Relational strategies in the discourse of professional performance review in an Irish academic environment: The case of language teacher education

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1. Introduction

Pragmatics, as defined by Green (1996: 2), “is the study of understanding intentional human action. Thus, it involves the interpretation of acts assumed to be undertaken in order to accomplish some purpose. The central notions in pragmatics must then include belief, intention (or goal), plan, and act.” Speaker meaning in context, and the deciphering of what is meant from what is said, are central tenets. For example, saying something as apparently innocuous as it's warm can mean anything from be careful, don’t touch it, uttered as a warning by a parent to a child of a hot surface, to something like I can’t stand this heat, uttered as a complaint by a male Irish friend of mine in a climate of anything over twenty degrees. Furthermore, we should remember that speakers can have either, or both, transactional (task-oriented) and interactional (social, interpersonal – in the Hallidayan sense) (Bloor and Bloor 1995) motivations for their language use, often operating simultaneously. To allow for the interpretation of meaning in context, the “pragmatics wastebasket” (Yule 1996: 6) has filled itself with diverse but related fields such as reference and deixis (Grundy 1995: 19–27), speech act theory (Austin 1962), politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1978), implicature (Grice 1975), discourse analysis (McCarthy 1991; Schiffrin 1994; Jaworski and Coupland [eds.] 1999), and conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974; Sacks 1984). Linguistic pragmatics draws on a number of disciplines: linguistics, psychology, cultural anthropology, philosophy, and sociology (Green 1996: 1). This avoidance of reductionism is a positive move away from professional insulation and fragmentation within and between disciplines. It has been suggested that to address the problem of different, often conflicting, approaches in the human sciences, the goal should be to link and not reduce
perspectives (Wertsch 1998: 7). Obviously, the nature and focus of each investigation will determine which are primary and relevant. For present purposes, my starting point will be linguistic, but the analysis below will draw on other fields to facilitate accurate interpretation and description.

There are two main advantages to pragmatics for linguistic description. Firstly, it allows us to talk about intended meanings, assumptions and actions performed. Secondly, there is less of a temptation to try to objectify language, which is, after all, a human and socio-cultural tool (Vygotsky 1978; Wertsch 1998), and as, such interpretations should at some point prioritize its users. However, we must also acknowledge associated difficulties if we are to attempt to surmount them. An issue raised by pragmatists and discourse analysts is the fact that we are tackling very human-related concepts, which are, by their very nature, difficult to analyse in a consistent or objective way (Yule 1996; Jaworski and Coupland 1999: 36). There is a problem of interpretation, of getting into the minds of the speakers. Drawing on the socio-cultural theories of Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin (1986), Wertsch (1998: 15), citing Burke (1969), talks about the “underlying enigma” and “inevitable ambiguities” of interpreting the motives for human actions. How do we know that we are making accurate assumptions and also that our judgments are not being skewed by our own biases? The short answer is that we don’t, but it has been suggested that the degree of accuracy is likely to be higher if the analyst/researcher is a member of the community under scrutiny (Jaworski and Coupland 1999: 36). This is consistent with the type of approach advocated by many working in the action research tradition (Wallace 1998; Edge and Hancioglu 2001; Edge 2002), and is the case in the research into the discourse of teacher education reported here. Another criticism that could be made of pragmatic investigation is that historically, it has been conducted in a more qualitative than quantitative way. Technology has recently afforded one solution to this problem. We now have access to large banks of language data in the form of language corpora, which can be analysed automatically using the appropriate software (for a fuller discussion of language corpora and related issues see O’Keeffe and Farr forthcoming). Quantitative and qualitative approaches can now be integrated to yield deeper insights. The analysis presented below uses a combined approach where appropriate and draws on a computerized spoken corpus in all cases. The final caveat to be mentioned is that the results of a pragmatic examination of language are not, and should not, be generalized to all or diverse contexts. We now know that language use is at least partially context-dependent and not generic in na-
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The first corpus-based, domain-differentiated grammar reference, published in 1999, is testament to this very fact (Biber et al. 1999), and all evidence suggests that "monolithic descriptions of English grammar will be replaced by register-specific descriptions" (Conrad 2000: 549). Such a revised approach to grammar in general provides ample justification for the pragmatician drawing conclusions only about specific contexts. Ultimately, we may reach a point where we have adequate empirical evidence to comment on pragmatic language use as being either generic or specific, but we are not yet there.

At times, the nature and breadth of pragmatics may evoke comparisons with grasping at the intangible, trying to resolve that for which there is ultimately no resolution, or even stepping onto the road to dementia. Yet, to take a purely formal approach, either syntactic or semantic, is to largely ignore the speakers and contexts of use of that which we call language. Pragmatics is a necessary part of the language equation, despite any difficulties and shortcomings. To illustrate, let me quote an example from a corridor conversation between two female students at my university, which I happened to eavesdrop on recently. One said to the other, Did you see the eyes on her this morning? The other responded with, God yeah, bad, and then changed the topic. Only by drawing on contextual and speaker-related knowledge could I possibly have inferred that they were talking about a mutual friend showing very obvious signs of a chronic hang-over early on a Friday morning after the imperatively traditional Thursday night social event in Irish student life. In no way were they suggesting that this mutual friend possesses various eyes that can be alternated like fashion accessories. Although with the recent availability of coloured contact lenses this is no longer beyond the realms of a possible interpretation. Only pragmatic insights can make such meanings apparent. In this chapter I aim to link ideas from pragmatics, discourse analysis, teacher education and socio-cultural learning theories through the analysis of professional discussions between trainers and trainees on an initial language teacher education programme in an Irish academic setting.

