Pragmatic modifications on the ‘representative’ speech act of defining

John Flowerdew*

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Most work on speech acts has focussed on commissives, directives and expressives, interest centring on the pragmatic strategies (indirectness, mitigation, politeness) used to modify the basic force of these speech acts. This paper presents a data-based analysis of one ‘representative’ speech act, that of defining, and demonstrates that a representative speech act, too, can be subject to modification. The modification devices employed with the speech act of defining are categorised into ‘internal’ and ‘external’ modification. The former include pronouns, modal ‘can’, adverbials and non-factive predicaturs; the latter include rhetorical questions, eliciting questions and asides. Each type of modification is exemplified from the empirical data.

1. Introduction

Much of the work to date on speech acts, both theoretical and empirical, has focussed on the pragmatic strategies available to speakers in varying the basic force of the speech act. Such strategies, or modifications, are inextricably tied up with the maintenance of face (Goffman 1967; Brown and Levinson 1978/87), and are referred to under the (often overlapping) headings of indirectness (Searle 1976), mitigation (Fraser 1980) (including the sub-category of hedges; Lakoff 1972), and politeness (Brown and Levinson 1978/87).

Of Searle’s (1976) major classes of speech act those of directives, commissives and expressives would seem to be most susceptible to modification. This is because the performance of speech acts belonging to each of these classes is likely to be accompanied by loss of face, or unwelcome effects; in Brown and Levinson’s (1978/87) terms they are intrinsically ‘face threatening’ acts. In the case of directives (e.g. requests) and commissives (e.g. offers) loss of face is possible because these speech acts are intended to shape future reality to match what is said and thus require future (possibly face-costly) action on the part of the speaker (commissives) or hearer (directives). In the case of

* Author’s address: J. Flowerdew, Language Centre, Sultan Qaboos University, P.O. Box 32493, Al-Khod, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman.
expressives (e.g. apologies, accusations) loss of face may be threatened because, although no action may be required on the part of speaker or hearer, attitudes (of a possibly face threatening nature) are typically expressed in relation to actions or states of affairs.

In contrast to these three major classes of speech act – directives, commissives and expressives – the other major class, that of representatives (we are excluding Searle’s more minor fifth class, declarations), in representing present reality as it is, and not requiring future action on the part of speaker or hearer, or the expression of any attitude towards actions or states of affairs, would seem to offer less possibility of unwelcome effects or loss of face. As a result there would appear to be less likelihood of indirectness, mitigation, politeness, etc. in the realisation of these speech acts.

This paper, by analysing a corpus of authentic data for one ‘representative’ speech act, that of ‘defining’, will demonstrate that this in fact is not necessarily the case, and that various types of face-saving modifications are to be found.¹

2. The corpus

The study is based on a corpus of over 200 definitions transcribed from 31 video-taped lectures in elementary biology and chemistry. The lectures were given by eight different native-speaker lecturers to audiences of non-native (Arabic) speakers studying in their preparatory year in an English medium university (Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman). Given that video-recording of lectures is part of the routine teaching procedure in the target situation and that the lectures selected for transcription were not ‘set up’ in any way, the data can be accepted as naturally occurring. The data was collected as part of a larger study (in preparation) into the way native speaker lecturers define when lecturing to non-native speakers (a by no means uncommon situation).

Given that the definitions making up the corpus were directed at non-native speakers, the pragmatic modifications identified might be considered to be features of ‘foreigner talk’ (Ferguson 1971; Gass and Madden 1985), as much as features of more ‘normal’ native speaker–native speaker discourse. This is to the advantage of this study, however, for face-saving pragmatic strategies are likely to play an important role in talk to foreigners, where there is a built-in imbalance of status in favour of the native speaker and thus a need on his or her part to support the positive face of the non-native. This is not to say, though, that the pragmatic strategies to be considered are exclusive to ‘foreigner talk’ and are not also to be found in more ‘normal’ speech. On the

¹ Although little has been done on the analysis of representatives, one recent piece of work having a bearing on the present study is that of Myers (1989).
contrary, the determining characteristics of foreigner talk (at least as far as the classroom situation is concerned) have been demonstrated to be quantitative rather than qualitative, i.e. they are features of ‘normal’ speech, merely occurring more frequently in speech to foreigners (Chaudron 1988: 87).

