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Jūratė Ruzaitė
Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas

VAGUE REFERENCES TO QUANTITIES AS A FACE-SAVING STRATEGY IN TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTION

Abstract
The main focus of the present paper is to show how vague language categories can function as a face-saving strategy. The observations made in this article are based on the analysis of one category of vague language, that is, quantifiers in British and American spoken academic discourse. The data used for the present investigation have been obtained from two corpora: the sub-corpus of educational events of the British National Corpus and the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken Discourse. The results suggest that quantifiers as a face-saving strategy are used when self-criticism or criticism towards others is expressed. They are often employed in apologies, promises, self-justifications, when giving advice and in cases of uncertainty. Both students and teachers use quantifiers in these situations, but in teachers' speech they are of special importance, since teachers, if they want to maintain their authority, are especially conscious of their positive face. Paucal quantifiers especially frequently function as a face-saving device since they have a mitigating effect. The use of quantifiers as mitigators is especially evident in those instances where they occur in negative contexts. Such instances demonstrate that the main difference between the two varieties under investigation is that in BE quantifiers significantly more frequently function as mitigators. Finally, it has been observed that quantifiers frequently occur alongside other means of self-distancing and face-saving in both varieties.

Keywords
Quantifiers, face-saving, mitigating, semantic prosody, academic discourse.

1. Introduction

The present paper aims to show that vagueness can function as a face-saving strategy. The analysis is based on one category of vague language, namely, quantifiers, which can be defined as non-numerical expressions used to refer to quantities; they answer the question *How much?* A distinction that is very important in the present analysis is the distinction between paucal quantifiers (those that refer to small quantities) and multal quantifiers (those that refer to large quantities). The analysis encompasses such quantifiers as *a bit, much, a little, a little bit, a lot, a number of, lots of, some, a few, several, many* and *few*. Quantifiers are studied in two varieties of English, British (BE) and American (AE), to point to some cross-varietal differences. To highlight some discourse-specific aspects of the usage of quantifiers, spoken academic discourse has been chosen. This type of discourse, as will be argued later in this paper, is especially important in relation to vagueness due to its hierarchical structure and the teachers' need to maintain their authority.

The investigation of quantifiers focuses on three main aspects. First, the main instances where quantifiers are used as a face-saving strategy are presented. Second, the occurrence of quantifiers in negative contexts is discussed with reference to their semantic prosody. The term "semantic prosody" (introduced by Sinclair (1987, 1991) and developed by Louw (1993), Stubbs (1996), Partington (1998), Hunston and Francis (2000)) can be identified by studying contextual clues in corpus data. As Sinclair (1987) observes, certain words have a strong tendency to occur habitually in unfavourable environments. As will be shown later, this also holds true for some quantifiers. Finally, the investigation points to the highly recurrent patterns of multiple face-saving strategies used alongside quantifiers.

The data for the analysis have been obtained from two corpora. The data for BE have been collected from one part of the British National Corpus (BNC), namely, the sub-corpus of educational events, which consists of around 1 million words (999, 986). The sub-corpus consists of in-class teacher-student interactions. The Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) was used to obtain data for American English. The corpus provides access to as many as 152 transcripts (totalling 1,848,364 words) of teacher-student interaction. Since non-native speakers have not been taken into account in the present investigation, the corpus used for the analysis makes up 1,490,174 words. The comparison of the data in the two varieties aims to show some cross-varietal differences in the use of quantifiers as a face-saving strategy.

2. Vagueness, politeness and teacher-student interaction

In the present paper non-specific references to quantities are perceived as instances of vague language (see Channell 1994). Vague language can be defined as highly context-dependent language that lacks specificity, its opposite being precision. An expression is vague if it can be specified in more detail and contrasted with a more concrete expression. For example, in the case of approximated numbers and quantifiers, the two categories can be replaced by non-approximated precise numbers. However, precise numbers have a different communicative effect and are not always welcome in spoken interaction.

Previous research shows that vague language can function as a strategy of politeness. Politeness has been researched from a variety of perspectives by a number of linguists; therefore, only the main notions related to the theory of politeness will be briefly overviewed below. According to Leech (1983), politeness is related to a relationship between two participants: *self* (or speaker) and *other* (or hearer), where it is important to avoid or at least to reduce conflict. Brown and Levinson (1994) and R. Lakoff (1990) also see politeness in terms of conflict avoidance. Due to vague expressions, utterances sound less insistent, and consequently the potential for conflict is minimised. As Wardhaugh suggests, "a request which is delicately put, politely refused, and gently acknowledged as being refused does no serious harm to a relationship" (1985: 166).

According to Eelen (1999), there are two aspects of politeness that are incorporated into different theoretical frameworks of politeness. One of such aspects is that the observance of politeness rules helps to avoid conflict, whereas their neglect entails conflict. Another aspect that unites the existing politeness theories is the notion of politeness as social indexing, which means that a person's politeness is tightly related to his/her social position. In addition, most theories argue that politeness is strategic (cf. Fraser 1990 for an overview of different perspectives on politeness).

