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Mitigating Devices within the Context of Two-Way Mediated Shop Conversations

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Abstract. In this paper, we will present our three-month-long study aimed at investigating the concept of relational language and mitigating devices and how such mitigating devices are used within the context of two-way mediated shop conversations. We will also see how relational language and mitigating devices help speakers establish and maintain good relationship. Our study results show that this relationship is maintained by the avoidance or reduction of unwelcome effects a speech act may have on others within a communication context. The communication context of this paper and the pertaining study are related to the recordings of agent-customer communications in English language. We will show some of the most representative examples found in our corpus and, through those examples, we will be able to see how agents of one telecommunication company in Montenegro[1] use different mitigating devices in order to sell a product or a service, entice a customer, or resolve a potentially face-threatening, problematic or volatile situation.

Keywords: power relations, discourse rights, perlocution, deixis, hedging

1. Introduction

In this paper, we will present our study, conducted over the period of three months. The main aim of the study was to collect the data about and analyse two-way communications. In this case, these communications took place between agents[2] and customers. We wanted to analyse how agents and/or customers use perlocutionary acts in order to make each other more lenient in terms of each other's judgements and reactions. Those perlocutionary acts are very important in making it more acceptable for the hearer to face criticism, bad news and obey a command, albeit those commands are always expressed as polite requests. The main inspiration

1 The name is removed due to legal requirements.
2 Generic name for this company's employees working with customers.

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behind this study is the fact that our everyday communication may contain more or less mitigating devices. What is also interesting is that those mitigating devices are not always used consciously because they have become entrenched in our personalities due to different culture- and society-driven processes. Within the context of the study design, our main hypothesis is that shop conversations will mostly rely on indirectness, hedging, approximation, vagueness, and tentativeness in terms of the utilized mitigating devices. The use of mitigating devices means speakers will have to decode each other's messages through the inferential process, which will, almost invariably, facilitate both addressee-oriented and speaker-oriented distancing and reservations. By using the above-mentioned devices, all speakers can preserve face if they perceive the decoded message as threatening. In order to test our hypothesis, we have collected a corpus of agent-customer conversations in English, but before we delve into a brief explanation of the corpus collection and transcription process, we will turn our attention to what scientific works served as the theoretical foundation of this paper.

2. Theoretical background and scholarly literature

The theoretical framework of this paper is broadly based on Erving Goffman's concept of "face" (Goffman 1959) and the Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson's Politeness Theory (Brown–Levinson 1987). In short, the first theory describes face as the manner in how people interact in daily life since everybody is, to some degree, concerned with what other people think of him or her. This is the reason why the majority of social interactions aim at preserving one's face. The second theory revolves around the way speakers use different communication strategies in order to achieve a desirable communication outcome and use the concept of face to explain the foundations of politeness. Additionally, authors make distinction between positive politeness, where participants show prosocial concern for the other's face, and negative politeness, which is primarily used to acknowledge that the other's face is threatened. All of these concepts will be further explored in our paper with the addition of some other communication parameters, which will be described in Section 4.

The majority of authors (Agar 1983, Drew–Heritage 1992, Drew–Sorjonen 1997, Maynard–Schaeffer–Freese 2011, Lamerichs–te Molder 2011) dealing with institutional discourse tried to pinpoint the particularities of this kind of institutional talk. Almost invariably, they came to the conclusion that almost every institutional talk has to have more or less clearly defined communication goal(s) or outcome(s). Additionally, this form of communication represents an asymmetrical communication in terms of "differences in the distribution of institutional power or expert knowledge between the participants" (Koester 2010). And the third major point

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presented in other authors' papers is that the concept of politeness is the cornerstone of this type of communication serving as "social glue". Our paper will confirm all of the above-named conclusions. The main difference between our results and the conclusions presented in the papers mentioned above is the fact that agents were, in the majority of cases, immediately ready to relinquish their institutional power if they deemed it to be beneficial for the communication, i.e. if they understood that this was the only way of retaining an existing or obtaining a new customer.

