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Hedging Opinion in Romanian Conversational Discourse: The Use Of Softeners[2]

Abstract: *This corpus-based paper addresses the use of softeners in Romanian conversational discourse. It highlights two important interactional functions: (i) as devices for mitigating the imposition of face-threatening acts; (ii) as markers of shared knowledge. When they serve the latter function, softeners offer the addressee the opportunity to provide support, understanding, thus showing that both speaker and addressee are on the same wavelength*

Key words: *conversation analysis, extreme case formulation, face-threatening act, positive politeness, softener*

Aim and assumptions

Softeners have been divided into three main groups: **diminutives**, **tag questions**, and a variety of **other devices** that enable the speaker to weaken or qualify the force of the imposition. Elsewhere I analyzed the use of diminutives in Romanian conversational discourse and argued that their interactional function is to stress the emotional bond among participants in the interaction. These affective connotations shift from applying to a particular lexical item to the entire conversation, thus turning diminutives into markers of small talk (Hornoiu 2008, passim).

Like many other pragmatic particles, **softeners** are multifunctional. It is not always clear whether the basic function of softeners is to modify the propositional content or the illocutionary force in order to avoid or minimize interactional face threats (Sifianou 164). However, their functions cannot be restricted to signalling lack of confidence to mitigating the imposition of face-threatening acts. By applying a conversation analytic approach, our analysis will show that their **interactional function** is instrumental in constructing shared knowledge.

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[2] This work is part of the research project "Translations of American Myths, Icons and Brands in Post-Communist Romanian Culture (TRANSMIT)", supported by CNCSIS- UEFISCSU, Project number PN II – IDEI – 802/2009.

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Tag questions

It has been argued that tags enable speakers to mitigate the force of the speech act by sounding more tentative and less committed to the truth of the proposition. Lakoff (83) argues that 'tags have the effect of hedging – protecting a speaker from the consequences of his speech acts'. Lakoff (16-17) claims that a consistent use of tag questions enables speakers to avoid commitment and thus conflict. She adds that tags also signal that speakers are not really sure of themselves and might not even have views of their own; thus, according to Lakoff, a consistent use of tag questions is indicative of speakers' insecurity and of their need to seek confirmation from the addressee.

The Romanian system of tag questions includes two items, *nu-i așa* 'isn't it' and *nu* 'no', which are invariable in form and can collocate with any verb. In addition to these two items, Romanian uses token tags such as *ştii* 'you know', *înțelegi* 'you understand' and *vezi* 'you see'.

In **excerpt 1** Maria has been telling how she managed her final lesson during practicum. At this point she mentions one important aspect in her story, namely time management.

Excerpt 1

1 Maria: **ştii** că data trecută am am trecut peste– deci cum să spun eu am–
you know that last time I skipped over– so how shall I put it, I have -

2 nu mi-am calculat timpu' ca lumea ş**tii**
I didn't estimate my time properly, you know

3 Iulia: mhm
mhm

4 Maria: şi am intrat pe timpu' ( ) şi acuma acuma zic
and I took ( )'s time and so, I say to myself

5 hai să-mi pun mai puține activități **ştii**
I should choose fewer activities, you know

6 ca să mă încadrez în timp să nu mă trezesc iar că n-am timp
to finish on time and not end up running out of time again'

7 Iulia: mhm
mhm

8 Maria: şi mi-am pus prea **[**puține
and I chose too few

9 Iulia: **[**aoleu şi ce? ți s-au terminat prea repede?
ay and what happened? they were over too soon?

10 Maria: mi s-au terminat bine cu vreo două trei minute înainte **ştii**
they were over in time two or three minutes before the break, **you know**

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11 Iulia: mhm
Mhm

In lines (1) and (2) she mentions an instance when she had problems with time management as she had not allocated enough time for the activities she intended to do. Since she cannot be sure that Iulia knows of that experience she checks Iulia's knowledge with *stii că data trecută am am trecut peste deci cum să spun eu am nu mi-am calculat timpu' ca lumea stii* ('you know that last time I skipped so how shall I put it I didn't estimate my time properly you know'). In line (3) Iulia confirms receipt of information and then Maria moves on to another piece of new information telling about her final lesson when she chose fewer activities lest she should run out of time again. *You know/Stii* in line (5) occurs in direct quote which provides one of the main aspects of her story namely finding solutions to problems related to time management in teaching, and through which Maria's story may become understood as an instance of a more general situation. The third instance of *stii* 'you know' follows a third piece of new information in line (10) where she concludes that this time she has been successful in managing teaching time. Again Iulia acknowledges receipt of information by producing a minimal response in line (11).