The theory of politeness is inextricable from the notion of face. This term was introduced and defined by Goffman as the positive social value claimed by a person for him/herself (1967: 5). Similarly, Brown and Levinson define it as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (1994: 61). Face can be threatened throughout the whole process of communication, but it is especially sensitive to praise and criticism aimed directly at a person (Hübler 1983: 158). In the case of criticism of the hearer, there is a direct attack on the hearer's face, whereas self-criticism is a threat to the speaker's own face (Hübler 1983: 159). Criticism can be mitigated if certain strategies are used. Besides, in order not to lose one's face, people have to communicate cooperatively throughout an interaction and to attend to their faces constantly. Therefore, Scollon and Scollon draw our attention to the constant negotiation of face since, as they claim, "any communication is a risk to face" (1995: 47).

In relation to the notion of face, the distinction between positive and negative face has to be clarified. A positive face, according to Mey, is the one "by which a

person's status as an autonomous, independent, free agent is affirmed; and a negative one … stresses a person's immunity from outside interference and undue external pressure" (2001: 74). In other words, positive face is a person's desire to be approved of, whereas negative face is related to a person's want of non-imposition. However, in communication face threats can arise, which, as Mey (2001) states, can be avoided or minimized by using mitigation devices (e.g. quantifiers in our case), which reduce the effects of impolite statements (cf. Fraser 1980; Caffi 1999).

One of the ways of minimizing impoliteness is "uninformative negation" (Leech 1983). Leech (1983) argues that negative sentences, being less informative than positive ones, are usually marked and thus are used for special purposes. Furthermore, as Clark and Clark (1977: 107-110) point out, negative sentences take longer to process and therefore are more obscure. Thus sentences with negation, which are less direct than affirmative ones, are employed as a form of understatement, where negation is a "hedging or mitigating device" (Leech 1983: 101). With regard to negation, Hübler argues that "predicate negation is the strongest face saving strategy [that] can counteract the face threatening" (1983: 167). Among various other politeness strategies, Leech mentions unreal mood, hedges, euphemisms as well as "minimizing" adverbials of degree *a bit, a little* and *a little bit* (1983: 147). The last category is used to understate the degree of negative aspects. As Hübler notices, understatement and hedges are special strategies to minimize face threat since they "have the effect of emphasizing indirectness" (1983: 157). Hamilton and Mineo (1998) point to vague language as a strategy to minimize face-threat, whereas, "a precisely worded message might come across as too personal, threatening a receiver's self-esteem" (1998: 6).

Leech (1983: 132) distinguishes six main maxims of the Politeness Principle, two of which are of special importance in relation to academic discourse. These two maxims are the Approbation Maxim and Modesty Maxim. The Approbation Maxim is based on the principle: "(a) Minimize dispraise of *other*; (b) Maximize praise of *other*." The Modesty Maxim says: "(a) Minimize praise of *self*; (b) Maximize dispraise of *self*." The praise-dispraise scale is especially relevant to teacher-student communication since students can be expected to rely upon the Modesty Maxim to a great extent, whereas teachers can be expected to ground their praise or dispraise of students on the Maxim of Approbation. For instance, since dispraise of the hearer is impolite, various strategies of indirectness (e.g. understatement or litotes) are likely to occur in academic discourse when the speaker seeks to mitigate criticism. Self-criticism, or self-dispraise in Leech's (1983) terms, can also be expected to involve indirectness to make self-critical claims less categorical.

Brown and Levinson (1994) in their study of politeness differentiate between on record and off record acts. If a speaker goes on record, his or her intention is unambiguous, direct and can be clearly perceived. Off record strategies, in

contrast, do not explicitly reveal the speaker's intentions, but in this way the speaker distances himself or herself from a particular commitment and makes the interpretation of the meaning more flexible. Thus off record strategies require vague language in order not to be clear with one's intentions for the purposes of self-protection and for protecting the interlocutor's face. Consequently, the Gricean Maxim of Manner, which claims that it is necessary to be perspicuous (Grice 1975), is purposefully violated in order to minimize the threat to the communicators' face. Indirectness helps to save face and, simultaneously, the relationship between people (cf. Leech 1983).

In addition, Leech (1983) distinguishes two types of politeness, namely, negative and positive politeness. Leech's formulation of negative politeness is as follows: "Minimize … the expression of impolite beliefs"; whereas the principle of positive politeness is: "Maximize … the expression of polite beliefs" (1983: 81). As Leech explains, polite and impolite beliefs are the ones that are "favourable or unfavourable to the hearer" (1983: 81). In relation to the importance of the two types of politeness, Leech argues (1983) that positive politeness is less important since generally it is more necessary to suppress impolite, or unfavourable, beliefs in communication.

