

**HEDGING YOUR BETS AND SITTING ON
THE FENCE: SOME EVIDENCE FOR HEDGES
AS SUPPORT STRUCTURES**

Janet Holmes
(Victoria University of Wellington)

In the process of identifying and classifying the linguistic devices which can be used in English to realize epistemic modality (or degrees of certainty) I found it was necessary to make a distinction between two types of meaning which may be expressed by such forms, namely modal meaning and affective meaning. This distinction provides, in my view, an explanation for the many different, and sometimes incompatible, interpretations of much of the research on so-called 'women's language forms' (Lakoff 1973, 1975). In this paper I will first explain the basis for the distinction between modal and affective meaning and then discuss its implications for research in the area of sex and language.

Modal meaning and affective meaning

There is a wide range of linguistic devices which may be used to express epistemic modality in English (Holmes 1982).

B's response in (1) provides some examples of lexical items which may function in this way:

- (1) A. You're coping with the numbers at present then
- B. Well *apparently* there's a *chance* we may get some extra help

Contextual Information¹

(Work setting.
A is B's superior.)

Modal verbs such as *may*, *might*, and *could*, noun phrases such as *a chance* and *a possibility*, adverbials such as *apparently* and *probably* are examples of forms which may be used to express the degree of certainty with which the speaker wishes to assert the validity of a proposition. Thus in (1) speaker B indicates that the proposition 'we get some extra help' is only a possibility by her use of the forms *apparently*, *a chance*, and *may*. By contrast speaker B in (2) indicates her complete certainty regarding the validity of the proposition expressed in A's utterance, by using forms such as *undoubtedly* and *absolutely*:

- (2) A. Do you think that (A is a radio interviewer,
women are much B the interviewee)
more interested in
personal growth
rather than achieve-
ment in the er
ambitious sense of
it
- B. *Undoubtedly* I think
that's *absolutely*
right yes

These examples illustrate the way in which such forms may signal primarily modal meaning, or the speaker's degree of certainty regarding the truth of the proposition. Their effect is to modify the illocutionary force or strength of the assertion thus reflecting the extent of the speaker's confidence in making it.

It is possible, however, to find examples of utterances involving these same linguistic devices to express not the speaker's attitude to the proposition but rather serving primarily to express the speaker's attitude to the addressee: i.e. to signal affective meaning. In other words items which might be classified semantically as modality markers may function pragmatically as devices reflecting the relationship between the speaker and the addressee. Consider (3) for example:

- (3) *Well I think George is (Person commenting on
a bit er perhaps foolish friend's husband's
behaviour)*

The linguistic devices which serve to reduce the force of this expression of opinion function primarily to express

(positive) affective rather than modal meaning. They reflect the speaker's concern for the relationship between her and her friend, rather than her uncertainty about the truth of the proposition. Similarly the lexical 'hedges' or Downtoners (Holmes 1983b) in (4) are used primarily to express politeness or deference, i.e. the speaker's attitude to the addressee, rather than uncertainty or the speaker's attitude to the proposition:

- (4) *I had the feeling that with all the talk about the future that perhaps some of the Ministers were not talking quite so strongly in an election year context and I wondered whether perhaps you were surprised that ...* (Interviewer to Prime Minister)

Linguistic devices which serve to increase the force of speech acts may similarly express primarily affective rather than modal meaning. In other words Boosters or lexical items which express certainty or conviction (Holmes 1983b) may function mainly to express the speaker's attitude to the addressee rather than to the proposition being asserted: i.e., their function may be firstly to provide information about the interpersonal dimension of the interaction, how the speaker feels towards the addressee, rather than about the exact degree of validity of the proposition. (5) provides an example where the Booster *obviously* serves to signal the speaker's solidarity with the aggrieved addressee:

- (5) *She's obviously difficult to work with* (One friend to another about addressee's colleague)

In (6), on the other hand, the Boosters serve to increase the social distance between the speaker and the addressee by boosting the force of a negatively affective speech act:

- (6) *My god you must be completely mad* (One friend to another discussing addressee's proposed action)

Clearly the primary function of such items in this context is to signal (negative) affective rather than modal meaning.

