Linguistic mitigation employed by language supervisors in post-lesson discourse

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Abstract

This investigation explores the linguistic mitigation strategies employed by language supervisors in giving critical feedback to language teachers. The provision of feedback is personal and may be intense as a supervisor needs to meet two goals: clarity in feedback-giving and maintenance of relationships. One way to achieve these goals is through the use of linguistic mitigation, which blunts the harshness of a message. To study language mitigation, post-lesson conferences between four in-service teachers and two supervisors, and between four preservice teachers and two university supervisors were recorded and transcribed. A discourse analysis was then conducted to identify specific linguistic mitigation strategies in supervisory discourse using a taxonomy (Wajnryb, 1994). Results showed that supervisors used a variety of linguistic mitigation strategies that could be classified under three major groups: syntactic, semantic, and indirect mitigation techniques. This extensive use of mitigation strategies showed that the supervisors were aware of the threat posed by their feedback on the teachers' face and the need to balance clarity and maintenance of personal relationships. The prevalence of mitigation in supervisory discourse also demonstrated that politeness may be an important consideration for teachers to accept feedback. The data also suggested that mitigation may be performing both personal and institutional roles for supervisors. Finally, the study would support the applicability of Brown and Levinson's (1987) face-saving model in the Philippine context. The implications of this study for supervision and language research were likewise discussed in the conclusion of this paper.

Keywords: Clinical supervision, discourse analysis, Filipino politeness, language mitigation, politeness theory

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1.   Introduction

Supervision is one of the important tools in helping teachers improve their instructional behavior. It can be generally described as an organizational function whose main aims are to assess and refine current instructional practices (Goldsberry, 1988, as cited in Bailey, 2009), to help teachers reflect on and improve their techniques, and to monitor and enrich the teaching done in schools (Wallace, 1991). To achieve these goals, supervision views teachers as autonomous individuals who should be afforded enough space to make decisions on their practice (Goldsberry, 1986) in the hopes of moving from their actual to ideal teaching behavior (Gebhard, 1991). The aforementioned perspectives seem to echo what the trailblazer in the field said decades ago: "[Supervision can] prove powerful enough to give supervisors a reasonable hope of accomplishing significant improvements in teacher's classroom instruction" (Cogan, 1973, p. xi).

In the context of the present study, supervision will be treated as synonymous to clinical supervision, which, in contrast to administrative supervision, is more concerned with what happens in the classroom (Wallace, 1991), and with contact with teachers to improve instruction and increase growth (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1993). Clinical supervision's data come from events in the classroom, and the analysis of these bits of information and the relationship between a teacher and a supervisor will be the basis for a program and the steps designed to improve teachers' classroom behavior (Cogan, 1973). Clinical supervision is treated as a means of knowing about teaching and engaging teachers in a dialog about their experiences, questions, practices, and possible alternatives to these that can be employed and tested (Smyth, 1986). Although the practice of clinical supervision varies (Pawlas & Oliva, 2008) and is arbitrary (Cogan, 1973), it is still a systematic and scientific endeavor composed of several stages.

Clinical supervision has eight phases, which include (1) the establishment of the relationship between a teacher and a supervisor; (2) the planning with the teacher; (3) the planning of the strategy of observation; (4) the observing of instruction; (5) the analysis of teaching-learning processes; (6) the planning of the strategy of the conference; (7) the post-lesson conference; and (8) the renewed planning (Cogan, 1973). Of these stages, the post-conference serves as the context where teachers can reflect on their instructional behavior and where aid is given (Wajnryb, 1994). Because of this and the fact that this is where a review of the teaching done by the teacher and witnessed by the supervisor is conducted and where feedback, which can be in the form of evaluative discourse (Diamond, 1978), is given, several scholars have come to regard the post-conference as essential, a conclusion supported by the literature on the topic. In fact, some view it as "the centerpiece of supervision" (Smyth 1986, p. 4), which, though not as extensive as supervision itself because it is just one of the several stages, can stand for the whole process because what happens in the post-lesson conference is part of and a result of the other stages (Cogan, 1973).

The importance of supervision derives from the feedback it provides to teachers during the post-lesson conference. Feedback is the communication event where the intended help is given to the teacher. The goal of feedback is to improve teaching effectiveness and

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promote professional growth (Feeney, 2007). Through feedback, teachers can sharpen their understanding of classroom events (Diamond, 1978), critically analyze their teaching, enhance their critical thinking (Akcan & Tatar, 2010; Feeney, 2007), promote their professional growth (Feeney, 2007), and improve the academic achievements of students (Anast-May, Penick, Schroyer, & Howell, 2011).

Language plays a critical role in fulfilling the above objectives as it provides the means through which help can be given to and received by teachers. It is through language that the message containing the help is encoded. However, language plays not only a transactional role in a communicative exchange but also an interactional purpose (Harris, 2003). Because a supervisory conference may be intense, confronting, and personal (Wajnryb, 1994), supervisors must employ a variety of techniques to make sure that their feedback is not only relayed efficiently, effectively, and clearly but also courteously and politely to ensure that they preserve their personal relationships with teachers. This balancing act between the need for clear feedback-delivery, which is warranted by institutional expectations of them as educational leaders, and maintenance of personal relationships, which stems from the personal and professional relationships they have with teachers, will be reflected linguistically in the supervisors' discourse in post-lesson conferences. It is interesting therefore to investigate how this balancing act is encoded in language. One can surmise that one possible means for supervisors to manage their way through this labyrinth of communication is through language mitigation, the specific forms of which were the object of this investigation.

Several studies have been conducted to analyze discourse in terms of linguistic mitigation employed by speakers to ensure that polite feedback-delivery is achieved (Copland, 2012; Roberts, 1992; Strong & Baron, 2004; Vasquez, 2004; Waite, 1991; Wajnryb, 1994; Yeşilbursa, 2011). Vasquez (2004) found that supervisors attended to both the positive and the negative face of teachers in their post-lesson conferences and used strategies to reduce the institutionally-governed social asymmetry in their relationships. However, Vasquez discovered a danger in using mitigation in suggestion-giving: there is a big possibility of a lost message in attenuated language. This could be attributed to failure to make a lasting impression because of the softened manner of feedback-giving, salience of the more abundant positive feedback, and differences in understanding of constructive criticism (Vasquez, 2004).