2. Context

The relationship between the human mind (our thoughts and motivations) and human action (what we do) is always complex and often elusive. Socio-cultural theorists agree on the need to go beyond the isolated indi-
vidual when trying to understand this relationship (Burke 1969; Vygotsky 1978; Bakhtin 1986; Lantolf and Appel 1994; Mercer 1995; Wertsch 1998). We also need to take account of the “instruments” (Wertsch 1998: 24) or “cultural tools” (Vygotsky 1978) which individuals use to achieve their actions. These tools come in many forms. One realization might be a formula used in the calculation of a complex mathematical problem, while another is the language we use to communicate. Whatever their form, they are always culturally derived and determined. This is most obvious in the case of language. What is acceptable and appropriate in our utterances is determined historically and contemporarily by the culture (in the broadest sense) in which we are operating. Such an approach sees culture as molding language and vice versa. If this is the case, and evidence to date does not suggest otherwise, then multiple contexts merit mention in relation to the data from which the present analysis is derived.

The broad socio-cultural context is Irish. There are certain aspects of Irish-ness or of being part of Irish society worth considering which guide some of the conclusions and interpretations in the analysis later in this chapter. Historically and traditionally we do not have a formal social class system in the way that other cultures do. In light of present purposes this has a double-sided implication. It supposedly implies that there is a reasonable degree of social equality but it has also engendered the attitude that people should not be overly assertive or “get above themselves”, and indeed we can be quite good at ego deflation. I remember once on a social occasion hosted by my family, a brother of mine reprimanded me for “talking posh”. We tend to be good at bringing people back down to earth. Of course this also means that we can be unnecessarily critical at times and we don’t praise easily. Consequently, in order to avoid reprimand, we often err on the side of caution and use many hedging and politeness strategies when communicating (these will be illustrated below). In fact, I have even heard comments from non-nationals spending time here that they have difficulty in trying to decide when an Irish person is being sincere and truthful as opposed to just trying to maintain good relations. The present analysis often illustrates this struggle between being honest and being nice. Another related trait of Irish culture is the value we place on talk and social interaction. You may have come across the hyperbolic expression S/he could talk for Ireland, which captures the concept perfectly. The reverse is the case in societies where silence is considered desirable among non-intimates and talk is perceived to threaten social or ideological imposition, as reported in a study of Athabaskan native Americans by Scollon and Scollon (1981).
dread to think of the pragmatic outcome of an encounter between an Athabaskin and a typical Irish interactant. In addition to the need for talk in our society, there is an imperative to actively engage when one does not have control of the floor and is playing the listener’s part. Bakhtin (1986: 68), rejects the distinction between active speaker and passive listener. In his words,

The fact is that when the listener perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude toward it. He either agrees or disagrees with it (completely or partially), augments it, applies it, prepares for its execution, and so on ... Any understanding of live speech, a live utterance, is inherently responsive, although the degree of this activity varies extremely. Any understanding is imbued with response and necessarily elicits it in one form or another: the listener becomes the speaker.

The degree of this active responsiveness in Irish culture is high. Engagement must be very obvious in a visible or audible way. The strongly interactive nature of talk may be reflective of, or resultant from, the strong levels of shared and common knowledge, in what has traditionally been a small mono-cultural society in an insular and somewhat isolated island setting. Familiarity with the topics, speakers, referents or ideologies presented in conversation often facilitates overt engagement. However, despite such familiarity, casual conversations tend to be non-intimate, though not altogether benign. Irony and humour are often used as buffers if talk strays towards what is considered to be too personal, probing or requiring too much disclosure. And finally, there now exists a renewed pride in Irish cultural identity (including music, dance, language, etc.), dispersing historical traces of any inferiority complex caused, at least in part, by our colonial history.

As well as being born in Irish society, the language under scrutiny in this chapter is determined by its local contexts of use and its speakers and hence belongs somewhere between the genres of professional, academic and educational discourse. I mentioned in the introduction the fact that many language descriptions are now genre-based and it is worth exploring this idea in more detail. The unambiguous differentiation of linguistic genres is neither possible nor desirable as they often share many attributes and characteristics. The data from post-observation trainer-trainee interactions examined in this chapter shares traits with and belongs partially to business and professional talk (Drew and Heritage 1992; Bargiela-Chiappini and