Accurate interpretation of the meaning of linguistic

forms will always require careful consideration of contextual factors. One cannot assign meaning to utterances in a social vacuum. In order to distinguish between the modal and affective meaning of linguistic devices which modify the force of speech acts at least two interrelated contextual factors need to be taken into account, namely the function of the speech act in the developing discourse, and the relationship between the participants in the context of utterance. The same form will have quite a different effect attenuating or boosting a criticism, for instance, as opposed to a compliment, uttered by a friend as opposed to a stranger, and so on. Consider (7) and (8) for example:

(7) She *seems pretty* intelligent

(8) It's a budgie *I think*

If (7) is a teacher's judicious evaluation of the referent's abilities then the primary meaning of the Downtoners is likely to be modal expressing the speaker's degree of certainty regarding the proposition 'she be intelligent'. If, on the other hand, (7) is a parent's boast to a friend, the Downtoners are more likely to be serving an interpersonal affective function. Similarly if (8) is a disagreeing speech act uttered by a teacher, the function of the Downtoner is likely to be primarily affective, mitigating the force of the 'unwelcome' or negatively affective utterance (cf. Fraser 1980). If, however, (8) was uttered by a child as a response to a teacher's question, it is more likely that the Downtoner *I think* expresses uncertainty or modal meaning.

Obviously then contextual information is crucial in assessing whether the primary function of such devices is modal or affective. Equally obviously there will be instances where an analyst cannot be sure, and indeed where the inherent ambiguity of such forms is being deliberately exploited by speakers. Who can be certain, for instance, whether Melanie is being tactful or indecisive in the exchange below?

(9) Teacher: I think these (Class discussing
must be middle photograph)
class boys.
What do you
think Melanie

Melanie: I don't know
they *could* be

working class
kids
couldn't they

Given the context, attenuation of the force of this disagreeing response would be appropriate in order to be polite. But it is equally possible that Melanie is uncertain about the validity of the proposition 'they be working class kids'. The photo being discussed was rather unclear and the clues to social class were not self-evident.

This last example illustrates the use of a syntactic device, the tag question, as well as the modal verb *could*, to attenuate the force of the speech act.² It is tag questions, in fact, which provide the data for the discussion in the second part of this paper where the implications of the distinction between modal and affective meaning for research on sex and language are explored.

The functions of tag questions

In her discussion of what she labels 'women's language forms', Lakoff (1975) discusses the functions of such forms in interaction. She describes, for instance, three different uses of 'hedges'. Firstly, there are those which 'convey the sense that the speaker is uncertain about what he (or she) is saying, or cannot vouch for the accuracy of the statement' (1975:53).

In terms of the analysis above these correspond to Downtoners being used primarily to express modal meaning. Lakoff considers this use of hedges to be 'fully legitimate' provided the speaker is genuinely unsure about his or her facts (1975:53).

Secondly, 'there is another justifiable use in which the hedge mitigates the possible unfriendliness or unkindness of the statement - that is where it's used for the sake of politeness' (1975:54). This corresponds to the use of Downtoners to express primarily positive affective meaning in my analysis. Thirdly, Lakoff suggests, there is another use of hedges, a use, she implies, which is not 'legitimate' or 'justifiable':

'What I mean is the class of cases in which neither of these facts pertains, and a hedge shows up anyway: the speaker is perfectly certain of the truth of the assertion, and there's no danger of offense but the tag appears anyway as an apology for making an assertion at all' (1975:54).

She suggests that women use more of this type of hedge 'because they are socialized to believe that asserting themselves strongly isn't nice or ladylike, or even feminine' (1975:54).

