

MITIGATION AND SELF-CORRECTION LANGUAGE IN PARLIAMENTARY QUESTION- RESPONSE DEBATES: A SOCIO- PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO PM THERESA MAY'S RESPONSES.

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Abstract: This study explores the socio-pragmatic use of mitigation in the question-response debates in British House of Commons. It also shows that mitigating devices are used to minimize damage to debaters' self-image and make indirect criticism in parliament. The analysis draws on insights from pragmatic approach to show that mitigators play a key role in managing the relation between the MPs and the Prime Minister. The findings suggest that the PM mainly uses hedges, bushes and modals as mitigating and self-correcting strategies. It is found that mitigators are strategically used to attenuate the illocutionary force of Theresa May's utterances and avoid unparliamentary language in the House of Commons. Mitigation helps the speaker to sound polite and attenuate face threatening acts.

Key Words: debates, discourse, face, mitigation, parliamentary, self-correction, socio-pragmatic, utterance

Résumé : Cette étude explore l'utilisation socio-pragmatique de l'atténuation dans les débats questions-réponses à la Chambre des Communes Britannique. Elle vise également à montrer que les outils d'atténuation sont utilisés pour minimiser les dommages causés à l'image de soi et à faire des critiques indirectes. L'analyse s'appuie sur les idées de l'approche pragmatique pour montrer que les dispositifs d'atténuation jouent un rôle clé dans la gestion de la relation entre les députés et le Premier ministre. Les résultats suggèrent que le Premier Ministre utilise diverse moyens d'atténuation tels que les adverbes, les modaux comme stratégies d'atténuation et d'autocorrection. Les résultats montrent également que les atténuateurs sont employés stratégiquement pour atténuer la force illocutoire des énoncés de Theresa May et éviter le langage antiparlementaire à la Chambre des communes. L'atténuation aide l'orateur à paraître poli et à gérer les actes menaçants pour sa face.

Mots clés: débats, discours, face, atténuation, parlementaire, autocorrection, socio-pragmatique, énonciation.

Introduction

Parliamentary debates, especially the Prime Minister's Questions represent a typical instantiation of political struggle for power between the opposition and the ruling party. In fact, The Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) is one of the most important British parliamentary procedures in British political landscape. It gives the opportunity to the members of the parliament (MPs) to directly question and press the PM for actions. In this sense, the question time also appears as an opportunity for the Prime Minister (PM) to better explain and defend the actions of the government. In this interaction, the parliamentarians are bound to comply with the rules of conduct in the House of commons. In doing so, they make use of a diverse range of rhetoric such as mitigating strategies and in order to avoid being guilty of using unparliamentary language. As a matter of fact, in this kind of rule-governed setting, mitigation seems to be a safe way to circumvent or downplay face threatening acts.

One of the universal features of human language is the phenomenon of mitigation. According to C. Caffi (2007) and B. Fraser (2010), human's pragmatic competence helps the speaker to fulfil communicative goals by adapting or softening the utterances. Mitigation is defined by B. Fraser (1980, p. 341) as "the modification of certain unwelcome effects which a speech act has on the hearer". In other words, mitigation consists in reducing the degree of illocutionary force of a speech act and the commitment to what is said. Mitigation in the terms of H. K. Al-Ebadi and F. K. Hassan (2020, p. 855), "supports the interlocutors with various choices for negotiation of their personal and relational goals either implicitly, via inviting conversational implicatures, or explicitly via other linguistic realizations". During the question time, the members of the parliament resort to mitigation strategies in order to remain within the limit of appropriate parliamentary language.