Mitigation is not only found in contexts with asymmetrical power relationships. Even peers giving feedback to colleagues in friendlier and more collegial environments have been discovered to use mitigation to soften the impact of their message (Yeşilbursa, 2011). Experience has also been shown to be a factor in the amount of mitigation present in one's speech. A study by Roberts (1992) found that less experienced feedback-givers were more variable in the number of strategies used, i.e., they were either too soft or too hard in their provision of insights, while more experienced ones used a combination of direct and indirect speech acts to achieve their goals. Trainees have also been discovered to use mitigation in talking to their superiors. According to Copland (2012), trainees employed linguistic-politeness techniques in talking to their trainers in instances in which they were able to wrest control over the conversation. These techniques could be in the form of justification for the interruption, careful suggestions, and appeal to the expertise of the trainer (Copland, 2012).

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Aside from supervisor-teacher contexts, linguistic mitigation in environments with different power structures has also been analyzed. For example, Harris (2003), in studying discourse in courts, surgeries, and police stations, found that politeness theory could be a means to understand norms and the interactional behaviors in these environments. The study posited that politeness strategies had more than redressive functions because they could be used to serve institutional and personal ends, a point which was not considered by Brown and Levinson (1987). The study also found limitation in Brown and Levinson's formula in predicting the weightiness of a face-threatening act (FTA). Harris also discovered transactional and interpersonal functions of communication in the study's data with the latter having an important role in promoting interaction. Finally, mitigation was also found to provide a powerful means to encode important relational and interpersonal elements of language.

In the Philippines, researchers have shown interest in studying language of discourse in contexts such as doctor-patient interaction (Adeva, 2005), apology-giving between couples (Mojica, 2005), and online exchanges (Correo, 2014). In Adeva's research, doctors were found to use strategies such as the deployment of everyday language and jokes to address the imbalance of power between them and their patients. The study also discovered that much of doctor talk was oriented toward information-giving and -seeking and that physicians utilized several strategies such as positive and negative expertise and positive moral appeal to gain compliance from their patients. Mojica (2005), meanwhile, showed that although Filipino apology structure had similarities with those in other countries, such a speech act had culture-based variations. Correo's (2014) research on politeness in Bikolano in computed-mediated discourse demonstrated that Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory had applicability in the Philippine context not only in face-to-face communication but also in computer-mediated interactions. She claimed that politeness had universal and cultural aspects as well as linguistic and nonlinguistic features.

Despite the breadth of these investigations into linguistic mitigation in supervisory discourse to achieve the goals of the supervisor (Copland, 2012; Roberts, 1992; Strong & Baron, 2004; Vasquez, 2004; Waite, 1991; Wajnryb, 1994; Yeşilbursa, 2011), and politeness and discourse patterns in environments with different power configurations (Adeva, 2005; Correo, 2014; Harris, 2003; Mojica, 2005), a concern that remains is whether the same pattern of mitigation exists in post-lesson conferences in a second language environment involving Filipino teachers and supervisors of English. To answer this, informed by the pragmatic approach to discourse analysis, the study aimed to identify syntactic, semantic, and indirect mitigation strategies (Wajnryb, 1994) used by two university supervisors and two in-service supervisors in their feedback-giving following their classroom observation of eight preservice and in-service English language teachers. This investigation gathered data from both in-service and preservice environments to determine the patterns of linguistic mitigation language supervisors used in these contexts. By analyzing post-lesson conferences, this study followed the tradition of using pragmatics to understand communicative encounters imbued with different levels of institutional power. In addition, this research hoped to reveal the function of mitigation in encounters where there was an asymmetry of power between the

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participants and to identify the applicability in other contexts of the face-saving model of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987), which has been criticized for its reliance on limited Asian data (Correo, 2014).

Uncovering the linguistic mitigation strategies used by Filipino supervisors in feedback-giving can help refine the face-saving model of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987) with additional data from an Asian country. This will also shed more light on the concept of "politeness" and how this is linguistically realized in a relatively conservative country such as the Philippines. The investigation can contribute to understanding on how politeness is used to navigate the dynamics of power relationships in an Asian society such as the Philippines. Finally, the results of the study can help training programs hone the skills of would-be supervisors in composing feedback that will achieve their goals of clarity and politeness.

1.1   Theoretical Framework

1.1.1   Gricean Maxims and Conversation Implicature

There is an underlying principle that determines the manner in which language is used with maximum efficiency and effectiveness to achieve a rational interaction (Grice, 1975, as cited in Huang, 2007). This ensures that in an interaction, which in this research is the post-lesson conference, the right amount of information is given and that it is conducted in a truthful, relevant, and perspicuous manner (Huang, 2007). This dictum is called *cooperative principle* (Grice, 1975), which is so prevalent in discourse that it can be divided into nine maxims of conversation classified under four major categories: quality, quantity, relation, and manner (Archer, Aijmer, & Wichmann, 2012; Huang, 2007; Yule, 1996). These maxims can be used in isolation or in combination with one another and serve as a basis for an effective sharing of information and feedback-giving, and expression of personal stance toward people, events, and subjects (Strauss & Feiz, 2014). This cooperative principle states that for a conversation (i.e., supervisory discourse) to be maximally efficient, the contribution of the participants (i.e., the supervisor and the teacher) should be at the right amount (maxim of quantity), be truthful (maxim of quality), makes sense in relation to something in the talk or context (maxim of relation), and should not be obscure or illogically ordered (maxim of manner) (Strauss & Feiz, 2014).

Conversational implicature, on the other hand, refers to the interactional process of meaning-making through inference, which is based on the content and the context of discourse and on mutual assumptions to be made by both the speaker and the hearer (Archer et al., 2012; Huang, 2007; Strauss & Feiz, 2014; Thomas, 1995). In understanding pragmatic meaning and conversational implicatures, which are not semantically encoded, context, mutual knowledge, and shared information are key (Strauss & Feiz, 2014). The content, the context, and the mutual assumptions convey an idea in a way that a listener will make sense of the utterance and fill the gaps in his understanding (Strauss & Feiz, 2014).