In what follows I will show, on the basis of an analysis of the functions of tag questions, that it is possible to identify tags which illustrate Lakoff's first and second functions of hedges, but her third category is, in my view, a chimera. It seems possible in fact that even the postulation of this third category is the result of negative stereotyping of women's behaviour. One woman's feeble hedging may well be perceived as another man's perspicacious qualification.

Very few of the researchers in the area of sex and language who have investigated Lakoff's claims about women's language have taken account of Lakoff's comments on the different functions of hedges. Most have simply counted linguistic forms and compared the totals for women vs. men with very little discussion of the functions of the forms in the context of the discourse in which they occur. Even fewer have taken account of the fact that the form of hedges may vary, and that this needs to be taken into account in any descriptive analysis. The intonation characterizing forms such as *I think* and *I guess*, for instance, as well as that distinguishing different types of tag questions, must be taken into account in any thorough analysis of the use of such forms. And syntactic position is also relevant to the meaning conveyed by many hedges or Downtoners. Compare (10) and (11), for example:

(10) I believe the students are responsible for this

(11) The students are responsible for this I believe

(11) expresses considerably less certainty concerning the validity of the proposition than (10). Indeed the major function of *I believe* in (10) could well be to boost the force of the assertion, especially if the speaker had status and his or her opinions carried particular weight in the context of discussion. Attention both to linguistic form

and to the range of functions which forms may express in different contexts is, then, a pre-requisite for any satisfactory analysis.

Tag questions may vary in form in a number of ways: firstly the tag may be a canonical tag (e.g. *are you? isn't it?*) or it may be what I have labelled an 'invariant tag' (e.g. *eh? huh? alright? OK?*); secondly the intonation on the tag may be rising or falling; and thirdly the polarity of canonical tags may be positive or negative (and this may contrast with or be the same as the polarity of the main clause).³

Turning to the function of tags, the picture is equally complex. All tag questions function as devices for eliciting a response from the addressee by virtue of their interrogative form. Tags may also function, at a very general level, as attenuating devices: they reduce the force of the speech act in which they occur. Hence the tag in (12) attenuates the force of a criticism, whereas that in (13) reduces the directive force of the utterance:

(12) You're driving rather (Mother to son)
fast *aren't you*

(13) Open the oven door for (Wife to husband)
me *could you*

At a more specific level tags can be analysed according to whether they express primarily modal or affective meaning, and, within affective meaning, it is possible to further distinguish 'facilitative' tags from 'softeners'. Table I provides a summary of the distribution of the tags in a 43 000 word speech corpus according to these categories, as well as according to the sex of the speaker.⁴

In the first category are tags whose primary function is to signal the speaker's degree of certainty about the proposition. (14) provides an example:

(14) She's coming around (Husband to wife
noon *isn't she* concerning expected
guest)

Moreover different tag forms signal different degrees of certainty, as illustrated in detail elsewhere (Millar and Brown 1979, Holmes 1983a). These tags can be described

Type of meaning	No. of tag questions	
	F	M
<i>Modal meaning</i> : degree of certainty. Speaker-oriented tags signalling speaker's degree of certainty about proposition: e.g. requesting reassurance, confirmation, agreement etc.	18 (35%)	24 (61%)
<i>Affective meaning</i> Addressee-oriented tags		
(1) Facilitative Expressing speaker's solidarity with or positive attitude to addressee: e.g. facilitating speaker's contribution to discourse	30 (59%)	10 (25%)
(2) Softening Expressing politeness or speaker's concern for addressee's feelings, e.g. softening force of criticism, directive etc.	3 (6%)	5 (13%)
	51	39

Table I

Distribution of tag questions according to sex of speaker and function of tag in discourse

as speaker-oriented since they request reassurance about or confirmation of the speaker's proposition.