During her premiership, PM Theresa May has attended many sessions of Prime Minister's Questions so as to answer questions of national and international interest in a polarized House of Commons in the aftermath of brexit. In this context of political upheaval, the PM commonly makes use of attenuating and healing communication strategies to answer MPs' questions. In doing so, she intends to preserve her image during her public appearances. From a pragmatic perspective, face can be defined as the self-image or reputation an individual claims for himself. According to P. Brown and S. Levinson (1987), interactants' face is constantly under threat. To avoid losing one's face, attenuating verbal strategies are the

means by which interlocutors downplay the face damaging acts. Analysing the responses of PM Theresa May can give some insights into the way the PMs handle parliamentarians' questions in the House of Commons. Therefore, this study has a three-fold purpose: first, to shed light on the linguistic resources that entail mitigation in PM Theresa May's responses and to show that the PM uses mitigation to make indirect criticism. It also highlights face concern and self-correction in Theresa May's responses. To address the objectives of the study, this analysis is guided by the following questions: What linguistic devices serve as resources for mitigation in PM Theresa May's answers? Does the PM use mitigation to effect indirect criticisms? To what extent using mitigation can be seen as an act of face concern and self-correction? Thus, drawing on Caffi's approach to mitigation, the first section highlights the literature on mitigation. The second section discusses the theoretical framework and the last section presents the analysis of mitigation strategies in PM Theresa May's answers.

1-Mitigation in Parliamentary Debates

1.1 Politeness in the British House of Commons

According to S. Perez de Ayala (2001), politeness strategies are the means by which interaction can take place in the House of Commons. In fact, politeness is essential to achieve a harmonious interaction in the parliament. The debates in the House of Commons are governed by rules of politeness. In the same perspective, S. Perez de Ayala (2001, p.143) maintains that the debates in the British parliament are "constrained by institutional rules of politeness that forbid straightforward threats to the addressee". To avoid flouting the rules of politeness in the House, the Prime Minister uses mitigation strategies. Mitigation is a form of polite speech act which helps to soften face threatening acts. In Prime Minister's Questions, the parliamentarians are constrained to use polite language when referring to one another.

V. Bonsignori and D. Filmer (2023, p. 73) contend that the polite forms of address in the House are important in preserving "the civil tone and objectivity of debate. It also avoids personal attacks as opposed to political criticism. Therefore, the use of polite forms of address with honorific titles has a mitigating function, moderating aggressive and adversarial linguistic behaviour". In the context of British House of Commons, the MPs cannot identify one another by using the second person singular (you). The MPs always address the House through the chair (the speaker). The members of the parliament are not entitled to address another MP as you. They should refer to each other through formulaic identity markers based on each member's role in the House. V. Bonsignori and D. Filmer (2003) contend that the

occurring of honorific titles plays a polite and attenuating function in parliamentary interaction. Some cases of polite ritualistic use of address forms can be seen in PM Theresa May's responses in (1) and (2):

(1) I thank **my honourable Friend** for his kind remarks ((T. May, 20 JULY 2016, column 816)

(2) I thank **the right honourable Gentleman** for the welcome he has given me (T. May, 20 JULY 2016, column 817).

(3) I thank **the honourable Lady** for her welcome (T. May, 20 JULY 2016, column 817)

Examples (1) and (2) illustrate the use of honorific titles such as “my honourable friend” and “the right gentlemen” which are part of UK parliamentary language. These address forms help to give deference to the MPs. For B. S. Akuka and *al.* (2021, p. 18), the honorific forms of address confer “respect and honour to the addressee. Hence, any MP who fails to use them is deemed to be out of order”. In other terms, courtesy is essential in parliamentary interaction. Besides, the use of honorific titles permits to express negative politeness. The speaker uses address forms to create distance with the addressees and state indirect utterances. The example (4) shows that the standing orders of British parliament influence the using of polite language. The indirectness of address forms also helps to mitigate the utterances of the Prime Minister as shown in excerpt (4).

(4) I thank **my right honourable Friend** for his reference to the work on polio, which enables me to commend the work of my constituent (T. May, 24 JULY 2019, Column 1300)

The honorific title “my right honourable friend” is used to refer to an MP if in the same political party. In fact, PM Theresa May uses this address form in (4) to show social decorum and maintain addressee's face wants. In this sense, B. S. Akuka and *al.* (2021, p. 19) explain that the way of identifying MPs is “suggestive of positive politeness strategy of using in-group identity markers”. Therefore, it can be said that the address forms used by MPs in the House of Commons contribute to maintain appropriate behaviours and preserve MPs' face wants.