3. Corpus collection and transcription

In order to be able to properly analyse the above-mentioned hypothesis, we needed to record a spoken corpus, which had to be transcribed later on. After obtaining all the permissions from the telecommunication company and the competent state agencies, we were able to record the pertaining data. We needed a microphone that would be able to pick up sound from the front and back, while rejecting sounds from its sides. This is why we opted for a bidirectional microphone which has a figure-8 polar/pick up pattern. In this manner, we were able to reduce any background noise to the minimum, without additional post-processing. Relatively speaking, the front side of the microphone was turned towards the agent, while the back side was facing the customer(s). The speech of each participant was recorded at a sampling rate of 44100 Hz (16 bit) using the Creative E-MU 0404 USB Audio/MIDI Interface and Adobe Audition™ for editing audio content. The agent had been notified they would be recorded and had been instructed to explain a customer s/he would be recorded and ask for the customer's written consent. Once those formalities were over, the agent would press the record button, and this procedure would be repeated with each English-speaking customer. Since the target language for our study was English, an additional condition was that all communication needed to be in English, so domestic customers were practically excluded. All the digital recordings were transferred on a laptop and saved as MP3 files. As we have already mentioned, we used Adobe Audition™ to edit the transferred audio files. The files were edited in terms of the removal of excessively long hesitation markers, non-speech sounds, and background noise. This editing phase was followed by a transcription phase. Those audio files were transcribed into written English using Soundscriber[3] software. All the transcribed files were saved as ASCII text files in the same folder as the original sound files. Four transcribers transcribed the whole recorded material independently, and then their transcriptions were compared and corrected for errors and discrepancies. The transcribed corpus was annotated for certain paralinguistic elements, and different metadata were input in

3 https://www.softpedia.com/get/Multimedia/Audio/Audio-Players/SoundScriber.shtml (downloaded on: 07.15.2020).

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order to facilitate further analysis. This was done since the process of transcription inevitably removes certain paralinguistic elements such as tone and pitch of voice. And it has long been established that different tone and pitch of voice can convey completely different meanings and connotations. Furthermore, two transcribers inserted comments and remarks to signal that some utterances were simultaneous, overlapping or closer to latching. The other two transcribers commented on pauses and gaps between utterances, truncations, changes in pitch, rhythm, and tempo. In the end, we collected slightly more than 16 hours of "clean" recordings over the period of three months.

4. Pertinent communication model

In order to properly analyse our empirical data, we have to define the pertinent communication model. This model is mainly based on the amended dyadic speaker-hearer model of communication which unfolds within the context of agent-customer encounters. In this particular context, the agent usually encodes a message and the customer decodes it, and the whole communication typically stays within the boundaries of an institutionalized form of talk. In terms of our paper, the communicative parameters are as follows:

– Agents traditionally have more discourse rights in terms of turn-taking and opening and closing topics.

– Participants typically do not know each other, and there are usually two people involved in the communication. Other people, if present, are often passivized.

– This passive audience reacts from time to time in order to show their support or dissatisfaction (long waiting times, etc.), but such interruptions usually have no impact on the outcome of the communication between the agent and the customer.

In our particular case, we have to take into account the following additional parameters:

– Within this environment, there may be a relatively high number of dissatisfied customers, which makes this audience potentially volatile.

– Agents are aware of this situation and must always be ready to reduce the intensity of a potentially unpleasant or even violent situation through face preservation, hedging, reassurance, or indirectness of speech acts.

– Even though they can exercise more discourse rights, agents waive those rights very often in order to appease the customer if the situation necessitates such behaviour. Even if there is no necessity per se, agents may decide not to exercise their discourse rights to their fullest extent in order to attract a potential (new) customer.

– Even though this is formally an institutionalized form of talk since agents speak and act on behalf of their company, whenever possible they will try to present

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themselves as "warm", "customer-friendly", "family-friendly" persons, rather than persons who simply serve as representatives of such companies. This is because, in this particular context, almost all relational transactions must have at least some amount of transactional elements since the end goal of both the company and the customer is to have an agreement about the provision of certain services or purchase of some devices. Therefore, within this communication environment, it is almost impossible to talk about pure relational interpersonal transactions.

– All agents are from Montenegro, but the customers are usually foreigners or at least they were not born in Montenegro. This makes any communication more challenging since there is a high chance the speakers will have different perceptions of what constitutes, for instance, a face-threatening act and varied levels of directness tolerance. Given the fact that for the majority of customers English is not their native tongue, coupled with the previous statement of having speakers from heterogeneous backgrounds, it is more probable to have communication breakdowns.[4] Therefore, agents need to exercise an additional level of caution in order to avoid any miscommunication or inappropriate situation.