Tags whose primary function can be described as affective, or addressee-oriented, express the speaker's attitude to the addressee either by facilitating contributions to the interaction or by softening or mitigating the force of negatively affective speech acts. Facilitative tags express solidarity or 'positive politeness' (Brown and Levinson 1978:106), supporting the addressee by encouraging contribu-

tions to the discourse. (15) and (16) provide examples:

(15) Still working hard at (Host to guest)
your office *are* you

(16) The hen's brown *isn't* (Teacher to pupil)
she

(15) provides the addressee with a smooth means of access to the conversation. (16) provides the pupil with a question which is considerably easier to respond to than, for example, *What colour is the hen?* (cf. French and MacLure 1979). The tag in both cases facilitates the addressee's participation in the interaction.

Softening tags on the other hand express concern for the speaker's feelings, or 'negative politeness' in Brown and Levinson's terms. (12) and (13) above provide examples of canonical tags serving this function, and (17) provides an example with an invariant tag which is particularly frequent in the speech of New Zealand children:

(17) That was pretty silly (Older child to younger
eh friend)

As Table I shows, in a corpus consisting of equal amounts of female and male speech in matched contexts, the overall distribution of tags between the sexes does not differ greatly. Women used 56.6% of the total number of tags, while men used 43.3%. The pattern of functional distribution, however, is quite different for the two sexes. Sixty percent of the tags used by women are facilitative tags, while only 25% of the men's tags are of this type. On the other hand 61% of the men's tags express uncertainty, compared to only 35% of the women's tags. Classifying multifunctional devices such as tags and hedges according to their primary or main function is obviously difficult and to some extent subjective. However classification according to these three categories was at least feasible, whereas distinguishing within category 1, as Lakoff suggests one might, between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' or 'unjustifiable' modal tags seems to me quite impossible. Moreover there is some support for the pattern revealed by these results from the work of other researchers who have examined the differential contributions of women and men to discourse.

It has been found, for instance, that in ostensibly equal

encounters women tend to put considerably more effort than men into maintaining and facilitating conversation and discussion. Women provide support for others' topics (Fishman 1978, Hirschman 1974, Strodtbeck and Mann 1956), allow men to dominate the available talking time with little interruption (Eakins and Eakins 1979, Edelsky 1981, Soskin and John 1963, Spender 1979, Swacker 1975, Zimmerman and West 1975) and generally do the lion's share of the conversational 'work' in female-male interactions. Hence this evidence that women use more facilitating tag questions than men do is consistent with the view of women as supportive conversationalists which is reflected in a wide range of research.

Clearly, too, the evidence presented in Table I demonstrates that comparing the frequency of linguistic forms without taking account of their function in discourse may result in a misleading picture of the relationship between language and society. Women and men may use similar or different frequencies of the same form. If they are using the form for different functions, however, simple comparison of the number of occurrences of the form in the speech of each sex is less than illuminating. As Brown (1981:133) suggests it is crucial to consider function or 'communicative strategy' as an intervening variable between form and social group if we are to proceed beyond meaningless and uninformative correlation.

Turning now to the second factor which is relevant in accurately interpreting the meaning of linguistic devices such as Downtoners, Boosters and tags, i.e. the relationship between the participants in the context of utterance, Table II provides information on the distribution of tags according to the role of the speaker in the interaction. The term 'leadership role/facilitator' is used to refer to those responsible for ensuring that the interaction proceeds smoothly: e.g. teachers, discussion group leaders, hosts in informal conversations at home, and interviewers in radio and TV programmes.⁵ Clearly the facilitators used more tags (67.8%) than their co-participants (32.2%). What is more, although the data were balanced in terms of the number of females and males who could be described as leaders on the basis of non-linguistic criteria, women were more likely than men to use tags when performing the leadership role (75% vs. 59%).

The results of this analysis clearly challenge Lakoff's claims that women use more 'unjustifiable' or 'illegitimate' tag questions 'out of a fear of seeming too masculine by being assertive and saying things directly' (1975:54). Women

Role of speaker	No. of tag questions		
	F	M	Total
Leadership role/Facilitator	38 (75%)	23 (59%)	61 (67.8%)
Non-leadership role	13 (25%)	16 (41%)	29 (32.2%)
	51	39	90

Table II

Distribution of tag questions according to role and sex of speaker

tend to use more facilitating tags than tags serving other functions and facilitating tags can most definitely not be labelled 'illegitimate'.