Current philosophies of education based on socio-cultural theories mentioned earlier emphasize the social nature of learning. We learn through interaction with others and especially through interaction with those who are more expert than ourselves (Vygotsky 1978; Lantolf and Appel 1994; Walsh 2001). Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) holds much weight in educational circles. It is defined as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky 1978: 86). The importance of such theories for this research stems from the importance they attach to the cultural, social and interpersonal aspects of learning. These are significant for three reasons. Firstly, language teacher education (hereafter LTE) does not take place in a cultural vacuum, and it has been suggested that to be most effective, it should take much more account of cultural and contextual factors in its curriculum and approach (Bax 1997). Secondly, value is now placed on a collaborative versus transmission-based mentoring approach to the acquisition of skills and knowledge (Mercer 1995; Freeman and Richards 1996; Smith 2001). The idea of relinquishing some experiential trainer authority and giving more ownership to trainees is central here. Notions of dialogic, persuasive and co-constructed discourse (Bakhtin 1986; Wertsch 1998; Jarvis 2001; Watson-Todd et al. 2001; Jarvis forthcoming) allow trainees to be masters of their own experiences and still allow trainers to facilitate as masters of professional knowledge and practice. It has been argued that such an approach allows for more participation, more appropriation and ultimately more integration into the classroom practice of those concerned. This involves building close relationships of trust, yet all the while maintaining the requisite professional distance and authority that inspire confidence. Significantly, research suggests that success rates in the classroom are less dependent on the knowledge and experience of the teacher/trainer than on her/his disposition in terms of congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy towards students (Barduhn 2002). Some of the ways in which good relations are achieved in teacher education programmes are the
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focus of this chapter. Thirdly, socio-cultural models are significant in LTE in how they relate to the notions of personal reflection and professional development, which happen best in collaboration with others (Schon 1991; Edge 1992, 2002). As well as these general philosophical influences, there are more local practical issues that play a part in the discoursal decisions taken by the parties involved in post-observation trainer-trainee interactions (hereafter POTTI). These will be discussed in some detail in the next section.

3. Data and methodology

The Irish English data used in this study is contemporary spoken language from the Limerick Corpus of Irish English (L-CIE). The institutionalized genre specifically isolated for present purposes is POTTI. In total this consists of just over 70,000 words (12 sessions) of transcribed data, audiorecorded in post-observation trainer-trainee interactions in a mid-western Irish university as part of a one-year M.A. in English Language Teaching. The aim of the dyadic interactions was to review and assess supervised teaching practice sessions carried out by the trainee. Each of these feedback sessions lasted between twenty-five and forty-five minutes and took place in the office of the trainer. The participants in the discourse forming the POTTI corpus include two female trainers (one of whom is the current author), three male trainees and seven female trainees. The only non-Irish participant was in the trainee group and of English nationality but had been living in Ireland for two years at the time of the recording and is married to an Irish woman. All feedback sessions were carried out on a one-to-one basis. Only one of the trainees had any extensive previous teaching experience before starting the M.A. Teaching practice (hereafter TP) began in the fourth week of the first semester of the programme, and all of the audio-recordings took place over a three-week period between the sixth and eighth weeks of the course. Each trainee did one TP class per week, which lasted for fifty minutes, was video-recorded and supervised in person by one trainer. Therefore, at that time the TP experience was still very new to the students, having done only two classes before the audio-recordings of their feedback sessions were made.

As in casual conversation, the participants in this institutional setting, the academic and the student, enter into a conversational contract where each party brings an understanding of some set of rights and obligations
vis-à-vis the other. Due to the institutionalized nature of the respective roles, these rights, obligations and norms are fixed to a greater degree than in everyday talk. The interaction has expected communicative goals, and there is a finite range of expected spoken subgenres (for example, directive, expository, self-directive, motivational). Despite these institutionally defining parameters in the context, both parties must attend to the relational aspect of the transaction. They engage in ongoing and careful management of potentially face-threatening moments in the discourse. The academic in the feedback situation is expected to give constructive criticism and direction based on the previously observed lesson. The student, on the other hand, is expected to be both self-critical and self-directive. Both use a variety of linguistic devices to manage and negotiate face threat and risk within the interaction. Although there is a clear outcome and an unambiguous, task-oriented aim for these sessions, there is an unspoken imperative that good relationships be built and maintained. These are attended to by employing a number of strategies, three of which will now be presented and analysed in some detail: Small talk, reference, and listenership devices. As mentioned in the introductory section to this chapter, both qualitative and quantitative approaches will be used as deemed appropriate, and, for practical reasons, subsections of data will sometimes be isolated.

4. Solidarity strategies

A pre-service teacher-training programme is as much about initiating trainees into the professional community of teachers as it is about transmitting content-based knowledge. Sternberg and Horvath (1995) identify three prerequisites to be an expert teacher. They suggest that one must be more knowledgeable, more efficient and have better insight than non-experts (either experienced or inexperienced). The apparent and attested aim of most training programmes is to produce teachers who are expert, or who in time will become expert. Whether this aim is achieved through training is a matter of much debate and constant concern, but is not to be elaborated on here (for a fuller discussion see Freeman and Johnson 1998; Schocker-von Ditfurth and Legutke 2002). Trainees will better start and continue to become more efficient and insightful (and possibly knowledgeable also) if they are part of the teaching community. In this respect, it is the trainer’s remit to trigger and foster such participation. Two things must happen in the feedback context to promote this feeling of membership. Firstly, the
trainer needs to reduce the asymmetrical relationship that exists with the trainee by merit of her institutional and professional position and therefore occasionally needs to promote her position as a teacher rather than/as well as a trainer. Secondly, the trainer needs to psychologically boost the trainee from being “merely” a student on an M.A. programme to playing the part of and really becoming a teacher. Solidarity and equality among the parties are key to accomplishing this. Politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1978) provides an appropriate framework to illustrate what happens. Both external factors (e.g., age, power, sex) and internal factors (e.g., degree of friendliness or amount of imposition) influence closeness or distance in an interactional encounter (Yule 1996: 59). The external factors are more or less fixed, but the internal factors are potentially more fluid and negotiable. Politeness theory attempts to account for how the internal factors threaten or save face (the public self-image of a person). Brown and Levinson suggest that we all have both positive and negative face wants. Our positive face needs us to feel connected, accepted, and liked, and can be attended to, for example, through compliments. On the other hand, our negative face needs us to feel independent, unimpeded and unimposed upon, and is satisfied by deference acts such as apologising. The notion of promoting a sense of belonging to the teaching profession in the POTTI context addresses and saves the positive face of trainees and is often achieved using on-record (directly addressed to the other person) statements and devices. Some of these will now be illustrated.