Another important issue that such scholars as Scollon and Scollon (1995) and Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) raise in relation to politeness and indirectness is power and social distance between the participants of communication. Blum-Kulka et al. claim that even children "as young as 2 years of age are sensitive to the relative power of speaker and addressee, and the social distance between them" (1989: 3). They also notice that both children and adults in Israel use indirectness differently according to the power of the addressee and prefer less direct requests to hearers in a dominant position. Similarly, Scollon and Scollon emphasize the fact that politeness is greatly influenced by such factors as "power, distance and the weight of the imposition" (1995: 52). In academic discourse, where relationship between participants is hierarchical, power is of special importance and can be expected to influence the use of politeness strategies.

With respect to power difference, Scollon and Scollon distinguish the hierarchical politeness system, where "the participants recognize and respect the social differences that place one in a superordinate position and the other in a subordinate position" (1995: 55). Such a system is asymmetrical and thus participants are expected to use different face saving strategies. Involvement strategies are used by the participants in the superordinate position, whereas participants in the subordinate position use independence strategies (Scollon and Scollon 1995). However, Scollon and Scollon (1995) admit that other strategies and politeness systems are also possible in academic settings. For instance, some ESL teachers who adopt communicative language teaching tend to foster a face system of symmetrical solidarity and thus all participants then use involvement strategies.

Finally, politeness is claimed to be discourse specific (e.g. Kasper 1990; R. Lakoff 1990; Myers 1989) and culture specific (e.g. Gu 1990; Blum-Kulka 1989; 1990, 1992; Matsumoto 1989; Ide 1989; Rhodes 1989; Ide et al. 1992; Coulmas 1992; Kummer 1992). Interestingly, Myers (1989) demonstrates that politeness can be observed in both spoken and written academic discourse, though academic discourse primarily aims at transmitting information. Cultural differences in the use of politeness show that the phenomenon of politeness may be universal, but it is achieved in different ways in different cultures.

Vague language in academic discourse can have very contradictory effects. On the one hand, it can function as a strategy of politeness, self-defence and can mitigate a conversation, as has already been mentioned. On the other hand, as R. Lakoff points out, "listeners at an academic lecture properly expect information to be to the point, and will misunderstand and miss a veiled reference, both its purpose and its meaning" (1990: 35). Furthermore, indirect commands, often in the form of a declarative sentence, are an implication of a "categorical relationship," as Fairclough (2001) suggests. Though indirectness is a strategy to mitigate an imposition, such indirect commands as "the door is still open" can sound rather imposing and authoritative since in some situations "power relations are so clear that it is not necessary for the teacher to be direct" (Fairclough 2001: 130).

An interesting observation in relation to hedges, which can be related to vague language, in academic discourse is presented by Crismore and Kopple (1997), whose research demonstrates that hedges tend to change the reader's attitude to scientific texts written on controversial issues. One of the major observations of Crismore and Kopple (1997) is that scientific texts which readers originally evaluate negatively are treated positively when those texts are presented with hedges. As Crismore and Kopple (1997) suggest, a hedged text does not impose an opinion and implies that the presented opinion should be evaluated before being accepted. Thus readers are involved into an interactive reading, where their face needs are respected (Crismore and Kopple 1997). Another intriguing observation of their research is that hedges stimulate positive attitude changes to a grater extent among women than among men. This is explained by the tendency that women are more interpersonally attuned than men.

3. Quantifiers in spoken British and American academic discourse

3.1. The use of quantifiers as a face-saving strategy

The analysis of the obtained data has revealed that quantifiers are used to save one's face in both AE and BE. Teachers and students use this category in very

similar situations in both corpora, i.e. mainly to avoid the possibility of conflict and to mitigate claims that may cause face threats. The examples provided below illustrate such situations. To indicate the speaker's role in each example, certain abbreviations are used in brackets; the list of these abbreviations can be found at the end of the paper. In addition, each example is followed by the number as it is marked in the corpus concordance.

Though saving one's face is important for both teachers and students, the data suggest that it is of an especially great importance in students' speech since in academic discourse they are in the role of the subordinate. Very frequently face-saving is tightly related to self-justificatory explanations, self-criticism, promising, apologies, advice, instructions and criticism, as will be argued further in this paper.

To see how much students can be conscious about their face, let us start by considering the following instances in (1)-(6) from the same student's speech in the same speech event:

(1) The carbon which one was that? erm cos there's so *many* of them now I'm getting a bit… (BE 139 S)
(2) Er carbon dioxide no er oh I'm getting confused now there's that *many* of them that… (BE 141 S)
(3) I'm trying to do too *many* things at once and I'm getting, Oh oh is it. (BE 142 S)
(4) …and I I've thought about it and I've thought about so *many* of them today I can't I'm getting confused at which one it is. (BE 145 S)
(5) Because you've asked me about so *many* of them. (BE 146 S)
(6) …but you're using so *many* different chemicals that it's getting more and more confusing… (BE 147 S)

In all the utterances above, the student attempts to save his/her face by providing different self-justifications. In utterance (6) the student even challenges the teacher's authority for the purposes of face-saving. S/he uses an intensified quantifier *so many* to justify him/herself for the lack of knowledge. S/he transfers the responsibility to the teacher by implying via the use of an intensified quantifier that all the confusion is due to the teacher's style of instruction. Examples (1)-(6) also demonstrate that self-justifying excuses most commonly include a multal quantifier with an intensifier, e.g. *too, so* or *that* (underlined in the examples above).