Women also tend to use more facilitating tags than men do, a finding which is consistent with other research suggesting women tend to adopt a supportive role in interactions. The data used in this analysis extend the contexts in which this pattern has been noted. Previous research has tended to focus on equal encounters between married couples or friends in settings where there is no obvious facilitator responsible for the success of the interaction. This study extends that finding to interview situations, classrooms and host-guest contexts where one or more of the participants is very clearly responsible for the overall development of the conversation or discussion.

In such contexts, it is clear that tag questions tend to occur more frequently in the speech of the facilitators or leaders rather than in the speech of other participants, regardless of sex. Clearly claims that tag forms and hedges tend to characterize the speech of the 'powerless' need some modification in the light of this finding (Lakoff 1973, 1975, O'Barr and Atkins 1980).

In most areas of sociolinguistic research analysis of form without taking account of communicative function and context has long been recognized as a theoretically unacceptable and uninformative procedure. But in research on the relationship between the sex of speakers and the language they use, it is only too easy to find studies which ignore factors such as the function of the forms examined and the context of discourse. As Brown points out:

'Linguistic features said to differentiate women's and men's speech have been treated as a collection of random linguistic facts ... There is no explicit connection drawn between the linguistic facts (traits of women's speech) and the sociological facts (the secondary position of women in society) in analyses to date' (1980:133).

This analysis has demonstrated the need to take account of the function of tags in the discourse and the role of the speaker in the interaction in providing a satisfactory description of the distribution of tag questions. It should also be recognized that other forms will serve a similar range of functions to tag questions. Hence to demonstrate that women use more facilitative tags than men, for instance, leaves open the possibility that either sex may use other linguistic devices for the same purpose. There are a range of linguistic devices available for facilitating interaction, for example. A thorough analysis of the various ways of expressing a particular function or communicative strategy is needed in order to say anything useful about the linguistic devices which differentiate different groups in the society (see Holmes forthcoming for a fuller discussion).

Finally it is worth commenting on the potential influence of the eye of the beholder in research on sex and language. The inevitable subjectivity which is involved in classifying forms according to the functions they serve means that research in this area is especially vulnerable to the influence of stereotyping. Take Downtoners, for example, lexical items which attenuate the force of the speech act in which they occur. This attenuation may express primarily affective or primarily modal meaning. Downtoners may be used to express deference or concern for the feelings and views of others: i.e. as politeness devices. As such they are overtly values and considered essential components in the linguistic repertoire of any user of the standard variety. Since, however, the same lexical items may also be used to express modal

meaning or the speaker's uncertainty, it is possible, by a simple bit of sleight-of-hand, to evaluate such forms differently in the speech of women and men. When women use such forms they may be heard as demonstrating lack of confidence, authority, and conviction in what they are saying, as 'tentative, hesitant, even trivial and therefore "deficient"' (Spender 1980:8). Men using the same forms may be perceived as being polite.

I have suggested in this paper that there is a third function served by forms which modify the force of speech acts, namely, a facilitative positive politeness function, expressing solidarity with the addressee. While it is easy to see how this function might be served by Boosters, I have demonstrated that it can be identified even in the analysis of tag questions - forms which typically attenuate rather than boost the force of speech acts. Given that the same forms may serve different functions it seems reasonable, then, to use the positively perceived functions as the basis of a stereotype of women's language. Moreover the analysis provided in this paper suggests that such a stereotype would not be inaccurate. Tag questions can quite validly be perceived not as 'hedges' or barriers to communication but as conversational support structures.

NOTES

¹I have consistently supplied in as economical a form as possible sufficient contextual information to interpret the illocutionary point and the approximate degree of force of the speech act. This generally involves information from which the reader can deduce the relative status or power of the participants, the social distance or degree of solidarity between them, and the cost or ranking of the imposition represented by the utterance (Brown and Levinson 1978).