4.1. Small talk

Small talk, understood as being a conventionalized and peripheral mode of talk (Coupland 2000: 1) is generally accepted as having purely social functions and is pervasive in the genre of casual conversation. In fact, the boundaries of what constitutes small talk are in many ways unclear, and perhaps the search for a precise definition may be futile and unnecessary as its essence is understood by all. It is necessary, however, not to disregard this type of talk as being unimportant and non-integral to the transactional focus of any discourse. Much of the research presented in the edited collection Small Talk (Coupland [ed.] 2000) shows that not only is it integral to the smooth execution of task-oriented discourse, but it is also often directly related in content and therefore should not in any way be considered peripheral (see also Koester 1999, 2001). It is used effectively in POTTI,
mostly by trainers, to “deprofessionalize” and relax the atmosphere, perhaps because it is reminiscent of casual conversation where symmetrical relationships are more common than they are in this institutionalized genre. Typically, small talk in POTTI is non-formulaic (Holmes 2000) and is used as a buffer at the beginning of a session which is set to be particularly critical or prior to a specific face-threatening episode. Although the topics discussed are indeed of a personal nature, they are invariably related in some way to the context of the TP session and the students’ performance. This is consistent with findings by McCarthy (2000), who illustrates the case of service-encounters.

Extract 1 below exemplifies the nature of small talk in POTTI. The background to this encounter is that the trainee has been organizationally negligent by arriving to her TP class prepared to conduct an activity which had already been covered with the group by a fellow trainee the previous week. As well as committing this organizational mortal sin, the trainee has delivered a very poor lesson and has failed to modify her teaching on the basis of previous trainer recommendations. This extract starts at the very opening of the interaction. Edwina is the trainer and Lou the trainee.  

Extract 1

1. Edwina Just let me get my notes Lou anyway I mean you haven’t watched your video which is fine you haven’t had time but you’ve had time to think about the lesson+
2. Lou Yeah+
3. Edwina +at least and tell me are you feeling okay now cos you were you weren’t feeling great earlier you said?
4. Lou Em not any better I can tell you actually+
5. Edwina Really?
6. Lou +I’m very tired and em I think I’ve an ear infection or something every time I talk I can it’s like major feedback in my ear+
7. Edwina Oh.
8. Lou +yeah I I’ll have to get to the doctor or something.
9. Edwina You need to be careful with that.
10. Lou Yeah.
11. Edwina Yeah.
12. Lou Yeah.
13. Edwina Have you been to see the doctor?
Although the exchange starts off in very transactional mode with talk of notes and videos in 1, the trainer makes quite a sudden shift to the interpersonal, and in this case personal, in 3. This was probably prompted by a couple of factors. Initially she may not have remembered or may not have been focussed on the lesson taught by Lou, and a glimpse at her notes reminded her of the events (and hence the unpleasant direction the feedback session would take). Also, there may have been physical signs that Lou was not well, and it would have been inconsiderate to ignore this, especially in light of the forthcoming criticisms. The length of time and attention paid to the care and health of the trainee is significant. The trainer assumes the maternal/pastoral role for eight turns. There is a clear willingness on the part of the trainer to continue with and promote the small talk when she has the chance to make the transition to more task-orientated matters. For example, in 10, 12 and 16 the trainee provides the opportunity for a transition. Interestingly, Lou, although providing opportunities for transition, does not initiate it. This is clearly in deference to the trainer and attends to her negative face as she has the institutional and discoursal power to start and stop this type of small talk when, and if, she pleases. The display question used by the trainer in 13, which has already been answered in 8, is in fact transactionally redundant, unless she hasn’t heard 8. Finally, the transition comes in a light-hearted playful way in 19. This episode of small talk is apparently deemed necessary for two reasons. Firstly, it establishes solidarity before forthcoming face-threatening exchanges and secondly, talk of the trainee’s ailments is an acknowledgement that there may have been some external excuse for poor teaching performance. The trainer may subconsciously be hinting that she will accept it as partial rationalization if offered at a later stage by Lou. We can see that the talk can in no way be consid-
tered “small” as it is directly relevant to both the interactional and transactional goals of the participants. It is supporting, probing and understanding, three functions typical of feedback as outlined by Watson-Todd et al. (2001: 356). The pragmatics also illustrate what is socially typical in an Irish context. It is completely acceptable and almost ritualistic to inquire about another’s health, especially of minor ailments associated with our damp climate. It would not be an exaggeration to say that a very high percentage of our population suffer from flu-related infections at any one time, and as a topic of conversation physical well-being is not considered too personal in nature.