– This paper deals with face-to-face communication, so our corpus analysis and interpretation needed to take into account paralinguistic or non-verbal cues, which add a personal touch to face-to-face communication, making it an inextricable part of our corpus analysis.

5. Mitigating devices found in the corpus

The analysis of the abovementioned transcribed conversations between agents and customers showed us very quickly that the main concept around which everything revolves is the concept of politeness, which is not surprising. Even though agents and customers come from different countries, which by itself entails a whole set of other differences, both sides are usually able to negotiate very quickly and find a common ground, which is used to facilitate further communication and achieve a mutually acceptable outcome. This common linguistic ground is occupied by relational language and its main pragmatic categories such as: expression of politeness, indirectness of speech act, parenthetical verbs, non-specific reference to the speaker/hearer, and hedges (Cheepen 2000). Let us take a look into some of the most prominent (in terms of their frequency and communication impact) mitigating devices we have found in our corpus.

Indirectness was a very prominent mitigating force found in our corpus since it is almost inextricably related (but not identical) to politeness. For the purposes of our paper, indirectness of speech act is defined as the divergence between literal

4 This is why our examples in the text below contain some grammar mistakes, which were not corrected by the author's team in order to preserve dialogue authenticity as much as possible.

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and intended meaning. The more interpretive decoding needs to be done by the hearer, the more a speech act is indirect and the more it diverges from its literal meaning (Grainger–Mills 2016). Indirectness is usually linguistically expressed as indirect directives containing a hedged performative. This hedged performative almost invariable calls the hearer to perform a desired activity in a more discrete manner. Direct requests are face-threatening, and any agent wants to avoid a face-threatening situation because of an undesirable outcome such as loss of a customer, declined contract terms and conditions, filing a formal complaint, etc. Additionally, agents need to use indirectness not only because of their personal politeness but because they speak on behalf of the company, and any company wants to be perceived as having polite employees. On the other side, customers want to be polite since they also need to complete a business transaction, but we must not forget that the majority of customers are polite by themselves, regardless of the aforementioned business transaction. Moreover, in terms of the discourse rights, even though agents more often than not relinquish some of their discourse rights, customers are usually willing to "return" those rights to agents in order to acknowledge that agents have more knowledge about this topic and that agents' input or advice is more than welcome:

(1) C:[5] I would like to have this data plan, but if you know for a better option, I am listening.

A:[6] If you want to listen to me, I would recommend you to take… (proceeds with the explanation of different data plans)

This customer's willingness to return some of the discourse rights shows her readiness to establish and maintain satisfactory relations between her and the agent. Such satisfactory relations usually lead to a change in one's attitude, which facilitates both relational and transactional communication.

One part of the recorded customers came to the agents in order to file a formal complaint in terms of the company's services (bills were higher than expected, no service or broken down service, etc.). In almost all instances, agents quickly reacted to the complaint of a disgruntled customer and employed different mitigating devices in order to de-escalate a potentially unpleasant situation.

(2) C: I want to complain about your TV service. My picture constantly freezes and I cannot watch any HD content.

A: Right, let me take a look at your account, and then we may be able to find the source of the problem together.

5 Customer.

6 Agent.

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In this particular situation, the customer was very direct because he wanted to clearly show his dissatisfaction and to elicit a direct response from the agent. The agent opens her turn by using a discourse marker *right* in order to acknowledge she received the information and now would try to act accordingly. Additionally, by using a modal verb, *may*, she wanted to imply potentiality or limited authority to do something. Expressing potentiality is very important for agents since they cannot immediately know the root cause of customers' problems, and when they get to know the reason, it may turn out that the implementation of the solution to the problems may be completely outside of their control due to some technical reasons (for instance, the IT Department needs to solve the problem or a field technician needs to react, etc.). Last but not least, by using an adverb, *together*, the agent wanted to establish a common ground and to show the customer they are together in this problem.

Apart from indirectness, face preservation, avoidance of face-threatening situations, and politeness, our corpus also contains vagueness and approximation. Agents are almost always walking a thin line between having to be precise and resorting to vagueness and approximations. Being precise is one of the main prerequisites of being an agent. Customers need precise information, for instance, before they want to sign a contract, choose their data plan, etc. On the other side, as we have stated in the text above, agents cannot always know all the information off-hand, and certain kinds of solutions are simply outside of their control since, for instance, a field engineer has to go to a specific location and resolve the issue. In this particular case, agents do not know precisely when that issue will be solved, so vagueness and approximation become acceptable mitigating devices in this context. The most frequent examples of vagueness in our corpus were:

– linguistic units of the collocation of the node phrase *sort of* and an exponent of vagueness, which is usually expressed as a noun or an adjective;

– various expressions of modality (could, might, perhaps, probably, etc.).