Thus **excerpt 1** illustrates the use of *ştii* 'you know' to mark the transition from a state in which the addressee is not aware of a certain piece of information to a state when that piece of information becomes shared knowledge. The excerpt above shows the speaker as being oriented to establishing *common ground/opinion* and to enlist the addressee's agreement when such agreement is not otherwise forthcoming.

Once the information state is acknowledged to be verbally displayed, the marker by which such verbal displays are solicited functions not merely as a cognitive marker, but as an interactional marker (Schiffrin 1987: 273). Token tags such as you know far from being markers of insecurity and lack of assertiveness, as Lakoff claimed, are used to draw the addressee as a participant, into the conversation, reassuring the latter that the speaker cares about his opinions.

Token tags + minimal responses

We have seen that *stii* 'you know' brings about information states in which the speaker knows of speaker/hearer shared knowledge. Moreover it turns out with great regularity that, a marker of information state transition, *stii* 'you know' does not work alone. An important part of these transitions is for the addressee to acknowledge his receipt of information either by affirming that piece of information using *yeah, mhm, aha* or other minimal responses showing agreement or by marking its reception with *oh*. **Excerpt 2** illustrates this point.

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Excerpt 2

1 B: da↓ da' trebuie să mă hotăresc de fapt ce fac pentru că am: așa cam o turmă de iepuri
yes, but I've got to make up my mind what I'm going to do actually, 'cause I've got about a herd of rabbits

2 fiecare dată drumu-n altă direcție
every time running in different directions

3 A : așa eram și eu↑
I used to be like that too

4 B : și trebuie să mă hotăresc pe unde s-o iau↓ **știi↑**
and I've got to make up my mind which way to go, you know

5 A : **așa eram și eu↑**
I used to be like that too

When such markers of receipt of information are not provided, the speaker is likely to repeat that piece of information or to try again with a different bit of information (as in the initial part of excerpt 1: lines 1 and 2). This suggests that *you know* is complementary in function to the marker *oh* or to minimal responses which display the addressee as an information recipient, i.e. one that is actively involved in the production of talk through the process of receiving information. Because *you know* induces the addressee to act as an information recipient, it has the complementary function of ratifying the speaker as an information provider whose provision of information is contingent upon addressee's reception.

This allows us to understand why *you know* prefaces background information. Speakers may need to introduce background material before an upcoming narrative event will make sense to their addressees. Bracketing such material with *you know* marks its special status as to-be-shared information, as well as the speaker's dependency on addressee's reception of that information prior to his continued role as information provider.

Returning to excerpt 1, Maria's point regarding the difficulties involved in managing time while teaching, may not be understood unless Iulia is supplied with information about a situation when too little time is allocated for too many activities. Thus Maria's status as information provider depends on her ability to establish that information as shared. She does this by prefacing it with *stii* ('you know') in line (1), and when Iulia delays her receipt of information, she repeats that bit of information in line (2), trying again to get it acknowledged. Maria then continues to tell her story in her role as information provider.

The same function is performed by other tag questions such as *nu-i așa* ('isn't it') or its shorter form *nu* ('no'), and *înțelegi* ('you understand'). Consider the following examples:

Excerpt 3

1 Iulia: deci ea care vorbește de metodică cum poa' să zică–
she, who's talking about methodology, how can she say?

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2 să-mi dea o clasă pe care eu nu o cunosc **nu**?
to give me a class that I don't know, right?