In Extract 1, the trainer does not relinquish her more authoritative role and is very much directing the disclosures of the trainee. This discourse is univocal in nature (Bakhtin 1986; Wertsch 1998; Jarvis forthcoming). Jarvis (forthcoming) argues that univocality may serve the purpose of establishing shared realities in initial encounters between trainer and trainee. Although she examines more ideational language use, the same could be said for the social aspects of language present in Extract 1. On the other hand, some episodes of small talk in POTTI see the trainer engaging in equal disclosures of a very private nature, as a type of quid-pro-quo with the student. These show more dialogic tendencies. In Extract 2, the trainer, mid-way through the session, wants to broach the problem of poor pacing of activities during the TP lesson. What makes the issue even more sensitive is that the trainer evidently feels that this has occurred as a result of a personality trait of the trainee and not just a performance glitch on the day. As a result, she approaches the issue from a very personal angle, making it even more delicate and potentially face-destroying. Surprisingly, the trainee fully engages on this highly personal level and willingly discloses very intimate information. Fionnuala is the trainer and Pete the trainee. This extract in its original form has an elaborate sixty seven turns. The transcription indicates where substantial parts have been cut.

Extract 2

1. Fionnuala Now what sort of a person are you in terms of (pause two seconds) I mean in your every day life are you a fast mover do you deliberate and think carefully about everything first or just+
2. Pete I probably am a thinker rather than an actor.
3. Fionnuala Yeah.
4. Pete  Ah I would say that mm (pause two seconds) confidence is something that I could definitely build on and+
5. Fionnuala  Yeah.
[eight turns later]
13. Pete  +whereas teaching is a completely different+
14. Fionnuala  Mmhm.
15. Pete  +profession and I also felt that it would be very beneficial for me as a person+
16. Fionnuala  In terms of human development.
[sixteen turns later]
32. Pete  I only lasted a month and a half when my mother died and I'd to go home to work on the farm+
33. Fionnuala  Yeah I remember that+
[seventeen turns later]
50. Fionnuala  Oh it's it works several ways I've a s= I've a son who's ah who should be an accountant and he's al= he's doing history and politics (laughing) to like he's+
51. Pete  Yes I suppose so.
52. Fionnuala  +he he has figures a= figures at his fingertips you know and he's that sort of like <overlap> he likes or- ganising <overlap> timetables and things like that and is very good+
[three turns later]
55. Fionnuala  +he wasn't there to do it and I was I was like where am I tomorrow is Thursday “where am I?” but what going back to the last ah the correction+
56. Pete  You were lost. Pace.
57. Fionnuala  +the pacing.....

Many of the same points mentioned in relation to Extract 1 are again relevant here, but there are also some additional features. This interpersonal small talk goes on for an amazing sixty seven turns, the majority of which are extended only by the trainee. The trainer generally utilizes minimal response tokens, e.g., yeah, mmhm, mm. In fact, what makes this episode different from Extract 1 is the way in which the exchange is initially driven for quite a long period of time by the trainee, yet ultimately, it is the trainer who makes the transition to task again in 55. Pete makes highly personal disclosures, for example, 4, 15, 32, and later, Fionnuala empathizes by do-
ing the same in 50, 52 and 55. This is clearly a face-saving act of solidarity. Perhaps she is also motivated by the need to regain the floor, ultimately allowing her to redirect to the business at hand. This finally happens during her turn in 55. None of this is obligatory in the POTTI context though it does serve an essential function.

4.2. Reference

4.2.1. Pronouns

A more overt solidarity strategy is often illustrated in the use of *we* and *our* as inclusive references. In English there is an ambiguity inherent in the pronoun *we* and the possessive pronoun *our*. *We* can be exclusive, referring to the speaker plus others but not the addressee. It can be inclusive, referring to the speaker and the addressee. And finally, it can be inclusive in a way that means the speaker, the addressee and others. The same can apply to *our*, but this determiner occurs only twice in POTTI and will therefore not be analysed further. The following table illustrates the frequency distribution of personal pronouns in POTTI (the total number of words concordanced to produce these results was 55,185).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Personal pronouns in POTTI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Order of frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>I</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>you</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>they</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>she</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>we</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>he</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ye</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As anticipated in this type of dyadic discourse, *I* and *you* are top of the frequency rankings. This is also indicative of the review and self-reflective aims of the feedback session. *They* is used primarily when referring to the
EFL (English as a foreign language) students in the TP classes and she features relatively high on the list because approximately 70-80% of EFL students and trainees are female. Ye is an interesting case pragmatically as it is still used by many speakers of Irish English to differentiate between second person singular and plural. Usually, it is found in more informal contexts but occurs twice in POTTI, and both are attempts by the trainee to strategically familiarize the discourse. In terms of solidarity and promoting group membership, the pronoun we is significant. Of its 131 occurrences, 96 are trainer uses, 23 trainee uses and 12 were uncategorizable. Table 2 illustrates specific trainer uses in more detail.

Table 2. Trainer uses of we in POTTI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>References including the trainee:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trainer, trainee and all people in general</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trainer and trainee</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trainer, trainee and all EFL teachers</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trainee and EFL students</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trainer, trainee and all Irish people</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trainer, trainee and other trainees in the group</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trainer, trainee and other trainers in the group</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of inclusive we uses</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>References excluding the trainee:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trainer and other trainers in the group</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trainer and EFL students</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EFL students</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of exclusive we uses</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of inclusive we uses at 82 is far in excess of the exclusive uses at just 14. In terms of signaling solidarity in the local Irish educational context, the third and fifth uses are noteworthy. The trainer makes conscious attempts (13 in total) to include the trainee when referring to the professional body of EFL teachers. This promotes professional solidarity and equality and can clearly be seen in examples such as:
(1) *We don't have as much influence without using words as we'd like to think we have...*

(2) *This is the Communicative Approach, which is basically what we're using...*

All of these examples come at the end of, or during, a verbal review of the classroom experiences of the trainee. It is likely that if the trainer did not intend to be inclusive here, she may have used references such as, *the teaching profession, us teachers* etc. In fact, when their professional affiliation to the trainer (versus teacher) community is felt warranted, it is clearly indicated twelve times in the corpus. Cultural solidarity is also exemplified in the five occurrences which refer to the trainer, trainee and all Irish people. A good example is, *We haven't got a standard in Irish or in Ireland but you, still we all have an idea of what is correct.* The trainee is much meeker in presuming professional or even cultural inclusion, and there is only one case of each present in the data.