To make the observations about students' face-saving strategies less individual-specific, more similar cases should be considered. Examples (7)-(14) are all students' utterances. This large set of examples suggests that this particular function of quantifiers is especially salient in students' speech.

(7) Too *many* lessons in the morning I'm sorry. (BE 161 S)

(8) I mean I got er the only th part erm I did mess up *a bit* was the the part here. (BE 259 S)
(9) It's it's all too much I'm getting *a bit* confused now it's… (BE 281 S)
(10) I was being *a bit* lazy with myself then erm I just I just looked there and I was gonna double that… (BE 351 S)
(11) Yeah but I got *a bit* stuck on that one… (BE 503 S)
(12) I'm *a bit* behind in my coursework and whatever… (BE 1128 S)
(13) …was gonna say like I'm *a little* confused about beta cuz they… (AE 1067 JU)
(14) …I made *some* also just *some* stupid mistakes which shouldn't have… (AE 1860 JG)

In the examples above the students admit their problems, but they attempt to mitigate those problems by softening them with paucal quantifiers or by asserting via multal quantifiers that the problem lies somewhere else (e.g. *too many lessons*). The problems that are admitted and mitigated or justified with quantified units are very typical of teaching situations, e.g. confusion, as in (9) and (13), being stuck, as in (11), or being lazy, as in (10).

However, not only students, but also teachers rely on quantifiers when they want to save their face when making certain claims. Just as students, teachers save their face by being less assertive or by justifying themselves with the help of quantifiers, as in (15)-(18).

(15) …and I have done *a little bit* on AutoCad which is erm making maps and things… (BE 257 T)
(16) Er I'm gonna give you one here, although there are *several* more which you'll find references to in text books, okay? (BE 67 T)
(17) Now you can define modern in *lots of* ways but that will do for our purpose. (BE 213 T)
(18) Okay Although I'm referring to Gibson's work, I mean this was typical of the time, there were *a number of* other researchers who were using similar ideas and notations. (BE 185 T)

In (15) the teacher makes the claim less assertive by minimizing his/her experience with AutoCad, thus leaving less possibility for criticism if his/her knowledge appeared to be too limited. In (16)-(18) the teachers make a brief notice with a quantifier to admit that there exist other numerous approaches, books and researchers. Such remarks can be treated as an attempt to show that s/he is aware of those other various approaches. Again, this decreases the possibility of criticism if the students came across some contradictory information in other sources.

A rather prevailing tendency that has been observed in the data is that in cases of self-criticism, the speaker's damaged face is at least partly repaired by a mitigating quantifier, e.g. *a little bit* or *a bit*. The examples below in (19)-(23)

illustrate how teachers mitigate self-critical utterances with quantifiers to save their face.

(19) In short, as I said at the very beginning of this series of lectures, you mustn't treat what as I say as gospel erm I am perfectly capable of being *a little bit* eccentric, possibly even *a little bit* erm original erm in my interpretations. (BE 772 T)
(20) …no I know it's *a bit* early erm, but it's not too early to start thinking that you are a world citizen… (BE 95 T)
(21) I should have been *a bit a bit* clearer about that. (BE 355 T)
(22) Well I'm I'm *a bit* biased cos I went there so… (BE 385 T)
(23) Now what did you think about this lesson was it *a bit* boring at some time or… (BE 513 T)

The self-criticism in utterances (19)-(23) is a real threat to the teachers' face. They explicitly admit their drawbacks thus challenging their own authoritative position. Therefore, the mitigating quantifiers *a little bit* and *a bit* lessen the impact of self-criticism and restore the face-damage at least to some extent.

Self-criticism is also expressed by using the quantifier *much* with a negation, as in examples (24)-(26).

(24) …cuz I didn't have *much* success getting into an area… (AE 299 JG)
(25) …it's not so *much* my area of expertise… (AE 892 SF)
(26) …I don't really know that *much* about chicken pox actually… (AE 1472 SU)

As can be seen in (24)-(26), *much* in a negative sentence is usually employed by both teachers and students to refer to the lack of knowledge or expertise in a certain area.

Speakers employ mitigating quantifiers when they are conscious of the interlocutors' face. In example (27) the teacher asks a question that might be face-threatening to the students, as most probably they would not be seen as tired and incapable to work.

(27) I think, I think you're all getting *a bit* tired are you not? (BE 85 T)

The quantifier *a bit*, the hedge *I think* and the tag question make the statement less forceful and thus less face-threatening.

An interesting case of being evasive with an answer and thus protecting one's face can be observed in example (28), where the speaker, most probably a student (marked as PS000), seems to be deliberately avoiding more precise answers. In the

conversation below the speaker repeatedly attempts to avoid a numerical reference in his/her answers to the teacher's, Ken's, question.