1.2 Mitigation and Unparliamentary Language

The parliamentary debates in the British parliament are guided by rules and code of conduct. According to L. Treimane (2011), these rules are known as Erskine May's treatise on law, privileges, proceedings and usage of parliament. The regulations on language in British parliament serve to maintain politeness and social decorum during the question time. The chair in the House of Commons ensures that during the parliamentary proceedings, the MPs abstain from using unparliamentary language. In fact, any speech act that breaks the rules of politeness in the British parliament is considered as unparliamentary language. Examples of unparliamentary language include: abusive language, rudeness, accuse each other of lying, being drunk or misrepresent each other's words. C. Ilie (2001) states that freedom of speech is at the heart of parliamentary debates. However, this does not imply that MPs have the right to use unparliamentary language such as insults, coarse or abusive language.

Parliamentary discourse is a type of institutional discourse. In this this regard, in question time, it is noticed that the PM resorts to mitigation strategies as a way of attenuating unparliamentary speech acts. A. S. Dawood's (2020) points out that "mitigation is used strategically as a means of displaying politic, appropriate behaviour to refrain from unparliamentary language". Mitigation is a strategic means to cover up parliamentary language. In Prime Minister's Questions, PM Theresa May uses mitigating devices in order to soften her responses. The extracts (5) and (6) illustrate how PM Theresa May uses mitigating devices to avoid unparliamentary speech acts. In other terms, the examples (5) and (6) show Theresa May's tentative answers in question time.

(5) **"I would point out** to the hon. Gentleman that my party **is a little bit** bigger than his"
(T. May, 20 JULY 2016, column 826)

(6) As **I said a little earlier** in response to my honourable Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski), we are leaving the European Union, but we are not leaving Europe. (T. May, 20 JULY 2016, column 825)

In using the modal "would" and the adverbs "a little" and "a little bit", Theresa May lessens the face threatening force of her utterances. Moreover, Theresa May responses seem appropriate and polite thanks to mitigation. In fact, mitigators permit to minimize the negative connotative meanings of the PM's utterances. The rhetorical question in (7) is asked by PM Theresa May to reveal opposition weaknesses, especially the failures of the Labour party. In this occurrence, the PM begins her response by an if clause which helps to mitigate the utterances in (7).

- (7) **If he wants to talk about** people ducking manifesto commitments and commitments made during general election campaigns, **might I remind** him that the Labour party and he said that they would abolish student debt? (T. May, 24 JULY 2019, column 1295).

The extract (7) shows a mitigated response of PM Theresa May. As a matter of fact, she uses a rhetorical question to counterattack the criticisms of the opposition about the Conservative party's manifesto. The PM uses a rhetorical question in order to avoid the responsibility of using unparliamentary language. This finding resonates with B. S. Akuka and *al's.* (2021) assertion that by using rhetorical questions, the PM avoids the responsibility for doing the face threat. Mitigating the speech acts permit to avoid inappropriate discourse in question time.

2- Mitigation Techniques in Communication

2.1 Mitigating Speech Acts

Mitigation means the softening of something unpleasant. According to B. Martinovsky (2005), mitigation is originally associated with contexts and environmental sciences. That is to say, the concept stems from things like risk mitigation, mitigation of damage. Attenuating negative effects is the main drive for using mitigating devices. B. Fraser (1980, p. 342) maintains that to mitigate is “to soften the effects of an order, ease the blow of bad news, make criticism in a more palatable way”. M. Albelda Marco and M. E. Arguedas (2021) consider mitigation as a linguistic strategy which permits to reduce the degree of illocutionary force of a speech act and /or the speaker's commitment to what is said.

From a sociopragmatic perspective, mitigation strategies are recognized and interpreted contextually. That is to say, speaker's intention to reduce the illocutionary force of her utterance can be appropriately interpreted within a context. Mitigation involves many linguistic devices such as hedges and euphemisms. B. Fraser (1980) suggests three fundamental conditions to successfully interpret mitigation. First, he notes that “mitigation only occurs if the speaker is polite” but not the opposite. Second, mitigation should not be seen as a speech act but a linguistic strategy that softens the force of a speech act. According to B. Fraser (1980), hedges can also contribute to create a mitigating effect.