4.2.2. Independent reference sources

Modes of reference discussed so far are largely used to tend to the other's face needs. There are occasions, however, where the trainer needs to curtail threats to her own face. This happens particularly when a trainee is behaving in a challenging or non-conformist way in relation to the advice or recommendations of the trainer. On such occasions, the trainer minimizes the imposition on her negative face by drawing on evidence external to the interaction but within the shared deictic reference scheme of both parties. While on the one hand this often shows a shared social closeness and intimacy, it is used here for slightly different purposes. The recurrent strategy to which I refer, is drawing on objective and less contentious sources of evidence external to the immediate context but part of the specific Irish university context, a type of non-present third party. This comes in the form of video-recordings of the TP lessons, the authority of other trainers on the programme (for example, *As well as the TP folder I think you you probably remember us saying you need to speak with...*) or reference to published works in the field of ELT. Though this is seldom resorted to, it does have the desired effect of ending the episode in an amicable way and keeping it on a very objective and non-personal plane as can be seen in Extract 3.
Directly before this extract begins, the trainer has questioned the personality traits of the trainee who had been particularly harsh and pedantic with her class. Fionnuala is the trainer and Joanne the trainee.

Extract 3

1. Joanne  Oh no I’m friendly and+
2. Fionnuala  Mmhm+
3. Joanne  +I try and get on listening to them.
4. Fionnuala  Now you see I didn’t get any of this I my only meeting with you has been in TP+
5. Joanne  Mmhm Mmhm.
6. Fionnuala  +sessions when you’re very friendly and you contribute and you make very sensible contributions and things like that and yesterday when I went into the classroom I found somebody who was like I suppose the best thing is like an old style “muinteoir”+6
7. Joanne  Me?
8. Fionnuala  Yes.
10. Fionnuala  Now the please don’t take this+
11. Joanne  Oh no <overlap> that’s fine that’s okay <overlap>.
12. Fionnuala  <overlap> This is what came <overlap> across to me now you started by when you looked at the video how many times did you ask them to keep quiet?
13. Joanne  Three or four.
14. Fionnuala  You asked them about six+

This extract opens with a blatant and unhedged divergence of opinion by the trainee in 1 and 3. The trainer attempts to diffuse the conflict by distancing to a completely different context in 4 and 6. The reference is to a TP preparation session where the trainer has been lecturer. This acts as an immediate side-step by the trainer and allows her to introduce a series of compliments before returning to the criticism. The exclamatory trainee question in 7 affirms that the conflictual stance remains unchanged and even the okay in 9 is not convincing. In 10 the trainer offers a preemptive apology and despite the trainee’s apparent pacification in 11 the trainer, sensing the mood, feels it necessary to depersonalize the situation and make
reference to the video evidence in 12. She judges the situation to be beyond reconciliation on the basis of opinion and introspection. The introduction of the video reference firmly re-establishes the trainer’s position of authority and allows her to make the categorical statement in 14 without fear of further disagreement. These maneuvers ensure convergence in 15, although the use of right could be interpreted more as a limited acknowledgment token than an agreement token. Throughout the data, the introduction of external authority or objective evidence is used to settle difficult moments such as this one and usually does so effectively and efficiently as it gives added weight and authority to the trainer, putting her out of the reach of argumentation, dispute or contradiction. It protects her negative face. There are other interesting points to be noted from this extract, and these will be returned to in some of the following sections.

4.2.3. First-name vocatives

Personal reference is achieved in a number of ways including the use of personal pronouns as seen in 4.2.1. Other modes of address generally include: Proper names, honorifics, terms of endearment and nicknames. In the POTTI data, the use of first-name vocatives is the only one present in sufficient frequency to merit elaboration. McCarthy and O’Keeffe (2003: 154), in their comparison of casual conversation and radio phone-in talk, suggest that vocatives “make an important contribution to the interpersonal stratum of the unfolding discourse” and identify a number of functions they perform. These include relational functions, topic- and turn-management, humour, summons, and face attention. Table 3 below illustrates the frequency and functional distribution of first-name vocatives used in direct address to the immediate interlocutor in POTTI.

It is most striking to note the unequal distribution of first-name vocative use between trainer and trainee in the 55,000 word search. Despite the fact that the parties are on a first name basis, it is the norm only for trainers to evoke this privilege. Only on two occasions does the same trainee call one of the trainers by name, and interestingly, this trainee is a mature student with some teaching experience and a mixed cultural background. As mentioned earlier, Irish society is relatively informal socially, and using first names even where there is a significant age difference between speakers is perfectly acceptable. Therefore, we can infer that the institutional context is playing a predominant role, and there is evident recognition of the assymet-
rical relationship between speakers. This is consistent with findings by Hook (1984, cited in McCarthy and O’Keeffe 2003: 154), who examines the relationship between terms of address and status. In POTTI the trainers use names to perform a number of functions, all of which are relational in nature. They use them most frequently (13 times) to support topic change or closure, for example, *What we’re going to do Michael, we’ll talk about*...