²In fact there is a very wide range of linguistic (and para-linguistic) devices which can be used to modify the force or strength with which the illocutionary point of a speech act is presented. Prosodic devices such as intonation and stress, syntactic devices such as tag questions and tag statements, discursal strategies such as repetition and the use of illocutionary force-indicating devices, are

examples of linguistic devices which may be used to boost or attenuate the force of speech acts (Holmes 1983b).

³For a thorough analysis of the forms of the tags in my data see Holmes 1983a.

⁴This table is a revised version of an earlier functional analysis (Holmes 1983a) in which information on the distribution of tags for sex of speaker was not included.

⁵It should be noted that role and status are independent variables since the facilitator is not always the person of higher social status: e.g. interviewer with Prime Minister.

REFERENCES

- Brown, P. 1980. 'How and why are women more polite: some evidence from a Mayan community'. *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, ed. by S. McConnell-Ginet, R. Borker and N. Furman, 111-136. New York: Praeger.
- and S. Levinson. 1978. 'Universals in language usage: politeness phenomena'. *Questions and Politeness*, ed. by E. N. Goody, 56-289. Cambridge: CUP.
- Eakins, B. W. and C. Eakins. 1979. 'Verbal turn-taking and exchanges in faculty dialogue'. *The Sociology of the Languages of American Women*, ed. by B. L. Dubois and I. Crouch, 53-62. San Antonio: Trinity University Press.
- Edelsky, C. 1981. 'Who's got the floor?', *Language in Society*, 10:383-421.
- Fishman, P. M. 1978. 'Interaction: the work women do', *Social Problems*, 25:397-406.
- Fraser, B. 1980. 'Conversational mitigation', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 4:341-350.
- French, P. and M. MacLure. 1979. 'Getting the right answer and getting the answer right', *Research in Education*, 22: 1-23.

- Hirschman, L. 1974. 'Analysis of supportive and assertive behaviour in conversations'. Paper presented at Linguistic Society of America Conference. Abstracts in *Language and Sex*, ed. by B. Thorne and N. Henley, 231, 248, 259, 288. Rowley (Mass.): Newbury House.
- Holmes, J. 1982. 'Expressing doubt and certainty in English', *RELC Journal*, 13:19-28.
- 1983a. 'The functions of tag questions', *English Language Research Journal*, 3:40-65.
- 1983b. 'Modifying illocutionary force', *Journal of Pragmatics*, in press.
- Forthcoming. 'Women's language': a functional approach.
- Lakoff, R. 1973. 'Language and woman's place', *Language in Society*, 2:45-79.
- 1975. *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper Colophon.
- Millar, M. and K. Brown. 1979. 'Tag questions in Edinburgh speech', *Linguistische Berichte*, 60:24-45.
- O'Barr, W. M. and B. K. Atkins. 1980. '"Women's language" or "powerless language"?'. *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, ed. by S. McConnell-Ginet, R. Borker and N. Furman, 93-110. New York: Praeger.
- Soskin, W. F. and V. P. John. 1963. 'The study of spontaneous talk'. *The Stream of Behaviour*, ed. by R. Borker. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Spender, D. 1979. 'Language and sex differences', *Osnabrücker Beiträge Zur Sprach Theorie*, 9:38-59.
- 1980. *Man Made Language*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Strodtbeck, F. L. and R. D. Mann. 1956. 'Sex role differentiation in jury deliberations', *Sociometry*, 19: 3-11.
- Swacker, M. 1975. 'The sex of the speaker as a socio-linguistic variable'. *Language and Sex*, ed. by B. Thorne

and N. Henley, 76-83. Rowley (Mass.): Newbury House.

Zimmerman, D. H. and C. West. 1975. 'Sex roles, interruptions and silences in conversations'. *Language and Sex*, ed. by B. Thorne and N. Henley, 105-129. Rowley (Mass.): Newbury House.