(28)

Ken	290	Thank you, good question, I forgot to mention it didn't I?
	291	Yeah.
	292	Erm the figure is <pause> there are, as we all know <pause> how many district councils are there?
	293	<pause> Non-metropolitan district councils <pause>
PS000	294	*Hundreds.*
PS000		<laugh>
Ken	295	Yes, there are hundreds, about how many hundred? <pause>
PS000	296	*Several hundred* <laugh>
Ken	297	Several, mm.
PS000	298	*Three hundred* <-|-> and thirty <unclear> <-|->
Ken	299	<-|-> Three hundred <-|-> and thirty three
F7TPS000	300	Oh of course.
Ken	301	yes.
	302	<pause> So there are three hundred and thirty three non-metropolitan district councils.

(BE 4)

As can be seen in (28), the student's replies are of different degrees of specificity. The first one is *hundreds*, whereas the second one is *several hundred*, which is already a more specific quantity than the former one. The student produces the expected numerical and thus even more precise answer only in the third attempt.

A similar pattern can be observed in (29), where again the teacher does not approve of an answer with the quantifier *a few* and continues eliciting a more specific reply.

(29)

John	1385	But how would you differentiate it.
	1386	What what rule what methods do you know for differentiating?
K6JPS000	1387	Erm <pause> well there's *a few*. <laugh>
John	1388	Okay, there's a few, so name a few.
K6JPS000	1389	Well I've got to the first one <-|-> <unclear> <-|->
John	1390	<-|-> Right, that's that's just <-|-> that's just the basic one
K6JPS000	1391	Mm.

(BE 304)

Both conversations, (28) and (29), suggest that students tend to use quantifiers with an attempt to save their face and be less assertive. However, teachers do not always approve of such vague replies.

Regarding threats to the speaker's face, promising is a special case since an unfulfilled promise is a real threat to one's face, especially if the person is such a figure of authority as a teacher.

(30) I'll get those fractions those multiplication tables printed out and get you a copy in the next *few* days okay. (BE 130 T)
(31) I'm going to bring in *some* illuminated medieval books for you to have a look at… (BE 185 T)

The teachers in utterances (30) and (31) promise to bring the students certain materials, but they employ a quantifier to indicate the time when they will do that, as in (30), or to indicate the number of books, as in (31). The quantifiers make the promises less specific and more flexible.

The data have shown that quantifiers are often employed in apologies, which threaten the speaker's face and thus are related closely to the function of saving one's face. When the speaker apologizes for something, the quantifiers *a little* or *a bit* can soften the fault that is apologized for, as in (32)-(33).

(32) Erm I'm afraid dinner's gonna be *a little* later than I anticipated cos that chicken is quite big isn't it? (BE 372 T)
(33) Sorry I've left *a bit* out… (BE 187 T)

A little later and *left a bit out* are milder statements than just *later* or *left out*. If the apology is made, the fault is admitted and consequently some damage to the speaker's face is unavoidable. The mitigating paucal quantifiers repair the damage at least partly.

The hearer's face is also threatened in any instance of advice, instructions or criticism directed to him/her. To reduce the effect of these face-threatening acts, speakers mitigate them via quantifiers to avoid damage to their face. The following examples in (34)-(40) illustrate mitigated cases of advice, instructions and criticism. Mitigation is achieved either via paucal quantifiers (e.g. *a bit, some*) or a multal quantifier in a negative clause structure (e.g. *much*).

(34) Erm that one's *a bit* of an odd question to be honest with you because I'm finding because I've had an exam in this, that this is the hardest. (BE 1316 S)
(35) Yes, it might, it might, but, but, but now you're getting a little bit, you're getting *a bit* too, too sophisticated now, we're going to come on to that later. (BE 721 T)

(36) … so you have to then try and go *a bit* further beyond the actual differences to find out what the reasons behind them are. (BE 597 T)
(37) … it is not the end of the lesson and *some* of you have not worked hard enough to make the end of the lesson… (BE 186 T)
(38) …Angela you haven't talked *much*… (AE 291 SG)
(39) …in fact you don't know *much* history, you don't wanna know… (AE 523 SF)
(40) …y- your statement was *a little* I think overgeneral I thought…(AE 757 SG)

The criticised or advised notions are underlined. To see the effect of the quantifiers, we should remove them from the utterances and leave only the underlined units. The effect is that the utterances turn into assertive and categorical claims or commands. When the speakers use quantifiers for mitigation whenever they attempt to doubt, criticise or advise the hearers, their instructions and advice do not sound as commands and criticism is softened.