Table 3. First name vocatives in POTTI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trainee uses</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic management (closure)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trainer uses</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic management (change and closure)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitigator (during criticism or divergence of opinion)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritualistic (questions and apologies)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumption of authoritative role</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booster (compliment)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banter</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of the remaining functions outlined in Table 3 are consistent with what has been found to be the case in other genres (McCarthy and O’Keeffe 2003), but a significant pragmatic finding in these feedback sessions is when the more powerful speaker uses the name of the other interactor at points where she is changing role to the person with more knowledge, experience and therefore authority. This occurs when the trainer is about to switch to transmissive or directive mode and offer pedagogic, academic, or even personal advice. She uses the name of the trainee to relationally mitigate this transition and highlight solidarity before or during authority. There are three clear cases in the data:

(3) These are what we call lexical sets Michael, okay...
(4) Yeah you have to take into account Lorna that some people that they knew this was for public performance if you like and some people it is in their nature only to present what is perfect.

(5) It depends very much on the sort of work they’re doing Peter and the sort of work they were doing with you was...

4.2.4. Shared socio-cultural references

It is generally recognized that the schemata we use for making sense of the world are at least partially culturally determined (Yule 1996; Kramsch 1998). Obviously, those of us with an Irish background will have many shared and mutually understandable cultural reference points. In the POTTI data, allusions are made to some of these on occasions of potential face threat to highlight commonalities in spite of any unfolding episodes of conflict or criticism. It seems that both parties in the interaction have relatively equal rights of access to this particular strategy, unlike some of the other forms of reference we have been discussing. This is to be expected in light of the fact that neither participant can claim stronger membership to Irish culture, which is not the case with membership to the teaching and academic profession. If we return to Extract 3, which is a troublesome exchange, we can see this diffusion strategy enacted by the trainer through the use of the word muinteoir on 6. This word comes from the Irish language, and despite having an objective equivalent in English, ‘teacher’, to an Irish person it can carry all sorts of additional connotations and nuances. Most of these tend to be negative and conjure images of the nineteenth century dictatorial-type headmistress/master armed with cane and never having dreamt of humanistic language teaching. At least this is probably the case for the trainer in Extract 3, having been educated in Ireland in the 1950s. The use of muinteoir impacts in three ways. Firstly, it allows for succinctness, thereby avoiding the need to use several descriptive adjectives (all negative) in an English version. Secondly, it minimizes the assymetrical relationship that is rapidly forming by bringing to the fore the shared socio-cultural background of the interlocutors in an attempt to dilute the institutional power being exercised by the trainer. It hints that despite current differences, in other contexts the speakers do have a lot in common, especially language and culture. This episode is only linguistically accessible to a group of people with a shared history and is inclusive in its exclusion of
those without this common knowledge. Finally, it may have been motivated by an attempt to add humour to the situation but in this respect, the response of the trainee in 7 suggests that it was futile.

Trainees also employ this strategy during difficult moments, for example, when they may feel that their validity and right to become a teacher is percievably in doubt. This is obvious in Extract 4.

Extract 4

1. Pete +mm it’s not that really mm I had always a feeling about teaching but it it has been in I have two aunts teachers and+
2. Fionnuala Mmhm.
3. Pete +my sister and my brother have taught as well so+
4. Fionnuala Mmhm.
5. Pete +it’s definitely somewhere in the family.

Traditionally teachers were highly valued and respected members of our society, and in addition, it was a vocation that entrenched itself strongly in certain families. It was considered very respectable to have teachers, policemen, priests or nuns in an Irish family. Although this is now much changed, it is interesting that when a moment of criticism is imminent (in this case in relation to the tempo of the lesson), the trainee reverts to these shared socio-cultural notions and values as a sort of genetic justification for his career choice. Interestingly, this justification is not corroborated by the trainer anywhere in the ensuing discourse. Of course, as with the previous example, these pleas also have the intention of strategically realigning the interlocutors.

