AVOIDING DISAGREEMENT IN ROMANIAN CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE: THE USE OF DIMINUTIVES

Diana Hornoiu

Abstract: The paper examines the role of *diminutives*, a subclass of *softeners*, in Romanian conversational discourse as *positive politeness devices* for avoiding disagreement. Like many other pragmatic particles softeners are *multifunctional*. In addition to *mitigating* the imposition of face-threatening acts, softeners (diminutives being no exception) tend to serve another equally important interactional function: that of expressing *shared knowledge* thereby offering the addressee the opportunity to provide support and understanding, i.e., to show that both speaker and addressee are on the same wavelength. By inviting shared knowledge between speaker and addressee softeners become instrumental in avoiding disagreement. The function served by diminutives in the excerpts analysed in this paper is to stress the *emotional bond* among the participants in the interaction, rather than being intended as purely descriptive items that indicate the smallness of the referent. These affective connotations thus shift from applying to one lexical item to applying to the whole conversational encounter, which turns them into markers of small talk.

Key words: conversation analysis, diminutives, positive politeness, softeners, small talk

1. Preliminary remarks

The use of hedges is one of the *negative politeness* strategies identified by Brown and Levinson (1987). Hedges are used to redress various kinds of face threatening acts (such as criticism, complaints, requests, suggestions, etc) or to strengthen the force of other acts that may be seen as beneficial to the addressee (e.g. promises). They may also be used to stress speaker's *commitment to the truth of their utterance* or to suggest that *they are not taking full responsibility for the truth* of their utterance, in which case they become simple yet efficient devices for **avoiding disagreement** with the addressee. Hedges are important devices used in marking topic changes. Such changes are face threatening and therefore are often done off record, the use of hedging serving precisely this purpose rather than signalling the speaker's lack of confidence. In such cases hedges redress the imposition on the addressee's face perhaps partially apologise for it (Brown and Levinson 1987).

Hedges vary greatly not only in terms of form, but also with regard to the functions they serve. Hedges have been grouped into **softeners** and **intensifiers**, with softeners *mitigating the force of the imposition* in at least the two ways stated above and intensifiers *aggravating the impact* of the face threatening act.

2. The use of softeners

One positive politeness conversational strategy, i.e. *exaggerate interest, approval, sympathy with H*, leads S to exaggerate and this is often manifested by employing *emphatic stress* and *extreme case formulations*. Thus apart from its self-disclosing nature that accounts for women's consistent use of *hedges*, all-female discourse is particularly rich in exaggerated intonation, emphatic stress as well as extreme case formulations like *marvellous, extraordinary, wonderful divine, delightful absolutely, incredible, completely, etc.* Nevertheless, in light of the desire to agree, this element of exaggeration is risky unless the speaker is certain of the addressee's opinion on the topic. Therefore one characteristic device

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in positive politeness is to hedge[1] these extremes by using **softeners**, making thus one's own opinion safely vague (Edwards 2000) and thereby avoiding disagreement. The use of softeners becomes a powerful device for saving both speakers' face.

However, like many other pragmatic particles softeners are *multifunctional*. It is not always clear whether the basic function of *softerners* is to modify the propositional content or the illocutionary force in order to avoid or minimize interactional face threats (Sifianou 1999: 164). In addition to *mitigating* the imposition of face-threatening acts, a function mainly characteristic of societies with negative politeness orientation, we can safely argue that in societies with positive politeness orientation softeners tend to serve another equally important interactional function: that of expressing **shared knowledge**, albeit to a limited extent, thereby offering the addressee the opportunity to provide *support, understanding, participation*, in other words, to show that both speaker and addressee are *on the same wavelength*. **Softeners** include *diminutives*, *tag questions*, and a variety of *other devices* that enable the speaker to weaken or qualify the force of an extreme case formulation so as to invite shared knowledge and thus to avoid disagreement. In what follows we will focus on **diminutives**, a subclass of *softeners*. This paper addresses excerpts of naturally occurring conversation with a view to establishing the function of diminutives in *all-female conversational discourse.*