B. Fraser (1980) indicates a number of mitigating structures employed to soften one's utterances. These mitigators include linguistic devices such as directives performed by indirect means, distancing devices or disclaimers, hedges, parenthetical verbs like guess,



think, feel and tag questions. In the same vein, C. Caffi's (1999) psychological approach highlights mitigation as a multilevel and multidimensional phenomenon insofar as it involves various linguistic levels together with an interactional dimension. In other terms, C. Caffi (1999, p.884) considers mitigation as "responsibility management in discourse, involving cognitive and emotive aspects". To use mitigating strategies to maintain speaker and co-speakers' face needs depend on the socio-pragmatic competence of the utterer. It means that the occurrence of mitigating techniques in communication entails the knowledge of language and the linguistic norms in a given communicative setting. Interactants employ a specific discursive strategy so as to fulfil their goals. To fulfil the communicative goal, the speaker may boost or weaken what he/she says. By using mitigations in her discourse during the oral answers in the parliament, the PM intends to adapt to changing circumstances, including speakers and addressees' stances and topics referred to.

According to I. Íñigo-Mora (2017), the concept of mitigation can be studied from a narrow or from a broad perspective. In the narrow sense, she says that mitigation is treated as part of politeness. Mitigation is subsequently considered as a politeness strategy deployed by the speaker to soften face threatening acts (FTAs). Politeness strategies are discursive means by which one minimizes threats to hearers' face. In this case, mitigation is used to help maintain hearer's face from loss. P. Brown and S. Levinson (1987) show that some verbal acts cause potential damage to both speaker and hearer's face. In the broad sense, C. Caffi (2007, p. 48) considers mitigation as "the result of the weakening of interactional parameters such as cognitive commitment, emotive involvement, topical salience". In this context, mitigation is approached as a strategic communicative behavior involving the use of indirectness, endorsement of a social role, emotive involvement and commitment to proposition.

Examining the strategic use of mitigation in parliamentary discourse, A. S. Dawood (2020) suggests that the MPs use mitigation to disguise the offensive effect of the messages while making requests or responding to critical comments to show the orientation of face concerns. A. S. Dawood's (2020) study reveals two kinds of mitigation: routinised and non-routinised linguistic features which are expressed through a variety of formulaic lexicogrammatical features and discursive strategies. Mitigation is deployed in this institutional interaction to downplay the face threatening acts embedded in the speech acts like requests, directives and critical comments. Mitigation in this way, helps to manage

interpersonal relational and participants' face needs. A. S. Dawood (2020) concludes that mitigation is an excellent pragmalinguistic resource for performing indirect FTAs to the hearers while adhering to the parliamentary norms of conduct in the British House of Commons.

In a research, I. Íñigo-Mora (2017) investigates the mitigating power of the first-person plural pronoun or inclusive 'we' in Prime Ministers' discourses. In doing so, she compares the former British PM David Cameron's discourses with that of his Spanish counterpart, Mariano Rajoy. The findings suggest that PM Cameron uses inclusive 'we' to mitigate the undesirable effects of his utterances. By contrast, I. Íñigo-Mora (2017) finds that the Prime Minister of Spanish uses an exclusive 'we' to minimize the illocutionary force of his utterances. In using this type of shield, PM Mariano Rajoy avoids self-ascription to his statements.

2.2 Sociopragmatic Approach to Mitigation

The study of discourse from a socio-pragmatic perspective entails the analysis of social factors that influence the linguistic choice of the speakers. G. Leech (1983, p. 10) explains that sociopragmatics is the most "sociological interface of pragmatics". In other words, a socio-pragmatic approach to discourse serves to account for interlocutors' linguistic behaviours and appropriate linguistic choices in a given context. In this regard, B. Martinovsky (2005, p. 42) points out that "human linguistic behavior is strongly defined by the activity in which people are involved". The social context, the type of speech event and speakers' goals are some factors that can lead to the choice a specific linguistic strategy instead of the other. According to B. Martinovsky (2005), the study of mitigation offers a bridge between the study of linguistic occurrences and that of social action.