1.1.2 Speech Act Theory

Speech acts are acts performed through utterances (Yule, 1996) and units of communication that view stretches of discourse as social acts which have social functions (Strauss & Feiz, 2014). The speech act theory posits that language is not only used to describe real-world phenomena but also to do things with it (Archer et al., 2012). It states that the utterance of a sentence is, or is part of, an action within the framework of social institutions and conventions (Huang, 2007). Speech acts are produced and understood in three ways, which are simultaneously performed when saying something (Huang, 2007). The first is the locutionary act, which conveys the propositional content by producing meaningful linguistic expressions (Huang, 2007; Peccei, 1999; Strauss & Feiz, 2014; Yule, 1996). The second is illocutionary act, which pertains to the intentional function of the utterance (e.g., request, demand, question, and the like) (Strauss & Feiz, 2014) and the action meant to be performed when the speaker produced the language by virtue of the conventional force associated with it, either explicitly or implicitly (Huang, 2007). Finally, there is the perlocutionary act, which is the effect of the utterance (Yule, 1996) and the bringing about of the consequences or effects, which are unique to the circumstance of the utterance, on the audience by producing the language (Huang, 2007). Some speech acts are easy to identify based on the surface structure of the sentence, while others are not because there is not a direct correspondence between the sentence type and the illocutionary force. These latter types are called indirect speech acts (Huang, 2007). In indirect speech acts, the speech act is indirectly performed through the employment of another speech act (Archer et al., 2012; Peccei, 1999). Because of this characteristic, individuals infer about their meaning not through surface structures but through other means such as context, interlocutors, activity, location, prosody, gestures, facial expressions, and others (Strauss & Feiz, 2014). Another means to decipher the meaning of indirect speech acts is to assume the existence of a literal illocutionary force, which is secondary, and an indirect illocutionary force, which is primary (Huang, 2007). One can also use felicity conditions, which are expected or appropriate circumstances for the speech act to be interpreted as intended (Yule, 1996). Applied to supervision, the concepts of the Theory of Conversational Implicature and Gricean Maxims, and of the Speech Act Theory ensure that the interaction between the supervisor and the teacher is cooperative and aims for the effective and efficient communication of feedback. Feedback is meant not only to describe events in the classroom but also for the teacher to do something. This need for message clarity and rules that govern it will now be used as the foundation for the concept of politeness.

1.1.3 Politeness Theory

There are four major theoretical models of politeness, namely(a) the "face-saving" model, (b) the "social norm" model, (c) the "conversational maxim" model, and (d) the "conversational contract" model. Of these, the most influential and comprehensive is the "face-saving" model (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This model advances that politeness can be viewed as a fixed concept that can be connected to polite social behavior in a culture (Yule, 1996).

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At the center of this model is the sociological notion of "face," which is the public self-image that individuals want to maintain for themselves (Brown & Levinson, 1987). "Face" is associated with embarrassment and humiliation and is thus emotionally invested, can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be attended to during interactions (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In supervision, it is assumed that the supervisor and the teacher will come to the post-conference aware of the need to cooperate to maintain their face, and this cooperation is based on the vulnerability of their public self-image (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In the conduct of the post-lesson conference, the participants must deduce the best way to carry out their objectives by using tools that will minimize their impact on the face (Watts, 2003). This awareness of another person's face is called "politeness" (Yule, 1996). Politeness is patterned behavior, based on social and cultural norms, in which people interact with one another using both linguistic and nonlinguistic means to ensure a smooth, efficient, non-antagonistic, and mutually-cooperative exchange of messages (Strauss & Feiz, 2014).

The sociological notion of "face" has two aspects: positive face and negative face (Archer et al., 2012; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Huang, 2007; Yule, 1996). Positive face represents the desire of an individual to be accepted and liked by others, to be treated as part of the group, and to know that his wants are shared by others (Huang, 2007; Yule, 1996). If actions are oriented to the preservation of the positive face, they are referred to as a positive politeness (Huang, 2007). Some strategies to attend to the positive face are claiming common ground, claiming that the interactants are cooperators, satisfying the addressee's wants (Brown & Levinson, 1987), noticing the hearer, exaggerating the approval of the addressee, seeking agreement, avoiding disagreement, and joking (Archer et al., 2012). In the post-lesson conference, the supervisor can say that he has experienced what the teacher is experiencing and exaggerate the good points of the observed teaching to show positive politeness. Negative face, meanwhile, is one's basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to nondistraction, and freedom of action and from imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Huang, 2007; Yule, 1996). Some actions that gear toward the preservation of the negative face are deference, emphasis of other people's time or concerns, or apology for the imposition or interruption. Some supervisory strategies for the preservation of the negative face are use of questions in giving feedback and apology before a point of criticism. Negative politeness strategies are more likely to be employed if there is a social distance between the speaker and the hearer (Peccei, 1999). The speech acts that threaten the positive face, the negative face, or both are called face-threatening acts (FTAs) (Huang, 2007). In the conduct of the post-lesson conference where feedback is expected to be provided, several FTAs such as criticism, praising, requests, suggestions, and orders can be given. Speakers may use a strategy or a combination of positive- and negative-face strategies to cushion the impact of FTAs (see Brown & Levinson, 1987 for the list of strategies).

The aforementioned three theories constituted the pragmatic approach to discourse analysis employed in the present study. The Gricean theory of conversational implicature would make the study view supervisory utterances as purposeful and cooperative even if they seemed otherwise. This approach saw supervisors as rational and cooperative, which should complement the literal meaning of utterances to fully understand their feedback. Hence, a

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supervisory utterance, no matter how irrelevant it might look, was assumed to be expressive of a message. The speech act approach, meanwhile, assumed that supervisory feedback was meant not only to describe teacher performance but also to prod, convince, or encourage him or her to do something about the points discussed. Under this approach, supervisor feedback was used not only to inform teachers but also to make them do something about what was observed. Finally, discourse analysis from the perspective of politeness theory would enable the identification of mitigation strategies to blunt the sting of face-threatening feedback from supervisors. This pragmatic approach was suitable to this study as it could demonstrate how language structures evolved from socially- and cooperatively-built communication (Hatch, 1992), the two characteristics of supervisory conferences where feedback was provided.