3. Data collection and methodology

The excerpts are grouped in two sets of audio-recorded data gathered in Constanta and in Bucharest. Both sets are uncontrolled samples of face-to-face naturally occurring interaction. The analysis presented in this study is based primarily on a study of our own corpus, henceforth referred to as the **Constanța corpus** (Hornoiu 2007). The Constanta set is part of our own research project comprising ten hours of both mixed and same-sex naturally occurring conversation gathered over the last six years with a view to exploring the speaking practices of Romanian women and men in both formal and informal settings[2]. The participants include twenty-four individuals (twenty females and four males), whose ages ranged from thirteen to sixty-four. In addition to the interactions belonging in the Constanta sample/corpus, this paper also examines one excerpt taken from the corpus of spoken Romanian established at the Romanian Language Department, Faculty of Letters, University

[1] According to Brown and Levinson (1978: 150), "a hedge is a particle, word, or phrase that modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or noun phrase in a set; it says of that membership that it is partial, or true only in certain respects, or that it is more true and complete than perhaps might be expected". In general their function is to to soften the force of the face threatening acts. Brown and Levinson (1978) argue that 'hedging can be achieved in indefinite numbers of surface forms' (Brown and Levinson 1978: 151) and they group these surface forms into two classes *weakeners* (mainly acting as tentativizers) and *strengtheners* (mainly acting as emphatic items).

[2] My primary concern in gathering the data on informal conversation has been to avoid the constraints inherent in a one-to-one interview where the interviewer is present. Therefore I have chosen not to be present while the informants were engaged in conversation hoping that the constraints produced by the informants' knowledge that they are being observed can thus be alleviated. I asked some of the participants to pair up with their same-sex best friend and talk about 'stuff' in a familiar setting; the topic for discussion, however, was up to my informants. The choice to group them in dyads rather than in triads or in even larger groups was made with the view to avoiding the technical problem of recording each speaker on a different track. On the other hand, I have chosen to interview best friends because I hold the view that the closest we can come to getting natural speech in an interview situation is by interviewing groups of peer. This type of interview is the context most conducive to obtaining casual speech since the normal patterns of group interaction can direct attention away from the tape recorder.

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of Bucharest[3]. The Bucharest set is used as a controlled sample to show that the phenomena under discussion are not restricted to our data set. Throughout the paper names are fictionalised to protect participants' identity.

The excerpts in the present study are analysed within the framework of **conversation analysis**[4]. Within this body of research, social life is viewed as being constituted at the micro-level of social interaction. Thus the major focus of concern within conversation analysis is on the interpretive and inferential processes whereby interactants acting in real time are able to strategize their own actions within a negotiative process to achieve their desired social meanings, including their identities, footings and alignments with others.

4. Diminutives in Romanian conversational discourse

Romanian is a morphologically rich language, both inflectionally and derivationally. Among the derivational processes we can mention the production of **diminutives** by means of special types of suffixes. Morphologically, diminutives are produced in Romanian from a variety of word classes, although the most productive class of all is that of nouns. Sometimes the same stem can be given either one (e.g. *-ut*; *-el*) or another (e.g. *-şor*; *-aş*) diminutive suffix (for instance, *puiut*, *puişor*; *băieţel*, *băieţaş*); occasionally the diminutive suffix may indicate sex; for instance, pisi 'small cat' can be either male or female, but pisoi or pisoias 'small cat' is male and pisicută 'small cat', female only. It is worth noting that some diminutive forms are produced through the addition of more than one diminutive suffix, as in *pisic→pisoi→ pisoiaş* ('small cat').

As the term suggests, the primary function of **diminutives** is to express the idea of smallness. However, they also carry a number of affective connotations ranging from 'endearment to tenderness through mild belittlement or deprecation to outright derogation and insult' (Haas 1978: 82).

Diminutives frequently accompany various classes of address forms. In Romanian, however, the use of diminutives may be extended beyond their function as address forms. Perhaps the most interesting feature of diminutives in Romanian is that, although they mainly concern morphological alternations at word-level, they can also be used in ways that affect the force of *the whole utterance* or *interaction*. A consistent use of diminutives is characteristic of positively polite conversations, especially among women, where they function as an *overall endearment for the topic of the interaction*. Thus diminutives can be freely added to inanimate nouns as well as adjectives and adverbs when *no* indication of smallness is involved or implied. Under such circumstances they function as **markers of small talk**, rather than purely descriptive items that indicate the smallness of the referent.

Consider excerpts (1) and (2) which are part of an interaction between friends. Both excerpts illustrate adults' use of diminutives to indicate social relationships[5].