3 Maria: **[**ca lecție finală
as a final lesson

4 Iulia: **[**ca lecție finală
as a final lesson

5 nu e posibil așa ceva
that's just not possible

6 și mîine o să-i zic "îmi pare rău doamnă da' nu există așa ceva
and tomorrow I'm gonna tell her "I'm sorry madam but that's impossible

7 cum să-mi dați mie- " **nu**? spune și tu
how can you give me-" right? don't you think so?

8 și o să vorbesc și cu doamna kaiter și îi spun și ei **nu**?
and I'm gonna speak to Mrs. Kaiter and tell her too, right?

9 și cu asta basta da' nu e normal
and that's that it's just not right

Excerpt 4

1 Alina: dac-ai știi cum e do:amne bietu' copil
if you knew how he looks… God poor child

2 Iulia: ca un păianjen
like a spider

3 Alina: da
yes

4 Iulia: și culmea că e superîngrijit și stau o grămadă **[**de capu' lui
and, on top of all, he's more than taken care of, and there are a lot of people looking after him

5 Maria: **[**da sînt mă unii copii așa sînt **nu**?
yeah, some kids are like that, right ?

The excerpts above show tag questions such as *nu-i asa* 'isn't it' and *nu* 'no' and token tags like *stii* 'you know' and *intelegi* 'you understand' as performing important interactional functions in both arguments and narratives. Arguments involve an asymmetric distribution of knowledge and/or opinion. These (token) tags allow the speaker to check on how the discourse is progressing away from this initial distribution. It also appeals to shared knowledge as a way of converting an opponent to one's own side in a dispute, achieving thus consensus. In narratives, they help the addressee filter through the story and select what is important for understanding the narrative point – and thus they enable the addressee to respond to the story as an audience. Responding to a story as an audience

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implies showing interest in the speaker's story and establishing bonding to the discourse and to each other (Schiffrin 1987, passim).

Tags are basically markers of information state transition. They have two discourse functions: first they are *markers of meta-knowledge* about *what speaker and hearer share*; second they are *markers of meta-knowledge* about *what is generally known*. The fact that (token) tags verbalize speakers' handling of cognitive tasks has interactional consequences. They may open an interactional negotiation over the informational status of a generalization, i.e. the degree to which a certain piece of information is really shared knowledge. Their purpose is to invite the addressee's involvement and to establish agreement and common ground[3]. By serving this purpose tags become an efficient way of *avoiding potential disagreement*.

The use of softeners: miscelaneous

There are a number of extremely common modifiers whose function is to tentativize what speakers say, thus allowing speakers not to fully commit themselves to what they are saying. They include such items as *cîteodată*, *în general*, *cam*, *un fel de*, *oarece*, 'sometimes', 'in general', 'rather', 'a sort of' and many others. Such modifiers usually collocate with extreme case formulations[4].

Softeners + extreme case formulations

Excerpt 5 shows speakers as being oriented towards the requirement of extreme case formulations to be occasionally weakened, or qualified, since using such elements of exaggeration an extreme case formulation may be risky unless the speaker is certain of the addressee's opinion on the topic.

Excerpt 5 is taken from a conversation on complementary medicine and herbal remedies and exemplifies the intricately woven fabric of **extreme case formulations** (ECFs) and **softeners**.

[3] Brown and Levinson (1978:235) argue that 'When token tag questions are tacked on to a presumptuous positively polite request ... the results are basically still positive-politeness strategies, even though they make use of essentially negative-politeness techniques to soften the presumption'.

[4] The term applies to descriptions or assessments that deploy extreme expressions such as the superlative forms of adjectives, semantically extreme adjectives (*total, absolute, marvelous, extraordinary*, etc) and adverbs (*always, never, completely, absolutely, totally*, etc) and phrases such as *as good as it gets*, *brand new*, etc. (Edwards 2000, passim).

