of the situation:

e.g. R2: ok one question I have. uhm in the uhm in the uhm ES four four seven, at uhm paragraph four point one point nineteen, I saw that we will use uhm light tubes for the le- for thee-uhm LEDs. is it correct this?
F1: that's correct.

Reaction (whether the speaker likes an object, etc.) occurs 10 times (6 times used by F1, 4 times by Romanians). R2 uses it to express his satisfaction when he finds out that the team has F1's approval to go to a conference:

e.g. R2: that means you you agree that we we can uhm we can go to we can attend that conference on uhm on Tuesday?
F1: yeah
R2: correct. thank you.

In the second instance, R2 asks F1 to evaluate whether the way in which he understood the future plans is correct:

R2: ok uhm and another problem
... I don't know if you remember uhm uhm on a VB eight uhm dash board uhm uhm VB eight plastic
and uhm I uhm as far as I understand now we will we abandon this idea and use CM two dash one correct?
F 1: that's correct

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One of the main reasons for this exchange is for R2 to make sure he understood the situation correctly. However, as this is a possible conflicting situation, he resorts to mitigation ("as far as I understand") and he begins his turn by stating its topic – "another problem".

Affect (relating to feelings) is seldom used during the conference, actually twice, both times by Romanians to express satisfaction and insecurity ('don't know for sure"):

e.g. R3: mhm I have schematic
but I don't think it's the final one yet
I have an idea but uhm don't know for sure yet.

There are few instance of judgment (evaluation of people's behaviour). Actually there are two instances when sanction is expressed, but it is professional not social, as described by Eggins and Slade. The example is provided by R2 who asks the team leader to decide whether it is acceptable for the team to attend a conference ("is ok also from you"):

e.g. R2: he establish to ask if uhm this is ok also from uhm from you and if and if and if you say it's ok if we can uhm uhm reschedule our ohm uhm conference either on Monday or on Wednesday.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the most frequent type of evaluation is amplification, particularly mitigation, which is justified by the participants' desire of avoiding unpleasant issues. Augmenting serves a similar purpose.

The second most frequent type is appreciation, which is often used by the team leader to evaluate situations and information and also by Romanians, to evaluate objects and situations.

The two instances of affect are both produced by Romanians while the judgment ones, again two in number, occur in questions asked by Romanians of the team leader.

In terms of use, Romanian participants resort to mitigation and augmenting, while the foreign team leader makes frequent use of valuation.

The explanation is twofold – situational since a team leader is expected to pass judgement on what happens in the company but also cultural, in terms of Romanians' resorting more frequently to mitigation and affect.

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[1]The data were collected as part of a CNCSIS-funded project whose aim was to identify communicative and cultural practices specific to two multinational companies in the area of Braşov. The whole corpus of data consisted of about 14 hours of spoken interactions in English, out of which this telephone conference is a part. The conference was audio-recorded and then transcribed.

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