Thus the data have demonstrated that quantifiers can serve as a face-saving strategy, which is of special importance in students' speech. It has been observed that quantifiers are employed in both students' and teachers' self-justifications. Quantifiers, usually the paucal ones, mitigate self-critical remarks and thus make them less face-threatening. It has also been observed that the multal quantifier *much* in negative sentences and paucal quantifiers in all types of sentences often serve as a face-saving strategy since they make the criticism less categorical (thus the Approbation Maxim is upheld). It has been noticed that sometimes students employ quantifiers when providing evasive answers to the teacher in order to make the answer less categorical. Quantifiers also serve as a face-saving strategy in cases of promising since they make the promise more flexible. In cases of self-criticism, paucal quantifiers play a special role since they mitigate an utterance and thus reduce the effect of a self-criticising claim. Instances of advice, instructions or criticism directed to others also tend to involve mitigating quantifers.

3.2. Semantic prosody of quantifiers in relation to their mitigating function

It has been mentioned that quantifiers are frequently used to mitigate certain claims in order to reduce their negative effects and to minimize the possibility of face-threat. In such instances, quantifiers typically occur in negative contexts, i.e. they precede (or sometimes follow) a negatively loaded notion. For instance, the quantifier *some* in AE co-occurs with such negatively loaded nouns as *problems* 16*, trouble(s)* 4*, difficulty* 2*/difficulties* 2*, confusion* 3 (here and henceforth, the numbers represent the frequency of each collocate per 1 mln words); *a little bit* modifies negative qualities such as *more complicated* 4*, more complex* 2*, more*

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difficult 2, or negative activities such as *break* 2, *suffer* 2, *worry* 2. *A bit* in BE especially frequently occurs in negative contexts and mitigates such negative notions such as *problem* 6, *misnomer* 3, *dump* 2, *hole* 2, and negative qualities such as *awkward* 18, *difficult* 6, *hard* 5, *tricky* 5/*more tricky* 2, *worried* 5, *confusing* 4, *late* 4, *messy* 4, *weird* 4, *boring* 3, *confused* 3, *hot* 3, *silly* 3, *strange* 3, *stuck* 3, *camp* 2, *far fetched* 2, *funny* 2, *heavy* 2, *nasty* 2, *odd* 2, *sick* 2, *sloppy* 2, *slow* 2, *unsure* 2, *vague* 2*; more complicated* 4, *more awkward* 2. The frequency of such patterns supports the earlier observations that quantifiers are often employed to minimize the threat to the hearer's or speaker's face in cases of criticism directed to oneself or somebody else.

As the corpus data show, certain quantifiers show a greater tendency to appear in negative contexts than others. Besides, some quantifiers show the tendency to appear in negative contexts in BE, but not in AE and vice versa. The frequency of quantifiers co-occurring with negatively loaded lexemes can be seen in Table 1, which shows that such lexemes are modified with quantifiers in 7.1% of the total number of occurrences in BE, as opposed to 3.4% in AE. The results show that quantifiers in the British corpus significantly more frequently appear in highly unfavourable contexts than in the American corpus.

Table 1. Semantic prosody of quantifiers in AE and BE (with frequency and percentages of negatively loaded lexemes)

	AE		BE	
	Freq. per 1 mln	% of total number	Freq. per 1 mln	% of total number
Paucal quantifiers				
a bit	11	16.4	224	25.3
a little	26	7.2	12	20.0
a little bit	28	6.1	13	6.6
some	38	2.1	33	1.8
a few	3	1.5	3	1.1
several	1	0.9	3	3.7
few	0	0	0	0.0
Total:	107	4.9	288	8.4
Multal quantifiers				
much	55	5.9	43	5.5
a lot	38	3.5	36	5.7
a number of	2	2.0	9	7.6
lots of	3	1.9	0	0.0
many	1	0.2	10	2.5
Total:	99	2.7	108	4.3
Grand total:	206	3.4	396	7.1

Table 1 also shows that paucal quantifiers are most commonly used with negatively loaded lexemes in AE and BE; this tendency supports the importance of quantifiers as mitigators. It has to be mentioned here that *much* usually occurs in a negative clause structure when it modifies a negatively loaded lexeme. If we take into account this tendency, the use of mitigating quantifiers becomes even more prevailing. Importantly, in BE paucal quantifiers occur almost twice as frequently in negative contexts as in AE, which suggests that speakers of BE tend to use paucal quantifiers for face-saving more frequently than speakers of AE.

The main difference between the use of individual quantifiers in the two corpora can be observed in the usage of *a bit* and *a little*, which are considerably more frequently used in unfavourable contexts in BE than AE. In general, the frequency of *a bit*, as has already been mentioned, is considerably lower in AE. Instances when this quantifier is used in unfavourable contexts make up 11 occurrences (or 16.4%) in AE, as opposed to 224 occurrences (or 25.3%) in BE. The difference between the use of *a little* in the two varieties is even bigger. This quantifier is used with negatively loaded lexemes in 20.0% of all the cases, whereas in AE such cases make up only 7.2%. These differences again suggest that British speakers of English tend to use mitigating quantifiers as a face-saving strategy more frequently.

3.3. Quantifiers and multiple face-saving strategies

The data have revealed that quantifiers have a strong tendency to co-occur with other means of face-saving in the same utterance. Such additional means of face-saving include:

- various types of hedges,
- discourse markers,
- repetitions,
- general extenders,
- other lexemes implying imprecise quantity (incl. quantifiers).