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Excerpt 5

1 Iulia: asta pentru ce o iei?
what do you take this for?

2 Maria: uite să-ți spună alina **[**pentru de toate
well, alina can tell you (it's good) for all kinds of things

3 Iulia: **[**să nu mai ai poftă de mîncare=
to assuage your appetite

4 Maria: =pentru de toate
for all kinds of things

5 Alina: **în general** cele care sînt bune de– pentru toate nu **prea** sînt bune
in general those that are good for- for all kinds of things aren't that good

6 Maria: deloc ăăă?
at all?

7 Alina: da mă rog au **oarece**
well they've got some

8 Maria: dar am înțeles că–
but I've heard that-

9 Alina: da' spirulina asta cre' că e- a ajuns așa: **un fel de** apă sființită
yeah, the spiruline has come to be some sort of holy water

Both Maria and Alina are at pains not to disagree with each other while stating their rather conflicting opinions. Their conversational behaviour leads them to hedge their extreme case formulations so as to hide disagreement conveying thus that they share common opinions. Previously in the conversation Maria mentioned spiruline, a drug based on algae extracts that she takes as part of her slimming diet, arguing in line (2) that it is good for everything. Notice that she uses an extreme case formulation. Since her opinion is delivered in overlap with Iulia's turn which supplies in line (3) a possible reason for taking this drug (*să nu mai ai poftă de mîncare* – 'to assuage your appetite', Maria repeats her extreme case formulation in line (4) when she emerges into the clear. Moreover, she expects Alina, who is a doctor, to agree with her opinion: *uite să-ti spună Alina (e) pentru de toate* ('well, Alina can tell you it's good for all kinds of things'). Maria's use of an extreme case formulation proves to be a risky strategy, in light of her desire to agree, since she is unaware of her addressee's opinion. Alina does not seem to agree with Maria since the point she is about to make in line (5) is that drugs that are claimed to be good for all kinds of things are not very efficient, and this would stand in total disagreement with Maria's opinion. However, in line (5) Alina seems to be attending to the capacity for simple unmodified generalizations to be taken as equivalents to extreme case formulations. Consequently, she uses two softeners *in general* ('in general') and *(nu) prea* ('hardly') which enable her to mitigate the force of an utterance that might stand in total disagreement

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with her interlocutor's assertion. Thus she makes a more plausible claim that is in keeping with her wish to avoid disagreement with Maria.

Maria, on the other hand, shifts to another point of view and aligns with Alina's position by supplying in line 6 the adverb *deloc* ('not at all'), an anticipatory completion that reinforces Alina's opinion. Thus Maria abandons her initial point of view in order to claim common opinion with Alina. The upshot that emerges from this collaboratively produced sentence amounts to another extreme case formulation that stands in complete disagreement with Maria's initial opinion: "drugs that are good for all kinds of things aren't good at all". Apparently they have reached agreement, but reaching this agreement means rejecting Maria's initial opinion, something Alina would rather not do. Hence Alina's unexpected turn in line (7): *da, ma rog, au oare ce* ('well, yes they have sort of') consisting of a token agreement (*da, ma rog*), meant to hide her partial disagreement with the assertion jointly produced by her and Maria, and a softener (*au oare ce*), meant to mitigate the force of the jointly produced utterance that amounts to an ECF (which as we have already seen stands in disagreement with Maria's initial opinion). Alina's turn in line (7), far from showing lack of assertiveness, actually signals her concern for Maria's positive face. The same goes for Maria who, after stating an opinion which later seems not to be favoured by Alina, embraces Alina's totally conflicting opinion by producing a collaboratively built sentence meant to signal shared point of view. Excerpt 5 illustrates the interplay between extreme case formulations meant to create involvement and instances of token agreement and hedging meant to avoid the disagreement that may be triggered by such elements of exaggeration.

Conclusion

In addition to *mitigating* the imposition of face-threatening acts, a function mainly characteristic of societies with negative politeness orientation, this paper has shown that in societies with positive politeness orientation softeners tend to serve another equally important interactional function: to seek interactional alignments by invoking shared opinion/knowledge and enlisting the addressee's agreement. The addressee is offered the opportunity to provide support, understanding and participation. When such support or understanding is provided by the addressee both the speaker and the addressee show that they are on the same wavelength.

Moreover, when the speaker uses extreme case formulations, which are risky in a positive-politeness ethos, unless the speaker is certain of the addressee's opinion on the topic, there is a tendency towards hedging these elements of exaggeration. This hedging is meant to avoid the disagreement that may be triggered by the use of extreme case formulation.

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