In excerpt (1) Maria is admiringly describing a pair of trousers Iulia has recently bought:

(1)

1 Maria : şi sînt d-ăia
and they're that kind

[3] For further details on the corpus and its construction see Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu (2002).
[4] In other formulations, this approach is also referred to as interactional sociolinguistics (Scollon 2001).
[5] Excerpts (1) and (2) have been taken from the *Constanta Corpus of spoken Romanian* (Hornoiu 2007).

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2 Iulia: sînt cu **brăd*uț***=
they've got a fir tree (dim.) pattern
3 Maria: =**lărg*uți*** nu?
loose (dim), aren't they?
4 Iulia : da
yes
5 Maria : sînt un pic evazați [….]
they're a bit flared
6 Maria : şi ăia îți vin- şi ăştia ăştia ştii cu ce merg ?
those fit you – and these, do you know what they go with?
7 Iulia : mhm ?
mhm ?
8 Maria : cu ăia ai tăi de iarnă ăia închişi chiar la culoarea asta
with the winter ones you've got, the dark ones, exactly this colour
9 Iulia : care de **[**iarnă ?
which winter ones?
10 Maria : **[ghet*uțele***[6]
the boots (dim.)

In this excerpt Maria's use of diminutives in lines 3 and 10 conveys *endearment* and *sympathy* towards a particular item and enables her to extend these feelings towards the addressee-owner[7].

In excerpt (2) Maria, who is paying a visit to her friend, is offered in line 1 a helping of spaghetti which she declines in line 2. In line 3 Iulia describes the spaghetti as having been made with *cărniță de pui* 'poultry-**dim**.'

(2)

1 Iulia: nu vrei spaghete?
won't you have some spaghetti?
2 Maria: vai lasă-mă că sînt
oh, don't tell me! I've grown
3 Iulia: a facut alina nişte spaghete cu **cărn*iță*** de pui
alina made some sphagetti with poultry-dim
4 Maria: **[**e::::::
e ::::

[6] The transcription conventions used for transcribing the conversations included in this paper as well as in the corpus on which our research has been based are adopted with some changes from Ochs, Schegloff and Thompson (1996: 461-65). One important difference between these conventions and the ones cited in the present is that capital letters are neither used in the beginning of turns nor for new turn constructional units. Nor are they used at the beginning of proper nouns. Capital letters are used to indicate some form of emphasis. The conversations have been transcribed phonetically. Thus we depart from some of the current spelling rules that apply to the letters **î/â** in medial position. We use the letter a only in such words as *român/românesc/românește/România*. Similarly, we use two variants for the verbal forms of *a fi* (to be) in first person singular and plural and in second and third persons plural (sînt/sunt; sîntem/suntem; sînteți/sunteți; sînt/sunt) depending on how our informants pronounce these forms.

[7] When speakers use diminutives to refer to their own possessions, achievements, or characteristics, the connotations may be those of affection but may also be attempts to reduce the possibility of the utterance being interpreted as self-praise (Sifianou 1999: 167).

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5 Iulia: **[**n-ai mîncat în viaţa ta aşa ceva
you've never eaten something like this

Since there is no imposition to be minimized in excerpt (1), whereas in excerpt (2) the imposition due to the sequence offer-refusal is kept to a minimum given the fact that the excerpt is part of a spate of small talk between two long-time friends and university colleagues, the diminutives in these two examples indicate *in-group solidarity*.

Diminutives are especially frequent in *everyday informal speech* where they mainly involve routine actions dealing with the exchange of 'free goods'. In such environments they serve various *positive politeness* needs, as the excerpts above have shown.

Diminutives are not usually used when there are status differences between the interactants (Sifianou 1999: 167) presumably because the conflict between intimacy and status makes diminutives expressing intimacy and familiarity inappropriate in interactions where participants are of different social status. However, excerpt (3) which comes from an encounter with a dressmaker illustrates the use of diminutives in an interaction characterised by *differentials* between interactants in socioeconomic status[8]. Here various diminutive suffixes added to adjectives and nouns occur in an extended spate of task-oriented talk and move from the thinness of the fabric, to the skirt, to the undershirt, to the thickness of the fabric.