4.3. Engaged listenership

Thus far, we have mostly been discussing relational devices which indicate solidarity and attend to positive face wants. In this section, I would like to extend the focus slightly to also include the idea of deference and negative face needs. We spoke earlier about the importance of joint construction of discourse in the educational setting of POTTI. Consequently, both parties are required to collaboratively contribute to the talk. However, it is not possible for both parties to make equal contributions simultaneously, and
usually speakers alternate in terms of who has primary control of the floor. One person plays the part of primary speaker and the that of other active listener at any time. Having examined strategies used by speakers in POTTI, I would now like to briefly comment on the reactant nature of listener behaviour which is obligatory to indicate cooperation (Grice 1975). This collaboration is obligated by the cultural and educational contexts. I refer to this phenomenon as engaged listenership, and I have explored it in much detail in an earlier paper (Farr 2003), the contents of which appropriately provide a foundation for the present discussion. The POTTI corpus suggests that listenership is verbally signalled in three ways. Firstly through the use of minimal response tokens (see for example Duncan 1974; Duncan and Fiske 1977; Schegloff 1982; Tottie 1991; Beach 1993; Drummond and Hopper 1993; Gardner 1997). These are realized in the following forms and frequencies in 70,000 words of POTTI data: *Yeah* (688), *mmhm* (286), *mm* (178), *yes* (65), *okay* (51), and *no* (8). This gives a total of 1276 occurrences. Such tokens function as acknowledgements, continuers, agreements or confirmations. As might be anticipated, they are relatively frequent in the data as silence or non-participation are not socially or situationally acceptable responsive options. Secondly, listenership is apparent in participants’ use of non-minimal response tokens (McCarthy 2002, 2003), which impart a higher level of emotional or evaluative engagement and tend to be more assessment-oriented. In POTTI, there are 148 such tokens in 70,000 words of data. They include *right* (80), *exactly* (27), *sure* (20), *really* (6), *absolutely* (3), *fine* (3), *true* (3), *God* (2), *definitely* (2), *good* (1), and *Jesus* (1). This simple melange is quite revealing in a pragmatic sense. The nature of this specific genre is apparent in the use of the more pedagogically evaluative tokens such as *right* and *exactly* which feature high on the list, and also in the use of the emotionally stronger and motivating (yet controlled) tokens *absolutely* and *definitely*. It is not surprising to an Irish person to find *God* and *Jesus* on the list as these are not generally taboo in Irish society, even in some relatively formal contexts like this one. And finally, I would like to argue that overlapped and interrupted talk in POTTI are clear measures of a willingness to actively co-construct the unfolding discourse and not, as has been remarked elsewhere, simply signals of power and dominance. This stance is consistent with conclusions reached by Meltzer, Morris, and Hayes 1971; Gallois and Markel 1975; Natale, Entin, and Jaffe 1979). Other research suggests that these phenomena are culturally determined and dependent; for example, White (1989) investigates in the context of Japanese and interculturally in Japanese/American exchanges
and finds significant differences in linguistic behaviour. Table 4 below, adapted from Farr (2003: 81), exemplifies the nature of interruptions and overlaps in a 15,382 word sample of POTTI data.

**Table 4. Overlaps and interruptions in POTTI**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overlap with no speaker switch</th>
<th>Trainer Initiated</th>
<th>Trainee Initiated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No occurrences (0)</td>
<td>To confirm, agree, concede (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overlap with speaker switch</td>
<td>To curtail self criticism, to direct and elicit trainee reflection (12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trainee Initiated</td>
<td>To confirm, agree, concede, to rationalize, to answer questions, to seek clarification/ advice (15)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interruption</td>
<td>To curtail self criticism, to direct and elicit trainee reflection, to provide relevant acts/information, to justify trainee performance, to acknowledge and feedback on trainee talk, to empathize, to close a topic (36)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is noteworthy from a conversational analysis perspective that these findings show that despite the power semantics of the situation, both parties seem to control and negotiate the turn taking system equally through overlaps and interruptions (the trainer initiates 48 times and the trainee 49). There is a clear tendency towards deference when an overlap occurs, as reflected by the fact that 27 overlaps result in a speaker shift in contrast with the 5 which do not. In general, minimal and non-minimal response tokens and overlaps and interruptions cater for the needs of both positive and negative faces of the trainer and trainee in these interactions.

5. **Concluding remarks**

This chapter has examined three relational strategies present in the spoken discourse within an Irish academic and educational institution. The pragmatic analysis of small talk, reference and listenership devices highlights their essential interpersonal properties, without which the discourse may be curt, abrupt and face-destroying in a context where the subject matter is already delicate and needs to be treated with sensitivity. There are other
strategies which serve a similar purpose. These have not been addressed due to current restrictions but are no less important than those which have received explicit attention in this chapter. Some of them include the use of personal compliments, hedges, elicitation, and questions in an appropriate way. The notion of modality and hedging in the POTTI corpus have been addressed elsewhere (Farr and O'Keeffe 2002; Farr forthcoming). At this stage of my research into the language used in feedback sessions, I can make two broad conclusions. Firstly, language use is appropriated and calibrated by its users in light of internal and external contextual factors. Interpretation of the data can be accurate only if approached with a pragmatics tool kit, combined qualitative and quantitative methodologies and is interdisciplinary in nature. Secondly, situational and cultural pragmatics operate in an integrative way in determining the linguistic choices made by the interactional partners. It no longer suffices to take a global perspective on Irish English usage as this can lead to gross overgeneralizations, which in essence may be not true of all contexts and not true of any.

Appendix

Transcription conventions

+ interrupted or resumed utterance  
= incomplete word

Notes

1. The comments I make here are necessarily general in nature and based on personal membership of this society. I do acknowledge that there are exceptions and will mention these if relevant.

2. L-CIE is a one-million word corpus of contemporary spoken Irish English. It is a genre-based corpus with data from a range of contexts and speakers in Ireland (excluding Northern Ireland). Details of L-CIE can be found at <http://rhw.ul.ie/~lcie>.

3. I will use the terms trainer/academic/lecturer interchangeably in this chapter, and also the terms trainee/student.

4. All names from the POTTI corpus used in this chapter have been anonymized.
Results have been normalized here and elsewhere as this procedure provides a useful basis for comparison with other corpora.

Translated to English as 'teacher', but has certain negative and unpleasant connotations.

The numbers in brackets indicate the real number of occurrences in 70,000 words of POTTI data.

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