The most recurrent devices are discussed below.

Hedges with 'I' frequently co-occur with quantifiers. Such hedges mainly include phrases like *I think* or *I mean*, as in (41)-(44).

(41) …there's... yeah I think there's *a number of* things you could do. Okay (AE 4 SF)

(42) …and, I think that pretty *much* covers everything we need for… (AE 251 JG)

(43) …but erm it would be I think *a little bit* unreasonable for me to expect you to read this one… (BE 478 T)
(44) …and I mean there's so *many*, there's so much literature… (AE 211 SU)

Hedging expressions indicate that the speaker is reconsidering the information that is being presented and thus imply that the quantifiers in such an utterance are also used for expressing uncertainty or guessing.

In addition to the hedges with "I," other hedges can be employed alongside quantifiers. Hedging adverbs expressing the degree of certainty are employed with quantifiers to reassert that the speaker is not absolutely convinced, as in (45)-(46).

(45) …or two you've probably got, *a number of* phrases in it possibly, one… (AE 83 SF)
(46) …one way of making some things perhaps *a bit* less forceful is to put a tag question… (BE 604 T)

The adverb *probably* indicates that the speaker's claim is a guess and thus the speaker protects her/himself from a possible mistake.

Modal verbs can also serve as hedges since they express the degree of probability or certainty. They co-occur with quantifiers in the same utterance when the degree of certainty is reduced, as in example (47).

(47) …um what I could pretty *much* say is because of the… (AE 1143 JU)

The speaker's utterance in (47) starts with the pause filler *um*, then the modal *could* follows and finally *much* is preceded by the diminisher *pretty*. All these different categories indicate a lack of certainty and self-distancing from the claim.

Discourse markers, e.g. *you know* in (48)-(49), are also used as self-distancing devices that strengthen the effect of quantifiers.

(48) …thing only lasts you know *a little*, a second or su, uh… (BE 980 T)
(49) …you kno- n- there are *a number of* other people around that have… (AE 3 SF)

The non-specific quantity references *a little* and *a number of* are made even less specific by employing the discourse markers in the examples above.

In addition, it is important to take into account repetition, which also frequently co-occurs with quantifiers, as in (49)-(50).

(50) …you can perceive in, in *a number of* ways and others can perceive… (AE 92 SF)

(51) …and that's that's that's pretty *much* pretty *much* the English extent… (AE 1136 JU)
(52) Yes, it might, it might, but, but, but now you're getting *a little bit*, you're getting a bit too, too sophisticated now… (BE 461 T)

In the examples above either the lexeme preceding the quantifier is repeated, as in (50) and (52), or the preceding lexeme and the quantifier itself are repeated, as in (51). In both instances repetition is an indicator of uncertainty.

Pause fillers are used to fill in the gaps when the speaker hesitates. They are underlined in examples (53)-(56).

(53) …must have given a great deal of pleasure to *a a* er *a number of* people who've been involved in the, in the research. (BE 150 T)
(54) … and then you get, uh *a number of* people who, wanted to hold… (AE 15 SF)
(55) …um I think there're *lots* of different definitions of both… (AE 167 JF)
(56) …with you and um pretty *much* uh at the beginning of… (AE 1138 JU)

As can be seen in examples (53)-(56), pause fillers can precede or follow quantifiers, or both precede and follow them.

Finally, in the utterances containing quantifiers multiple means of self-distancing occur. This tendency can be observed in examples (57)-(59).

(57) There's there's so *many* though aren't there I mean there's that Scottish accents which I love… (BE 490 S)
(58) …I mean there's yeah there's *tons of* 'em. I mean if you… (AE 22 SG)
(59) …well there's there're *many* differences I guess… (AE 803 JF)

Example (57) involves repetition, a tag question and a hedge with *I*. In (58) the hedge *I mean* and the repetition of *there's* precede the quantifier *tons of*. In (59) the discourse marker *well* and the repeated lexeme *there* precede the quantifier; the utterance ends with a hedge (*I guess*). All these multiple means of self-distancing confirm the non-specificity of a claim with a quantifier.

To sum up, quantifiers tend to occur with various self-distancing devices used for face-saving; these devices are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Additional face-saving strategies used alongside quantifiers

Hedging expressions with *I*:	*I think, I mean, I suspect, I suppose*
Hedges with modals:	*can, could, might, may*
Other lexemes implying imprecise quantity:	*average, more or less*
Hedging words expressing probability:	*possibly, probably*

Other quantifiers:	*a lot of, some*
Discourse markers:	*you know*
General extenders:	*or so*
Other hedging expressions:	*sort of*
Pause fillers:	*Uh, a number of people. (15 SF)*
Repetition:	*you can perceive in, in a number of ways (92 SF)*

Frequent multiple hedging and self-distancing demonstrate how much speakers are conscious of upholding the principles of precision and correct information. Whenever uncertainty arises, speakers employ multiple linguistic means to indicate this uncertainty, which helps the speakers to avoid face damage if the claim does not present correct information.