(3) C: What is the difference between my data plan and this new data plan you are offering me now?

A: Well, it is sort of an improvement, but let me give you more specific details.

(4) C: Can I get this phone? (pointing to the phone)

A: That is just a sample we display in our shop, but I might be able to procure one for you.

In terms of vagueness and approximation, the following two situations were the most prevalent in our corpus. Agents use vagueness in order to give themselves more time to acquire more precise information (by searching the database, calling their colleagues, etc.) or to give a vague promise which is, for the time being, sufficiently good to keep the new customer happy or to retain an existing one. In this context, the

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meaning is jointly interpreted by both the agent and the customer without coming to a concrete conclusion. This is obviously only a temporarily valid situation since, sooner or later, there has to be some sort of solution, but more often than not both agents and customers are satisfied with this kind of temporary solution until a permanent solution is finally negotiated. In 28 instances in our corpus, customers returned to the same shop to check if the permanent solution was available, and in almost all situations agents drastically reduced their vagueness because of two reasons:

– The issue had been successfully resolved or cannot be resolved. Either way, there is some definitive information available.

– During the first encounter, vagueness was an acceptable option, but for the second encounter vagueness can aggravate the customer to the point s/he wants to terminate the contract, file a formal complaint, or perform some other face-threatening act.

(5) C: I have already contacted you about my problem in (name of the village and address). My Internet is very slow.

A: Can I get your ID card. Let me check the status of the ticket (checking the database). Yes, the engineers are in the field and the problem is with a high-voltage cable that runs very close to our installations. This causes interference… (proceeds with a more detailed explanation) … we should be able to fix it in one or two days…

In the second example, we can see the instance of partially vague explanation. The situation is slightly clearer since they know the cause of the problem, but they cannot guarantee what is a precise timeframe for the completion of the work and the restoration of the degraded service.

In terms of other categories of vague and proximate language, *Figure 1* shows their numbers in our corpus.

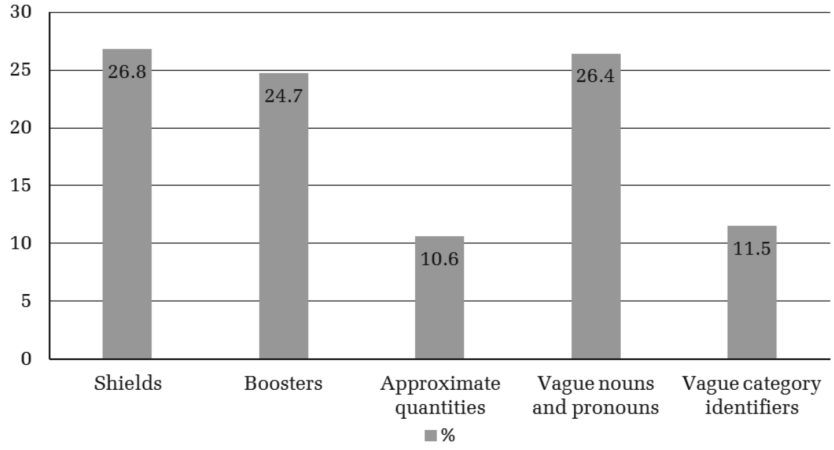


Figure 1. *Other categories of vague and approximate language*

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In *Figure 1*, we can see that shields (I hope/think/believe), boosters (very, really, honestly), and vague nouns and pronouns (things, stuff, someone) are almost equally present in our corpus. The main pragmatic function of these vague categories is to be used as an interactional strategy, to be deliberately vague, and protect the face of all participants (Hyland 2017). Example:

(6) A: I believe this is the best plan for you because it combines all services in one bill.
C: That is, maybe, the best option, and what about…

However, as the conversation between the agent and the customer progressed, vagueness made room for more specific and concrete expressions in almost all instances, which gives the precise amount of information suitable to a given context:

(7) A: This plan is a bit more expensive than the previous one, and you will have to sign a contract extension.
C: How much more expensive?
A: €1.9 with VAT and (interrupted)
C: What's the length of contract extension?
A: 24 months
C: Hmm, I don't know…

Other types of mitigating devices were much less frequent, but we will mention one more relational language feature which we find very interesting, and that is endearment. For the purposes of this paper, endearment is to be understood as an expression used in a dyadic and interactive context which speakers employ in order to remove almost all social distance and to emphasize one's willingness to have a more intimate, shared communication ground. Even though participants do not need to use endearment in order to complete the transactional goals of language, some participants used this form of mitigation in order to employ this kind of situated politeness (Jucker–Smith–Ludge 2003, O'Keeffe 2006). How effective this and other mitigating strategies combined together can be in terms of getting the participants closer can be seen from the following examples:

(8) C: Hello darling, I want to buy a new phone, but I don't know which one.
A: **I will be more than happy to assist you**. Do you want to buy it for you or somebody else?
C: **Lovely, that's very kind of you.** I want a new phone for myself.
A: We have this **really nice** model, and it is not expensive.
… (explaining the features and other details) …
A: **Would you please** sign here. **Thanks**. (gives her the contract)

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A: **Right**, that is one hundred sixty-nine euros.
C: **There you go.** (gives him her credit card)
A: **Thanks!** …
C: **Thank you, darling!**
A: (Gives her the phone) **Have a lovely day**!
C: Likewise, **bye**.

If we remove all mitigating devices (**in bold**) from this short conversation:

(9) C: I want to buy a new phone, but I don't know which one.
A: Do you want to buy it for you or somebody else?
C: I want a new phone for myself.
A: We have this model, and it is not expensive.
… (explaining the features and other details) …
A: …sign here. (giving her the contract)
A: That is one hundred sixty-nine euros.
C: (Gives him her credit card)
A: (Gives her the phone)

Thus, we get an exceptionally awkward or even rude conversation reduced to a bare minimum and devoid of any closeness and exceptionally self-distancing. This kind of conversation does nothing in terms of establishing and maintaining good relations with the other interlocutor, and that is the reason this manner of speaking is non-existent in our corpus, as almost invariably it would not accomplish anything.

The third very prominent mitigating device in our corpus is hedging. With this device, we will come full circle in terms of all mitigating devices since hedging can serve the purpose of introducing indirectness, politeness, vagueness, and approximation into one's conversation. The term was coined by Lakoff in 1972 in order to describe a semantically-driven process whereby words, phrases, chunks, and expressions become vaguer than they would usually be. Ironically, hedging does not readily lend itself to any definition, and it encompasses a wide variety of different forms.

Table 1. *List of examples of hedges in English found in our corpus*

Form	***Example***
Adverbs/Adjectives	approximately, occasionally, generally
Agentless passive	Many customers were affected.
Concessive conjunctions	though, while, whereas, even though
Conditional subordinators	assuming that, such as, given that
Epistemic verbs	to suggest, to seem, to appear
Hedged performative	use of modal as a hedged performative

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Form	***Example***
Impersonal pronouns	one, it
Indirect speech acts	Could you check the PSTN, please?
Introductory phrases	believe, it is our view that
Modal adjectives	likely, possible, probable
Modal adverbs	probably, practically, presumably
Modal noun	claim, assumption, suggestion
Modal verbs	can, could may, might
Negative question with positive hedged assertion	Didn't he already finished that?
Reversal tag	isn't she?

These structures usually operate as face-saving devices (Channell 1990); they indicate the degree of the interlocutor's commitment to the truth value of his/her proposition (Markkanen–Schroder 1997) and serve as frequently used pragmatic markers. In our corpus, hedging was primarily used to exercise caution and prudence and as a rhetorical strategy. As in the text above, agents may be committed to truth-telling, but the current and/or objective circumstance may prevent them from fulfilling this commitment. This rhetoric strategy is usually employed when the issue a customer is complaining about is beyond the agent's immediate control:

(10) C: When can you fix the problem?

A: I presume we can close the ticket[7] in less than two to three hours, but I will have to check that with our back office.