## 2.	Method

### 2.1	Research Design

This descriptive research used a qualitative design. The study employed the recording of a total of more than 120 minutes of eight post-lesson conferences in three schools in Parañaque City and Manila. The recorded post-lesson discourse was later transcribed. The transcriptions of the post-lesson conversations were needed to determine, using the pragmatic approach to discourse analysis (Schiffrin, 1994; Strauss & Feiz, 2014), the grammatical, lexical, and indirect mitigation strategies (Wajnryb, 1994) employed by the supervisors to achieve their goal of giving feedback clearly and politely to teachers.

### 2.2	Participants

#### 2.2.1	Language Supervisors

The selection of two in-service supervisors and two university (preservice) supervisors was guided by the criteria that they (1) were school supervisors of English, and (2) had experience in clinical supervision for at least three years. This three-year experience was set to ensure that the chosen supervisor had enough experience with the supervisory process, especially the feedback-giving session after an observation. The two in-service supervisors came from a public national high school in Parañaque City, while the preservice supervisors were from a private Catholic university in Manila. All the supervisors were female. The first in-service supervisor was 55 years old at the time of the study and holds a bachelor of secondary education degree major in English. This supervisor, who was handling Grade 10 students at the time of the investigation, had been supervising fellow teachers in the department for the past five years. The second in-service teacher holds a degree in mass communication and took education units to qualify as a teacher. She had experience teaching in three national high schools in Metro Manila and had already taken 36 units of graduate courses at the time of the data gathering. She was a language supervisor for three years when she participated

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in the study. The first preservice supervisor had a 30-year experience and holds a master's degree in reading education from a Manila university. She had been involved in the practicum program of her university for eight years and handled language education subjects. The second university supervisor had a master's degree in language and literature teaching from a university in Manila. She had also taught different language education subjects and had been a practicum supervisor for three years at the time of this investigation.

2.2.2   Language Teachers

Four in-service teachers from a public high school in Parañaque City and four preservice teachers from a Catholic university in Manila were chosen for this investigation. For teachers to be chosen, they should (1) be teachers or trainee-teachers of English and (2) have experience or knowledge about feedback-giving that transpires during post-lesson supervisory conferences. Two of the in-service teachers were female, while the other two were male. Their experience ranged from 14 to 39 years at the time of the research. Two of the four teachers have bachelor's degrees in education, while the other two have postgraduate degrees. The four in-service educators had experience teaching on different levels in both private and public schools. The four preservice teachers, meanwhile, had their practicum experience in two public schools in the Division of Manila. The first two were males who were assigned to a science high school. The other two preservice teachers had their training in a regular school. One of these two student teachers was a male Korean who had been in the country for four years. The student participants had limited experience in supervision although they were knowledgeable about it.

2.3   Instrument

The oral data needed for this research were gathered through audio-recording. The post-lesson conferences of the supervisors and the teachers were recorded and then transcribed. The researcher attended the feedback-giving sessions to record the conversation upon securing the permission of the study participants to do so. The researcher was a nonparticipant observer during these meetings and gave only minimal comments when his opinion was solicited.

2.4   Procedure

The recording of the post-lesson conferences happened during the meeting between the supervisors and the teachers following a classroom observation. The recordings were listened to and transcribed. The transcriptions were read and counterchecked with the recordings to ensure accuracy. The analysis of the transcriptions was started by identifying stretches of critical incidents (CIs) in the discourse of the supervisor. A CI is composed of language preparatory for the FTA, the FTA itself, and the responses of the supervisor and the teacher (Wajnryb, 1994). After identifying the CI, the critical utterances, or stretches of language containing a negative evaluation, were isolated and analyzed in terms of the mitigation

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strategies they contained. These strategies were classified and analyzed using a tool based on the taxonomy developed by Wajnryb (1994) (see Appendix A). In this classification tool, syntactic strategies were (A), semantic strategies were (B), and indirect strategies were (C). Each general type has several subcategories. Syntactic mitigation strategies had seven (A1 to A7), semantic had four (B1 to B4), and indirect had three (C1 to C3). If further classification was needed, lowercase letters were utilized, e.g., B1a, B2a, etc. Each utterance containing mitigation was labeled using a code based on the supervisory discourse and the critical incident where they could be found. For example, a code such as [1.5] means that the featured utterance could be found in the fifth critical incident in the first supervisory post-conference. Considering the dynamic nature of language and its constitutive elements, a stretch of discourse could contain a number of mitigation strategies. Words, phrases, utterances, and linguistic structures in Filipino were included in the analysis and were classified using the same categories.

3.   Findings and Discussion

Based on the analysis of the transcripts of eight post-conferences recorded for the purposes of this investigation, all the three major categories of language mitigation in the taxonomy, i.e., syntactic, semantic, and indirect mitigation techniques, were found. The discourse analysis also discovered seven subcategories of syntactic mitigation strategies and four subtypes of semantic mitigation techniques. Some of these subgroups, especially those under semantic mitigation techniques, could still be further subdivided. Three subdivisions of indirect mitigation were also discovered in the data. These divisions and subtypes of mitigation strategies found in the feedback of four language supervisors are demonstrated in Figure 1.
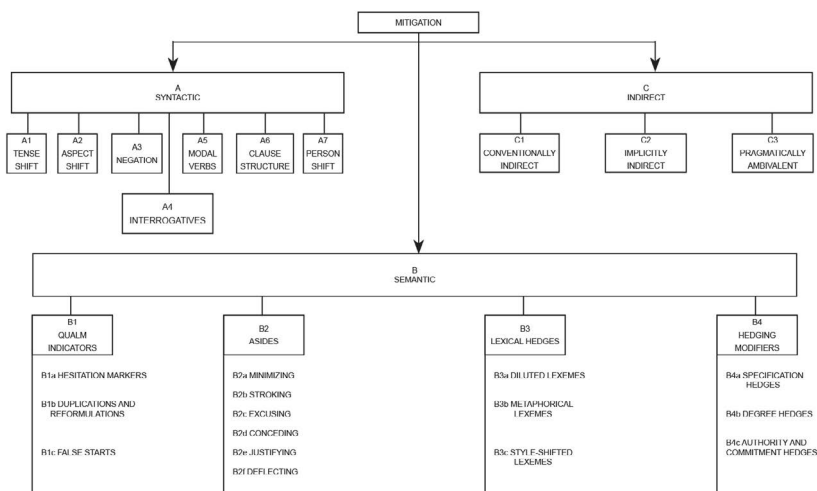