3. The speech act of defining

The determining characteristic of the speech act of defining is its propositional structure. Writers on definition, from Aristotle on, are agreed that a definition should have as its propositional content a term to be defined (definiendum), a class to which the term being defined belongs (genus) and a distinguishing characteristic which separates the term being defined from other members of its class (differentia). Thus the paradigm form of a definition might be as follows:

(1) (An) X is (a) Y which has characteristic(s) Z.
   definiendum + genus + differentia

In actual fact, depending on context and purpose, there is a certain flexibility in the propositional content of definitions. The genus may already be known and only the differentia needed (as in example (2)), or, vice versa, the differentia may already be known and only the genus needed (as in example (3)):

(2) A mixture is made up of different substances which have not combined.
   (NO GENUS)
(3) A ganglion is a mass of nervous tissue.
   (NO DIFFERENTIA)

4. Modification devices

Following Faerch and Kasper’s (1989) work on the modification of requests, the devices used in the modification of definitions can be divided into two major categories: internal modification and external modification. Internal modification is modification occurring within the definition itself, whilst external modification occurs outside the definition.

4.1. Internal modification

4.1.1. Pronouns

The first of the modification devices internal to the definition itself is the use of the personal pronouns ‘we’ and ‘you’:
When we talk about morphology we mean the parts of the body on the outside. This is morphology.

If we have 2 or more elements together we make up a molecule and we call these compounds.

A saddle is something you put on a horse when you are sitting.

When you say they are cold-blooded it simply means they cannot maintain the temperature of their bodies.

Fraser talks of one device to convey mitigation as 'immediacy' (1980: 346 ff.), a use of language which suggests positive feelings towards the hearer or the subject matter. Similarly, Brown and Levinson (1978/87) describe one face-redressing strategy to be to include both the speaker and hearer in the activity and thus convey that speaker and hearer are cooperators. Thus, employing these notions, whereas the simple copula, as in, for example, (1) and (3) above, has the effect of distancing the speaker from the hearer (in Brown and Levinson’s terms these ‘bald, on-record’ statements indicate that the speaker is more concerned with conveying information efficiently than with redressing the hearer’s face), the personal pronouns ‘we’ and ‘you’ in (4)–(7) bring them together, ‘we’ perhaps being the more ‘immediate’ of the two, in including the speaker and the hearer together, ‘you’ suggesting a less close relationship, but nevertheless involving the hearer in the act of defining.

4.1.2. Modal ‘can’

Quirk et al. define modality as “the manner in which the meaning of a clause is qualified so as to reflect the speaker’s judgment of the likelihood of the proposition it expresses being true” (1985: 219). A possible use of the modal ‘can’ in a definition would be as a hedge on the performative verb (see Fraser 1975 on ‘hedged performatives’), as in (8), where the commitment of the speaker to the truth of the definition would seem to be less than in (9). In (8) the speaker seems to be saying that he/she is giving one from a variety of possible definitions, this one not necessarily being the most suitable, whilst in (9) the definition is presented as the universally accepted one true definition.

(8) X can be defined as ...

(9) X is defined as ...

In actual practice there are only two instances of definitions realised by the performative verb in the present data (i.e. less than 1%) and neither of these is modified by a modal.

The usage attaching to ‘can’ in the data seems to be a combination of the two related meanings of ‘possibility’ and ‘ability’ (both Palmer 1979 (71 ff.)
and Quirk et al. 1985 (221 ff.) point out the difficulty, often, of distinguishing between these two meanings).