(3)
1 C: da' ăsta CE –are
but WHAT'S wrong with this one?
2 E: e mai **subţir*el*** poate şi se ia pă picior
maybe it's thinner-dim. and it fits on the leg
3 B: e mai **subţir*ică*** […]
it's thinner-dim
4 A: nu mi-am dat seama că-i materialu subţire
I haven't realized the fabric is thin
5 B: da' ce eu mi-am dat seama? e materialu' subţire
you think I realized? the fabric is thin
6 A: îl făceai tot cu fustă
you would have made it with a skirt as well
7 B: da
yes
8 A: tot cu **fust*iţă*** […]
with a skirt-dim. as well
9 A: i-o-ndoi doar un pic **tănţica**
you fold it just a little tanta-dim.
10 C: îhî
yep
11 B: da da
yes yes
12 C: păi da da' mi-am luat şi **maie*uţu*** ala aşa să port pantalonii cu **maie*uţu*** ăla aşa [….]
well, yes! but I've also got that top-dim. to wear the trousers with that top-dim.

[8] Excerpt (3) has been taken from Ionescu-Ruxandoiu (2002).

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13 A: îl croieşti mai larg mult mai larg spatele **[tănțica**
you tailor it looser, much looser at the back, Tanta-dim
14 B: **[**mult mai larg SPA**[**TELE
the BACK much looser
15 C: **[**LARG cît cuprinde
as LOOSE as possible
16 B: da da
yes yes
17 A: îhî [...]
yep
18 E: nu da' materialu subțire întotdeauna se ia pă
but the thin fabric always fits on
19 B: da da
yes yes
20 E: şi cînd e mai **gros*uț*** el stă mai **lărg*uț*** [...]
and when it's thicker-dim. it falls looser-dim.
21 B: chiar nu mi-am dat seama. cu de toate am lucrat
I really didn't realize it I've worked with all the kinds
22 da' uite nu mi-am dat seama că se poate întîmpla aşa
but, look! I haven't realized that this might happen
23 A: BINE că mai are material şi facem spatele din ăla
GOOD thing we've got some fabric left and we make the back from that
24 B: da. păi da' bine că n-am scos mînecile că n-am scos mînecile şi::
yes well, it's a good thing I haven't made the sleeves, I haven't made the sleeves and
25 E: astea ies **[**din
these will come out from
26 B: **[**da
yes
27 C: din astelalte
from these other ones
28 B: aşa şi cu **guler*aşu***-ăla
like this, and with that collar-dim.
29 A: şi uite că vine frumos [...]
and see? it looks nice
30 A: nu **tănțica** dacă-i faci spatele un pic mai mare
no, Tanta-dim. if you make the back a bit larger
31 ai să vezi că-şi dă drumu
you'll see, it will loosen
32 B: da da păi d-aia zic
well, yeah! that's what I was saying

Since interactants perform specific roles, requests are not perceived as impositions, and diminutives show *readiness for co-operation* in a friendly atmosphere.

On the other hand, there is some imposition involved in this excerpt which stems from the *social distance* between the service provider and the clients due to social status and age differences; these differentials in socio-economic status are acknowledged and mitigated through other means: the asymmetrical use of polite and diminutivized forms of address. The redressive force of diminutives stems from their association with in-group language; this

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feature enables the interactants to express their wish to establish a successful encounter where they are co-operating members.

5. Concluding remarks

Clearly the function served by diminutives in the excerpts analysed in this paper is to stress the *emotional bond* between the participants in the interaction, rather than being intended as literal descriptions of their referents as being small. These affective connotations thus shift from applying to one lexical item to applying to the whole conversational encounter. This renders the *whole encounter* (and thereby the *relationship* in general) as being **solidarity-oriented.**

It has been argued that "rich systems of diminutives seem to play a crucial role in cultures in which emotions in general and affection in particular is expected to be shown overtly" (Wierzbicka 1985: 168). As the excerpts analysed so far have shown Romanian women's preference for a consistent use of diminutives is indicative of their tendency to value spontaneity and to express both their negative and positive emotions overtly. Thus, diminutives appear to be instrumental in facilitating the expression of feelings. By contrast, the Anglo-Saxon culture does not encourage such an unrestrained display of emotions and feelings. Consequently, the English system of diminutives has not been developed to the same extent, nor are diminutives so extensively used.

Diana Hornoiu
Ovidius University, Constanța
Diana.hornoiu@seanet.ro

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