Figure 1. *Mitigation strategies found in supervisor feedback*

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3.1 Syntactic Mitigation Strategies

The main basis for these categories of mitigation is the manner through which politeness strategies are linguistically realized. In the case of syntactic mitigation strategies, politeness is grammaticalized into the mechanics of the construction of message through the syntax of the language (e.g., tense, negation, interrogation) (Wajnryb, 1994). The subcategories of syntactic mitigation found in the eight pieces of supervisory discourse were tense shift, aspect shift, negation, interrogatives, modal verbs, clause structure, and person shift.

Tense pertains to the alteration or modification of the form of the verb to encode the time of the action or state it describes (Celce-Murcia & Freeman, 2008; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1983). In the case of the use of the past tense in the data, its mitigating meaning is derived from the sense of "remoteness" it conveys, which stems from the idea that the event is over and done with (Celce-Murcia & Freeman, 2008). This remoteness also comes from the event's distance from reality. The past tense also expresses indirectness, which can also be a signal of politeness (Celce-Murcia & Freeman, 2008). This meaning of remoteness is shown by this extract from the data:

> Okay. Sir, meron kang mga estudyante ah, okay? (Sir, you had these students, okay?) We were there at least 10 minutes, Sir?...When they came in…to them. You were not able to…notice… [1.5]

The present tense, meanwhile, was used by the supervisors in giving guidelines, which are complete and stable, one of the core meanings of the present tense (Celce-Murcia & Freeman, 2008). By using the present tense, the supervisor is basically sending the signal that she is merely stating a fact and that no offense is meant to the teacher, as shown by this example:

> Maybe, you know, the lesson plan is there as a guide but you can be flexible. [5.3]

Aspect refers to the internal structure of the action occurring at any time (Celce-Murcia & Freeman, 2008) and to the way the verb action is experienced or regarded with respect to time (Quirk et al., 1983). This analysis found the shift to the progressive aspect as one of the syntactic mitigation strategies employed by the supervisors, and this is shown by this piece of discourse:

> Kasi I felt that you were spending too much already sa questioning part. (Because I felt that you were already spending too much time on the questioning part) [8.6]

By using the progressive aspect, which depicts actions as imperfective or incomplete, the supervisor was able to make his comments less certain and precise, opening her to a possible "challenge," and to deflect the attention from the teacher to the process or activity in progress (Wajnryb, 1994).

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Another strategy discovered was negation. Logicians may posit that there is a symmetrical relationship between an affirmative and a negative statement (Celce-Murcia & Freeman, 2008), but negation is more complex than this. One meaning of negation is denial, which can be explicit or implicit (Tottie, 1991, as cited in Celce-Murcia & Freeman, 2008). By denying something, the supervisor is denying the truth of the propositional content of the sentence. This is where its mitigating effect lies because by simply telling what is not, the supervisor is leaving several possibilities on what really the fact is. This provides the supervisor an oblique way to raise an issue or problem with the teacher (Wajnryb, 1994). Another type of negation used to mitigate FTAs in the data is negative transportation or transferred negative, that is, the transfer of the negative of the subordinate clause where it semantically belongs, to the matrix clause (Quirk et al., 1983). This is shown by this stretch from the data:

> Ah and I ah I <u>don't know</u> if it's because nakaupo kami dun sa area na yun and baka siguro mas active yung girl dun sa side na yun but try to give equal attention even dun sa mga hindi nagtataas. (I don't know if it's because we were seated in the area or because the girl on the other side was more active, but try to give attention to those not raising their hands.) [8.10]

By using negative transportation, the sentence results in different meanings that weaken the negative force of the transferred negative (Quirk et al., 1983). This syntactic construction is also able to distance the negative from the subordinate clause, to which it really belongs and which is pragmatically more important because of its propositional content. In the case of supervision, through negative transportation, the negativity of supervisory feedback is softened and made tentative.

The conventionalized way for supervisors to provide feedback is through questions (Wajnryb, 1994). Questions can either be yes-no or wh-questions and can have a range of purposes. One of the most important pragmatic functions of questions is to provide supervisors a way to transform "I" statements into "you" questions, leading to the avoidance of conflicts and disagreements during supervisory conferences. Interrogatives also allow supervisors to become the seeker of answers, which reduces the power asymmetry between him or her and the teacher. One example of question found in the data is the following line:

> Now, uhm, <u>what other means could you have done to at least make them, make them really know the story?</u> [5.3]

The analysis also found that supervisors used tag questions such as "diba" and "right" in their redressive language. Their mitigation value stems from the invitation for a response on the part of the teacher and a collaboration of meaning between him or her and the supervisor. Because tag questions invite a response, this blunts the imposition contained in critical feedback, thereby mitigating its impact on the teacher's face as demonstrated by this example:

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Ibig sabihin they're still thinking so huwag ah kaagad ma-tempt na tawagin na lang yung nakataas ang kamay lalo na kung lagi na lang nakataas parang ganun <u>diba?</u> [It means they're still thinking, so don't be immediately tempted to call those raising their hands, especially if they are always participating, right?] [8.10]