Where this usage occurs the propositional content needed for the definition is elicited from the hearers (see section 4.2.2 for further consideration of the role of eliciting questions). Examples of this type are thus accompanied by their preceding context, as this is vital to their interpretation:

(10) A. What is the plasma membrane? Can someone tell me? What is it? Where do we find it? Where is it found?
B. Around the cell.
A. Around the cell. So we can say the plasma membrane is the membrane around the cell.

(11) A. Can anyone tell me what growth is? What does it mean?
B. To get bigger.
A. We can say that growth is an increase in size. An increase in size of an organism.

The 'possibility' meaning of can is indicated in these definitions if 'can' is paraphrased by 'It is possible ...':

It is possible to say the plasma membrane is the membrane around the cell ... (possible paraphrase for (10))

or

It is possible to say that growth is an increase in size. (possible paraphrase for (11))

However, this interpretation is to neglect the preceding context. Taking this latter into account, the definitions in (10) and (11) can be seen to take the form of a reformulation of the elicited information. The meaning of 'can' can be interpreted as suggesting that, thanks to the contribution of the hearer, the speaker is now able to make the definition (i.e. 'ability-can'), whereas previously he/she was not. The speaker thus pays the hearer the compliment of suggesting that it is his/her information which has enabled him/her to create the definition. (Interestingly, the required information is elicited in both examples by the use of a so-called conventionally indirect request, which itself uses 'ability-can' – 'Can someone tell me?’, ‘Can anyone tell me ...?’ – further emphasising the desire of the speaker to support the positive face of the hearer.)

4.1.3. Adverbials
A number of adverbials (primarily 'basically', 'simply', and 'just' in the data
under review), referred to as 'quantity hedges' by Brown and Levinson (1978/87) and 'content disjuncts' by Quirk et al. (1985), play the role of indicating that not as complete or precise a definition is being given as might be expected.

The function of 'basically' in examples (12)–(14) seems to be to say 'this is not necessarily a complete definition I am giving you, but it provides as much information as you will be needing in the present context'. The speakers thus indicate that they are doing the hearers the service of tailoring their definitions to their particular needs:

(12) Vitamins are basically organic compounds. They are found in all foods.
(13) The crop is basically that organ which stores food.
(14) The word translocation basically means to move or to transport from one place to another.

'Simply' seems to have the additional function of saying 'this is not a difficult concept to understand; it is quite straightforward':

(15) When you say they are cold-blooded it simply means they cannot maintain the temperature of their bodies.
(16) The meaning of metameric is simply that organs are repeated.
(17) The mesosome is simply a structure which is the enfolding of the membrane.

'Just' is similar in function to 'simply'. It is used to indicate that the definiendum is no more complicated than the speaker says it is:

(18) Vesicle just means a small sack with a membrane around it.
(19) Inside the inner membrane there is a matrix ... we came across this word before, it's just the fluid inside the mitochondria.²

In one instance in the data 'just' is preceded by 'really':

(20) The simplest instrument which you have seen is probably the ruler, which is really just a scale printed on the side of a piece of plastic or wood.

Quirk et al. (1985) classify 'really' as an 'emphasiser', relating to the item it precedes. In (20) its function is to emphasise the truth value of the disjunct

² This definition also exhibits external modification and will be referred to later (example (34)) in section 4.2.1.
'just'. The overall effect is thus to increase the degree of commitment, not to the definition itself, but to the simplicity of the definition.3

4.1.4. Non-factive predicators
Non-factive predicators are constructions (verbal, nominal or adjectival) which take a complement clause, but which do not commit the speaker to the truth of the proposition expressed in that clause (Lyons 1977).

An example of a non-factive predicator in the data under review is the verb 'say':

(21) A way of defining a metal is by saying that it is an element that readily forms a cation.

Here the speaker distances him/herself from the universal truth of the proposition – and thus protects his/her positive face – by implying that this is but just one way of defining a metal.

Another example of a non-factive predicator is 'considered to be', as in (22):

(22) The four units of physical quantity are considered to be the fundamental units, the simplest units of the SI system.