C: Can you, please, do that because…

Without hedging, the customer would get the impression that the agent is certain the matter would be resolved in two to three hours. If this was not resolved within this timeframe, the agent would be running the risk of having another dissatisfied customer. However, with the sentence above, the agent hedged his statement with a modal verb, which belongs to the most common category of hedges found in our corpus. The most common forms of hedges which we encountered while analysing our corpus were: modal verbs and verbs with modal meanings (52.3%), evaluative relative clauses (22.1%), restrictive adverbs (20.6%), syntactic choices pertaining to question forms (2%), stance adverbs (1%), false starts (1%), and others (1%). Thus, modal and modal-related structures were the most dominant forms of expressing a hedged context. These structures are usually expressed as these forms (examples from our corpus):

7 Agent's jargon meaning "solve the problem".

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Modalized questions:
Could you, please, look at the rear side of your STB and locate an on-off switch?

Modalized statements:
We should be able to transfer our number through a new service called Number Portability.

Modalized offers and volitional modality:
Would you like me to find a personalized offer for you?

Weak illocutionary forces:
I suspect the problem lies with interference, but let me check.

Hedging a speech act verb:
What I can tell you is that the courier service will deliver the item during this week.

Tokens of politeness to the other participant:
I hope we can agree this phone is better for you.

Questioning the completeness of the knowledge of weakening a statement:
As far as I can see in our database, you are not eligible for a new phone until…

It is no surprise that modal verbs are the dominant force for carrying a more or less hedged meaning since, "even when modal forms convey speaker-external meanings, these are often given interpersonal significance by the particular context in which they appear, usually as part of a tentativeness strategy" (Preisler 1986).

This tentativeness strategy is very important for the agents, and this is why, during the new agent training process, particular emphasis is placed on two elements: how to sell a service or a device and how to be pragmatically competent. This means agents need to be ready to convey a message with all of its nuances to the customers of different socio-cultural backgrounds. This is where hedging becomes a convenient mitigating device which can be used to attenuate the full illocutionary force and the full semantic value of a particular word, phrase, or structure (Strauss–Parastou 2014, Paul Gee 2017). On the other side, customers have more liberty in terms of being more or less direct and polite, while agents usually do not have that freedom.

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6. Conclusions

Through the abovementioned examples and analysis, we may safely conclude that agent-customer discourse is a very dynamic one. Agents need to deal with customers from different social backgrounds. Even the politest customer can become aggravated if they cannot get the service or device they desire. This is why agents need to know how to de-escalate potentially problematic situations by using different mitigating devices such as hedging, approximation, indirectness, vagueness, etc. Additional degree of unpredictability is brought about by an unusual situation in terms of discourse rights. Even though agents should be the prototypical power-role holders because they have the power to resolve the issue, procure a new device or service, a lot of customers are aware they can reverse these roles and take over some discourse rights. This is because if a customer is not satisfied, this may translate into less money for the company, which is an undesirable outcome. This is why within the context of our corpus discourse rights were relatively equal in distribution, and ritual brackets (openings, leaving, greeting, small talk, leave-taking, and closings) were usually jointly negotiated. The main purpose of this kind of discourse collaboration and creation of shared ground was to establish and maintain a good relationship and to avoid any face-threatening situation. In the majority of cases, both agents and customers showed pragmatic, contextual, and situational awareness. Concepts of indirectness, vagueness, politeness, and hedging were challenged only when an already disgruntled customer would be additionally aggravated by the lack of service or some similar situation. The abovementioned examples come from a small and specialized corpus of communication taking place within a specific environment. This form of communication has its own set of rules, which would probably be lost if this collection of transcribed texts was a sub-corpus of a much larger corpus, which should be understood as a compelling case for using small specialized corpora.

Two-way mediated shop conversations are ultimately a form of negotiation. In this form of conversation, conciliatory behaviour is not a weakness but a strategy to find a mutually acceptable outcome. In order to achieve that, both customers and agents use different types of mitigating strategies which enable them to communicate effectively in a language. However, it is an exceptionally thin line between proper and improper decoding of mitigating devices or even a failure to understand them, which may lead to communication failure or miscommunication. This is why the proper and contextually conscious use of mitigating devices can be considered a linguistic art. In our corpus, turns were not pre-allocated but tended to be short and often overlapping, where such overlapping literally supported the idea of the necessity to establish a common ground in order to have a more successful communication. Roles and goals were somewhat institutionalized and transactional in their nature, i.e. the main idea of the communication was to find

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more information about a specific problem or something similar, with an addition of other more affective elements which facilitate the communication process.

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