Another type of syntactic mitigation strategy found in the data was the use of modals, which can qualify the meaning of a clause to reflect the speaker's judgment on the likelihood that the meaning it carries is true (Celce-Murcia & Freeman, 2008; Quirk et al., 1983). Modals express a variety of meanings such as degree of probability, attitude, and politeness. In the data, modals were utilized to remove the bluntness of declarative sentences by offering possibilities or reducing obligations. The supervisors were able to make their critical feedback appear suggestive and recommendatory through modals such as "could" and "may." Modals such as "must" also offered supervisors a means to highlight the urgency or need of their piece of advice. This is shown by this piece of language:

Now uhm can I ask you that next time na-manage mo siya in fairness na-manage mo yung time but I feel na may mga parts na dragging na siya like you <u>could</u> have you know. (Now uhm can I ask you that next time, in fairness to you, you managed your time well, but I feel that there were already dragging parts which you could have you know.) [8.6]

Subordination and conditional subordination were the two types of clause structure found in the data. The first type of subordination uncovered was the pattern main clause + subordinate clause in which the matrix clause contains a first-person pronoun and a verb of perception followed by a subordinate clause holding the proposition (Wajnryb, 1994). This is shown by this sample:

Kasi if for example for comprehension <u>I think uhm you can at least be intentional with the number of questions.</u> [8.6]

By using subordination, the main clause in the foreground creates a feeling of subjectivity in the sentence and the critical feedback in the subordinate clause is relegated to a less prominent location, the clause-final position. Through the subjectivity created by the foregrounded main clause, the supervisor's feedback becomes less of a fact and becomes open to a challenge from the teacher, thereby reducing the asymmetrical relationship between the two. The clause-final position of the critical feedback, meanwhile, removes its bluntness and makes it appear less important. Conditional sentences, on the other hand, mitigate through their ability to control the proposition in the matrix clause by making it dependent on the subordinate clause. Through this dependence, the matrix clause becomes less of a statement of fact, which reduces the impact of the FTA on the teacher's face. An example of this found in the data is:

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Uhm <u>when there's an observation</u> you give a copy of the lesson plan. [8.8]

The final subtype of syntactic mitigation found in the discourse of supervisors was person shift, which can be shift to the third person, shift to the first person, or ambivalent use of the second person. By shifting to the third person, the supervisor is able to hide the agency of the critical feedback. Through this agency masking, the responsibility is not directed at the teacher, and the sting of supervisory feedback is removed. The shift to the first person "I," meanwhile, enabled the supervisor to focus the conversation on him or her. Mitigation here lies in the creation of the solidarity between the supervisor and the teacher by demonstrating shared experiences and issues in the classroom (Wajnryb, 1994). The second person pronoun "you" can either be singular or plural in meaning but is always treated as plural for the purposes of subject-verb concord. "You" can also refer to people in general. This indeterminate meaning is the source of the mitigating and pragmatic capability of "you" (Wajnryb, 1994). This conveys lack of specificity in terms of the person being referenced and therefore removes the sting of supervisory feedback.

3.2   Semantic Mitigation Strategies

The next major category of mitigation found in the data was semantic mitigation strategies. Under this division, mitigation is conveyed directly through the signaled meanings of words employed by supervisors in their speech (Wajnryb, 1994). The four major subcategories of semantic mitigation discovered in this discourse analysis were qualm indicators, asides, lexical hedges, and hedging modifiers, with each of these having further subdivisions.

Qualm indicators are linguistic signals of uneasiness or reticence to give critical feedback on the part of the speaker (Wajnryb, 1994). They are a mixture of linguistic and acoustic signals, and almost all of them are fragments rather than sentences. Qualm indicators signal to the teacher that the supervisor is uneasy with his message and make the comment less impositive and more tentative (Wajnryb, 1994). The subclasses of qualm indicators found in the data were hesitation markers, duplications and reformulations, and false starts. Hesitation markers in the data such as *ah* and *ano* (what) showed the reluctance, tentativeness, and uneasiness of supervisors to produce their message. They also demonstrated how the supervisors carefully avoided offending the teacher and how they tried to buy themselves time to think about the words they would employ in feedback-giving. The collective impact of hesitation markers was to make the supervisor and his message less definitive and authoritative. The second subcategory of qualm indicators was reformulations and duplications. Reformulations, which happen when the same idea is phrased differently, and duplications, which transpire when the same words are repeated (Wajnryb, 1994), are demonstrated in this extract:

Okay, <u>you</u>, <u>you</u> gave them the ano, <u>the the anticipation guide</u> noh, <u>the questions</u>, but you don't let them read the statements or the questions there. [1.3]

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These showed the tendency of speakers to repeat or recast their message to buy time or improve their manner of feeding back. The third type of qualm indicators in the data was false starts, which are a part of natural language and show the mental struggle of the speaker to formulate his or her message (Wajnryb, 1994). These consist of sentence beginnings and self-repairs, and these forward and backward movements in language indicate that the speaker is struggling to find the right words to engineer his feedback. These hesitations give false starts their mitigating power and humble the supervisor by sowing doubts on his message.

Asides are short yet complete units that accompany criticisms and contain a different content from the main message from which it branches (Wajnryb, 1994). An example of an aside is shown below:

> At tsaka, 'di ba, Sir, <u>ewan ko sa akin lang ah</u>, hangga't maaari, as much as possible, you avoid erasure. (This is just my opinion, but as much as possible you avoid erasure, right, Sir?) [3.3]

These afford supervisors with a means to speak with another voice and with another speaker status. The subcategories of asides found in the data were minimizing, stroking, excusing, conceding, justifying, and deflecting. Minimizing asides lower the harshness of a critical message in the data by (1) downplaying the problem and devaluing the propositional content of the message, and (2) humbling the authority of the supervisor through self-deprecation (Wajnryb, 1994). This effect is shown by the piece of discourse shown in [3.3] above. Another subgroup of asides is stroking, which removes the sting of a critical message by massaging the ego and the positive feelings of the teacher, resulting in better acceptance of the feedback (Wajnryb, 1994). A sample of this is presented below.