In this definition the use of the passive distances both speaker and hearer from the definition, ascribing it to some external authority (the scientific community at large). But in addition, the non-factive verb 'consider' suggests that this authority is not sure of itself; the commitment to the truth of the statement is mitigated; the 'fundamental units' referred to in the definition may be something else. The speaker thus prevents possible criticism and consequent loss of face on his/her part as to the validity of the definition.

4.2. External modification

Turning now to external modification, we find the following phenomena in the data under review:

4.2.1. Rhetorical questions
A very frequent means of introducing, and at the same time mitigating, definitions in the present data is by the use of rhetorical questions:

(23) What is density? Density is defined as mass over the volume.
(24) What is biology? Biology is the science of life.

3 To be noted also in this example is the use of the further 'content disjunct' or 'quantity hedge', 'probably', introducing a further hedge or element of doubt into the definition.
(25) What do we call the study of plants? The study of plants is called botany.

(26) What are golgi bodies? Basically they are flattened cavities.

One function of rhetorical questions here would seem to be to capture the attention of the hearer, to highlight the importance of what is to follow. However, there is also a mitigating function. Although these questions do not require an answer on the part of their hearers, the speakers nevertheless want the involvement of the hearers in the discourse. In not waiting for an answer to their questions the speakers pay the hearers the compliment of implying to them that they assume they know the answer (even if they suspect that they do not). It is as if the speakers are providing the definition as part of their own thought processes, as much as to inform their hearers. If the speakers came straight out with the definitions the implication would be that they thought that the hearers were ignorant of the information contained therein, an implication that might involve loss of face on the part of the hearers. By prefacing the definitions with a rhetorical question, however, the speakers ensure the preservation of the hearers' positive face.

4.2.2. Eliciting questions
Closely related to rhetorical questions are eliciting questions (the term is borrowed from Sinclair and Coulthard's 1975 analysis of classroom interaction). Here, in contrast to the rhetorical question, the speaker does expect a definition, or part of a definition, to come from the hearer (or one of his/her hearers) in response to his/her question:

(27) A. What is an organ?
   B. It's a group of tissues.
   A. Yes, it's a group of tissues composed of cells performing a specific function.

Sometimes, instead of providing the definiendum and eliciting the genus and/or the differentia, the speaker provides the genus and differentia and elicits the definiendum.

(28) A. Does anyone know the name of this membrane which is around the sap vacuole?
   B. Tonoplast?
   A. What is tonoplast? It is the membrane around the sap vacuole.

In these examples of elicits the positive face of the hearer is attended to in allowing the information to come from him/her. In encouraging an active,
participatory, role for the hearer in the discourse, indeed, the eliciting question is a stronger mitigator than the rhetorical question, where the hearer does not in fact contribute. However, the speaker still maintains control of the discourse with the elicit, by repeating (as in (28)) or elaborating the contribution of the hearer, where it is not complete (as in (27)). The eliciting question is thus still not a ‘real’ question in the sense that the speaker really expects an acceptable answer from the hearer.

The speaker will do his utmost to ensure a positive contribution from the hearer. In order to avoid failure, when a response is not immediately forthcoming, the speaker will try to give the audience another chance, by repeating, paraphrasing, or changing the emphasis of the question:

(29) A. What is the plasma membrane? Can someone tell me? What is it? Where do we find it? Where is it found?
   B. Around the cell.
   A. So we can say the plasma membrane is the membrane around the cell. 4

In some cases, however, an elicit is unsuccessful. Where the audience makes an attempt at a contribution, but this is totally inaccurate or unintelligible, in order to preserve the positive face of the hearer, the speaker will mitigate his/her elaboration by an expression such as ‘I’ll explain it a bit better perhaps’, as in the following example:

(30) A. Now can you tell me what is a gland? Do you know what a gland is?
   B. UNINTELLIGIBLE RESPONSE
   A. I’ll explain it a bit better perhaps. A gland is a structure in the body which secretes fluids or substances.