4. Summary and discussion

Quantifiers are employed both by teachers and students as a politeness strategy to save face in AE and BE. Very frequently face-saving is tightly related to self-justificatory explanations, instances of self-criticism and promising. In cases of criticism directed towards the others, negative politeness (based on the principle "minimize the expression of impolite beliefs") is followed by employed mitigating quantifiers (cf. Leech 1983). That is, quantifiers are used in the cases when the biggest threat to the speaker's face arises. It is important to note that though the function of face-saving occurs in both teachers' and students' speech, it is really typical of students.

In the examples obtained from the corpora, students admit their problems by softening those problems with paucal quantifiers. Similarly, teachers mitigate self-critical utterances with quantifiers to save their face. When they explicitly admit their drawbacks, such claims challenge their authority. The mitigating quantifiers such as *a little bit* and *a bit* reduce the impact of self-criticism and restore the face-damage at least to some extent. Hübler (1983), as was mentioned at the beginning, notices that both criticism directed towards the hearer and self-criticism are especially face-threatening. Therefore, the mitigating use of quantifiers is not surprising.

Regarding threats to the speaker's face, promising is another instance when a speaker's face can be threatened. An unfulfilled promise can damage one's face, especially if the person is a teacher, a figure of authority. Therefore, promises often contain mitigating quantifiers in teachers' speech to reduce the commitment to the promise.

My data support some of the observations mentioned in other studies. The use of vague language for the purposes of politeness and for expressing defensiveness

is briefly pointed to in Drave (2002) (also cf. Overstreet 1995, 1999 for a discussion of general extenders as a politeness strategy). Leech mentions *a bit, a little* and *a little bit*, which he calls minimizing adverbials of degree, as a politeness strategy and claims that they can be used to understate "pessimistic evaluation" (1983: 148). Similarly, Gruber (1993) observes that vagueness serves as a face-saving strategy in political discourse. *A bit, a little bit, a little* are used to soften criticism and thus to convey rhetorical meaning in the study of Jucker et al. (2003).

Semantic prosody of quantifiers has not been widely researched, though some tendencies have been mentioned in passing by some linguists. For instance, Leech in his analysis of the Politeness Principle notices that *a bit* and *a little* occur with negative notions and observes that these quantifiers "can occur with the negatively evaluative adverb *too*, but not with the positively evaluative adverb *enough*" (1983: 148). Mauranen's (2004) results, similarly to the present analysis, show that *a little bit* occurs in negative contexts more frequently in the British data than in the American corpus. Bolinger (1972: 50) points out that *a bit* implies "more than expected" and thus is restricted to "unfavourable (largely negative), conditional, and desiderative contexts."

The results of the present investigation have also shown that in both AE and BE quantifiers strongly tend to co-occur with multiple means of self-distancing and face-saving; such means include hedges, modals, discourse markers, repetition, etc. Co-occurrence of multiple means of self-distancing with vague language categories has been observed by other linguists as well (e.g. Stenström 1994; Overstreet 1995; 1999; Overstreet and Yule 1997, 2002). The findings of my study support Culpeper et al. (2002), who in their investigation of impoliteness observe that combinations of impoliteness strategies are the norm in their data. In some cases a particular strategy is used repeatedly, but any repetition serves as a means to increase the force of an utterance. It seems that the same principle is at work when politeness strategies are used. Similarly, Jucker et al. (2003: 1747) observe that multiple hedges emphasise the vagueness of a particular utterance and soften the rhetorical impact (also cf. Hyland 1998). The results of the present study also support Ediger's (1995) observations. Ediger (1995) claims that pauses, which frequently accompany general extenders, are an indication of speaker's effort to produce adequate words. Other typical grammatical and lexical forms accompanying general extenders in Ediger (1995: 253) include a number of categories, which overlap with the categories in the present investigation to a great extent (e.g. discourse markers, modals, subjunctive, qualifiers such as *maybe, kind of, just, actually, usually, sort of, somewhat*, verbs of conjecture/opinion/interpretation, e.g. *seem, be sure, I mean*, etc.). Overstreet (1999: 115) also observes that in her data general extenders frequently collocate with such expressions as *I don't know, maybe, probably, I'm not sure* when extenders hedge on the content of an utterance.

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Abbreviations

Speaker roles in BE:
S – Student
T – Teacher

Speaker roles in AE:
JU – Junior Undergraduate
SU – Senior Undergraduate
JG – Junior Graduate
SG – Senior Graduate
JF – Junior Faculty
SF – Senior Faculty

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About the author
Jūratė Ruzaitė is a lecturer in English linguistics at the Department of English Philology at Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas (Lithuania). Her publications focus on such topics as academic and political discourse, vague language, meaning of fuzzy adjectives, text typology in translation, and shop signs. Her research interests cover corpus linguistics, applied linguistics, discourse analysis, spoken and written academic discourse, and cross-linguistic and cross-cultural differences.