> Then, I want ah <u>you did well in uh making them think at the question, over the questions that you asked</u>. But I suggest that you also give them the chance to, to do the talking like read them read. [6.5]

In the case of excusing asides, the supervisor relays the feedback but is able to make the teachers escape responsibility by giving a reason for the criticized event (Wajnryb, 1994). Through these, the supervisor is able to empathize with the teacher by demonstrating that she understands the situation. An example of this is this piece of language:

> Okay din yung ano, yung ah mga so yu-, yung mga reporters, are, ah are they the same people na laging nag-ano sa una, hindi? Nag-iba? <u>Kasi yung iba parang, nahihiya pa noh? Siguro mga first time, mga first timer.</u> (Are those students always reporting, or do they take turns doing so? Some of them were a bit shy, right? Maybe it was their first time.) [4.3]

Conceding asides are similar to stroking asides because they offer praise in the form of acknowledgment that the teacher exerted effort in the context of the criticized

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event (Wajnryb, 1994). This acknowledgment removes the sting of the message and blunts the sharpness of the feedback, rendering it more palatable to the teacher. This power is demonstrated by this stretch of language:

> ISS2: Oo. Kahit na kung anu-ano man yun basta, siguro sila basta makapag-produce lang sila. <u>Importante ah they become part of the activity</u>. (Yes, whatever they presented, what's important was they became part of the activity.) [4.7]

Justifying asides, meanwhile, are akin to excusing asides in that they offer an excuse, but this reason is not for the teacher's behavior but for the supervisor's (Wajnryb, 1994). These give supervisors a means to justify the need for critical feedback by raising the fact that it was the teacher himself or herself who brought the issue to the fore or that it is part of the school's rules. For example, by citing a guideline in school, the supervisor is able to rationalize why she needs to provide critical feedback. Finally, deflecting asides momentarily remove the focus away from the teacher to the supervisor (Wajnryb, 1994). This is done by showing the teacher that the supervisor shares a set of common experiences with him or her. This also removes the hierarchical relationship between them and humanizes the supervisor by showing that she understands what the teacher is feeling and going through. A sample of this from the data is this line:

> You know sometimes, maybe because it goes with the age or the experience, there <u>are</u> times that I also <u>plan</u> things but this suddenly something <u>crops up</u> so I, I, I <u>change</u> my activity or I, I <u>think</u> of another foc-, another things to focus on. That is, that'<u>s</u> alright. [5.2]

Lexical hedges were difficult to find in the post-lesson discourse of supervisors. These mitigating devices are chosen over another because of their ability to soften the impact of the message on the receiver's face. At best, one can only surmise the lexemes being avoided, if such is really the case, and this investigation could only offer possibilities. The lexical hedges found in the data were diluted lexemes, metaphorical lexemes, and style-shifted lexemes. Diluted lexemes are words chosen over others for their softer, more mitigated meaning (Wajnryb, 1994). For example, in this utterance from the data:

> Uhm here are the things that you I want to see <u>improvements</u> [solutions] in these particular areas. [8.6]

instead of using the word "solutions" that implies a problem or issue, the supervisor utilized the word "improvements," which has less sting than the former and conveys a more positive message. By avoiding the more congruent form, the feedback is made less critical and harsh. Metaphorical lexemes, meanwhile, are chosen over their more congruent counterparts also because of their mitigating effects. By using metaphors, the supervisor was assuming a shared

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background from which the teacher could draw the meaning the supervisor would like to express. Through this solidarity, the imbalance in power is diluted even for just this instance. Lastly, style-shifted lexemes are colloquial, nontechnical terms in supervisory feedback. By using these words, the supervisor was able to bridge the power-related distance between her and the teacher because the use of technical lexemes creates an aura of exclusivity and awe through language. Style-shifted lexemes also make supervisors more accessible and put them on the same plane in the issue as the teachers. This is demonstrated by this stretch of discourse:

> Parang na-ano…Ganun, parang, parang na-ano ko lang nabigla ang bata gagawa agad ng story. Kumbaga wala kang <u>pasakalye</u>. (It was like, it seemed, I just, the students were surprised they would immediately write a story. In other words, you did not have an introduction) [4.2]

Finally, hedging modifiers may be in the form of words, phrases, or even clauses. They can be specification hedges, degree hedges, and authority and commitment hedges. Specification hedges or compromisers render the class membership of words and phrases vague and reduce the force of the word they modify (Quirk et al., 1983). They also reduce the gravity of the semantic proposition of a word or phrase and lessen the urgency of the nature of the message. Some examples of this in the data were "parang," "medyo," and "more or less." Degree hedges or diminishers, meanwhile, reduce the amount or the quantity of the item they modify (Quirk et al., 1983; Wajnryb, 1994). They have the effect of scaling the quantity or amount of an item downward (Quirk et al., 1983) and understate the degree to which things are bad or serious (Leech, 1983, as cited in Wajnryb, 1994). Some examples of these from the data are "just," "a bit," and "a little." Lastly, authority and commitment hedges are constructed through an anticipatory clause (Wajnryb, 1994) with a private verb in the matrix clause, which is a type of factual verb that expresses intellectual states such as beliefs and intellectual acts (Quirk et al., 1983). In the examples from the data, this was realized through the "I + private verb + subordinate clause" construction. The "I + think" construction provided the feedback a level of subjectivity and makes it less of a declaration of the state of affairs. In the example below, removing the projecting clause from the underlined piece of discourse will result in a more direct feedback:

> Ok. So from the motivation which one the act- <u>I think they were, though, the two paragraphs were the ones you used as springboard for the lesson,</u> right? [6.3]

3.3   Indirect Mitigation Strategies

The third major class of mitigation in the data involves indirectness or the use of sentences and phrases that have contextually unambiguous meanings, which are different from what they literally mean (Brown & Levinson, 1987). It may be seen also as a verbal or nonverbal

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communicative behavior to convey something more than or different from its literal meaning (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Indirectness enables the speaker to go on-record with his FTA but at the same time express his desire to have gone off-record (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Although it is convenient to see indirectness as a unitary, universal feature, it is better to look at it as a continuum with varying and differing degrees of indirectness, resulting in three subtypes for this general class of mitigation: conventionally indirect, implicitly indirect, and pragmatically ambivalent (Wajnryb, 1994).