Where no response at all is forthcoming from the audience the speaker always has the option of converting the elicit into a rhetorical question, by answering it him/herself:

(31) What is this called? This process of removing chemicals from our bodies. What is it called? ... Excretion.

The length of the pause between the question and answer is crucial here. Speakers who wait too long before answering increase the chances of hearers seeing through their subterfuge. However, where face is concerned, hearers are probably willing to go along with the game, even if they realise they are being tricked. They are grateful that the speakers have done them the service of pretending that they did not really expect them to know the answer.

4 This example was previously used (as example (10)) as an example of the use of modal ‘can’.
4.2.3. Asides
Brown and Levinson describe the function of asides to be "to disclaim the assumption that the point of S's assertion is to inform H" (1978: 170). This, of course, is a gloss which might be applied also to rhetorical questions and eliciting questions. However, in the case of asides, the disclaimer is stronger. The speaker overtly asserts that the hearer is already familiar with what is to follow:

(32) You remember that we said that compounds were made from two or more different elements combined chemically.

(33) I take the reciprocal. You know that word RE-CI-PRO-CAL the reciprocal is just equal to one over whatever it is.

(34) Inside the inner membrane there is a matrix which...we came...we came across this word before. It's just the fluid inside the mitochondria.

In some cases, an aside may be combined with an elicit:

(35) A. I assume you all know what an element is. What is an element?
    B. A substance.
       A. A substance. A substance, you can't divide it up into something simpler.

In other cases, instead of asserting categorically that the hearer already knows what is to follow, the mitigator can itself be mitigated; this is done by the speaker down-grading his/her aside to merely suggesting or enquiring whether the hearer might already be aware of what is to follow (this corresponding to Brown and Levinson's face-saving strategy, "Don't assume H is able/willing to do a given act"; 1978: 150):

(36) If you remember, metameric segmentation which was the repetition of organs in each segment.

(37) Now I think you all know what an element is. It's a substance, an element is a substance which cannot be broken down into a simpler, into simpler substances.

(38) Do you remember that word...electropositive is likes to become positively charged to form cations.

(39) So they're opaque. Do you remember that word, you can't see through it, light does not go through.
5. Conclusion

The analysis of empirical data in this study has highlighted a number of linguistic features used to modify the basic speech act of defining.

The interpretations put on the various modification devices of course are subjective. Ultimately the effects of pragmatic modification are dependent upon the psychology of the hearer, and we have no way of entering into the mind of the hearer. However, the fact that the devices identified are recurrent throughout the data with a variety of speakers suggests that speakers do use them with the aim of achieving certain ends. To this extent they can be said to be conventionalised.

Regarding the types of modification device recorded, it should be pointed out that a larger, or a different corpus might have revealed other devices. For example, the ‘hedged performative’ referred to in the section on modal ‘can’, although not occurring in the present data, would, on the face of it, seem to be a possible usage. Tag questions, as in (40), again not occurring in the present data, would also seem feasible as a modification strategy:

(40) An X is a Y which has characteristic Z, isn’t it?

These are only hypotheses, however. The present study, as any empirical study, restricts itself to identifying those devices actually occurring in the given data.

Those modification devices which have been identified, however, do provide sufficient data to validate the claim made in the introduction to this paper, namely that a representative speech act can be subject to modification, just as a directive, a commissive, or an expressive can. Searle describes the representative class of speech acts as characterised in terms of truth conditions. The examples of definitions cited in this study do not contradict this. Although subject to various modifications, the determining factor of the definitions cited is still their propositional content. What these examples do indicate, though, is that when the speech act of defining is performed a lot more is going on than the mere conveyance of truth or falsehood. In limiting the characterisation of representatives to truth and falsehood, a lot that is also happening on the interpersonal dimension is neglected.

References


Instances of this form are commonly found in written scientific text.