For the purposes of this investigation, stretches of discourse that showed that the supervisor had gone on-record through a polite form were considered as examples of conventionally indirect. In this example,

> Tapos, ah yung ano natin, Sir, yung pagco-correct natin sa students while ano, sa palagay mo hindi makaka-apekto yun sa ano natin? (Then our error correction, Sir while, you think it will not affect our students?) [1.1]

the supervisor used a question, one of the conventionalized ways for her to be indirect but at the same time be on-record with her FTA on the teacher's excessive correction. The question provided the supervisor an indirect means to raise the issue with the teacher's correction of his students. Through the question, the supervisor removed the sting of the feedback by making her question subject to the opinion of the teacher and by making the comment negotiable. The supervisor was able to mitigate by beginning her comment with, "Ano sa palagay mo? (You think…?)." This prefacing involved the teacher in the conversation and addressed their power imbalance.

The second point on the continuum of indirectness is implicit indirectness. Implicit indirectness is utterance-specific and not conventionalized (Wajnryb, 1994). To do this, the supervisor says something that is either more general and is actually different from what he means (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The hearer, who in this case is the teacher, should use both textual and contextual clues to understand the message of the supervisor and link the statement's literal meaning with its intended meaning through inference. Because of the interpretation required, a wide range of meanings may be deciphered and may put the message at risk. In the sample discourse below,

> Parang na-ano…Ganun, parang, parang na-ano ko lang nabigla ang bata gagawa agad ng story. Kumbaga wala kang pasakalye. (It was like, it seemed, I just, the students were surprised they would immediately write a story. In other words, you did not have an introduction) [4.1]

the supervisor raised the issue she saw by stating how students would react to a story-writing activity without any introduction. By highlighting how the students would react to the lack of an introduction, the supervisor was able to make the teacher think why the perspective of the student was being discussed by the supervisor. By thinking that such a comment was still relevant to the conversation though on the surface it looked otherwise, the teacher would surmise that the supervisor was feeding back on the activity.

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The last point on the continuum of indirectness is pragmatic ambivalence (Wajnryb, 1994). In this type of indirectness, the hearer or teacher struggles to be certain about the intended illocutionary force of the utterance because this cannot be deciphered based on sense, context, or a combination of the two. Speaker intention is irretrievable or difficult to know in this type of indirectness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This indirectness also affords the supervisor an "out" through defensible interpretations such a device gives. Thus, pragmatic ambivalence enables the supervisor to do an FTA but avoid responsibility for it by leaving the interpretation with the teacher (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In this example below,

Alright. <u>What was what were your expectations</u>? [7.2]

the supervisor is asking the teacher about his expectations of the lesson, its activities, and his students. The question can be interpreted as a simple inquiry about what is on the mind of the teacher, a praise, the teacher's expectation on the success of the teacher, or a form of criticism. It was only later in the conversation when the real motive of the supervisor surfaced. After learning that the expectation of the teacher did not match what happened in the classroom, the supervisor gave a piece of advice on what he could do next time to prevent the same problems from occurring.

4.   Conclusion

The discourse analysis of the post-lesson conferences showed that mitigation is a common feature of supervisory talk and revealed three major classes of mitigation used by supervisors in their feedback-giving. These were syntactic, semantic, and indirect mitigation strategies, each of which had subclasses. The prevalence of mitigation strategies in the post-lesson conferences showed that the supervisors were aware of the threats that critical feedback posed to the face of the teachers (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and the need for them to clearly provide comments to teachers. This is one of the dilemmas, tensions, and anomalies in the practice of supervision (Wajnryb, 1994). The use of an extensive list of linguistic mitigation strategies to provide critical feedback and maintain collegiality between supervisors and teachers can be one of the means for supervisors to address this dilemma, and this result has been a consistent finding across sources in the literature (Copland, 2012; Harris, 2003; Roberts, 1992; Vasquez, 2004; Waite, 1991; Wajnryb, 1994; Yeşilbursa, 2011). The use of language politeness also suggests that the supervisors know that linguistic mitigation in speech is an important consideration for the teachers to accept their feedback, especially in an Asian country such as the Philippines where concern for others takes precedence over individual choice and desire (Kinnison, 2013). This finding also indicates that mitigation performs not only personal but also institutional purposes for supervisors and people with power in general, a facet of politeness theory that is not developed by Brown and Levinson (1987) and is explored by other researchers (Harris, 2003). Although the supervisors were endowed with institutional power such as the right to set the topic of conversation and control

its flow, they employed redressive features in their language to cushion the impact of their critical message and avoid offending the teachers. The investigation also demonstrated not only the applicability of Brown and Levinson's (1987) face-saving model of politeness in the Philippine context but also the wide range of similarities of mitigation strategies used in both native-speaker (Wajnryb, 1994) and ESL contexts, indicating universal yet localized features of linguistic politeness.

The findings of this investigation demonstrate the need for supervisors to be trained in ways of composing their message, so they can provide feedback clearly and politely. It is also recommended that further research on mitigation in other areas where there is power asymmetry between participants, such as teachers and students, and where there is equality in power, such as between two colleagues, be conducted. Future research should also go beyond language teaching environments and explore politeness in other subject areas and fields. Studies on the role that code-mixing and code-switching play should also be launched as these are prominent features of Philippine discourse and conversations. A taxonomy of utterance-level mitigation in Filipino similar to Wajnryb's (1994) should also be created to aid research on politeness in the language.

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Appendix A
Mitigation strategies classifying tool

A: Syntactic/Grammatical Mitigation Strategies
      A1: tense shift
      A2: aspect shift
      A3: negation
      A4: interrogatives
      A5: modal verbs
      A6: clause structure
      A7: person shift

B: Semantic Mitigation Strategies
      B1: qualm mitigators
      B2: asides
      B3: lexical hedges
      B4: hedging modifiers

C: Indirect Mitigation Strategies
      C1: conventionally indirect
      C2: implicitly indirect
      C3: ambivalent

General Strategy	Specific Strategy (Code)	Utterance
A		
B		
C		