In this study, C. Caffi's (2007) typology is used to shed light on the mitigation strategies adopted by PM Theresa May during the question-answer sequences in the House of Commons. This analytical framework permits to highlight the mitigating acts. In other terms, the analysis draws on C. Caffi's (2007) three basic classes of mitigation strategies as follows: bushes, hedges and shields. This typology offers a better understanding of the concept of mitigation. H. K. Al-Ebadi and F. K. Hassan (2020, p. 856) maintain that C. Caffi's (2007) mitigation strategies "stand at the top of the hierarchical organization of mitigation". In fact, this framework allows to explore the occurrence of mitigation in discourse. For C. Caffi (2007, p. 49), mitigation can be achieved on three levels or domains namely "the proposition", "the illocution", and "the deictic origin" of speaker's utterance. In this vein, C.

Caffi (2007) has suggested three main techniques to mitigate. To better understand how PM Theresa May makes use of these mitigation techniques to prevent or minimize conflict during the polarized parliamentary questions. In this regard, C. Caffi's (2007) model of mitigation is the theoretical framework that underpins the investigation of mitigating strategies in parliamentary debates between PM May's answers.

A- Bushes as Mitigation strategy

These types of mitigators attenuate the propositional content. As a matter of fact, bushes help create a vague propositional content. In doing so, the speaker's goal is to minimize the seriousness of an issue at hand or downgrade the negative effects of the verbal acts. A. I. Ali and S. M. Salih (2020, p. 34) note that "the mitigating force is usually achieved by making personal assumptions or expressing doubts about the propositional content of one's own remark on speech acts, such as offer of apology, accepting compliment, self-contradiction and confession". They add that bushes can be expressed by using these mitigators: 'I think', 'I guess', 'I assume', 'if I could'. Bushes are used to create vagueness.

Adaptors represent a subcategory of bushes. Adaptors are defined by Al- H. K. Ebadi and F. K Hassan (2020, p. 857) as "a set of lexical terms operate as mitigators or modifiers the speaker depends on to express the level of truth of original proposition". These lexical units are employed in discourse to adapt utterer's lexical choices. Some illustrative cases of the bushes (adaptors) are: kind of, sort of, a little, somewhat and more or less. In the context of face-to-face interaction in the House of Commons, the PM uses these strategies to defend herself and avoid unparliamentary language.

B- Hedging as a Mitigation Strategy

G. Lakoff (1973, p. 471) describes hedges as words that "their meaning implicitly involves fuzziness". This category of mitigators represents the second major mitigating strategies outlined by C. Caffi (2007). Hedges are linguistic devices permit to express things in unassertive way with the aim of weakening the negative connotative meaning. As a matter of fact, hedges involve the use of linguistic forms such as: you know, sort of and perhaps, to express certainty or uncertainty about something. B. Fraser (1980, p. 344) calls this type of mitigation "self-serving". Since its use preserves the utterer from discomfort, shame, contradiction and face loss. In the case of parliamentary discussion, this mitigation strategy contributes to minimize the tension between MPs.

Al- H. K. Ebadi and F. K Hassan (2020, p. 858) draw attention to the fact that hedges are different from hedges. In the sense that “hedges do not concern with the truth value of the propositions or changing the content of the discourse. Instead, they express indirectly the addresser’s attitudes to weaken his own speech acts and to display his ‘doubt or reservations’ to the conversation”. Hedges act as mitigators by causing uncertainty or impreciseness. They frequently occur in political discourse to maintain interlocutors’ face wants. Further to this, it shows that hedges are pragmalinguistic devices which have the discursive functions of marking a lack of full commitment to one’s assertion. Hedges are lexical expressions which help to mitigate speech acts by making them fuzzy. In fact, it is the fuzziness of meaning brings about by hedges that the speaker exploits in order to soften what he/she utters.

C- Shields as Mitigation Strategy

According to C. Caffi (2007), shields are pragmatic mitigating strategies which can be characterised as impersonalization mechanisms. That is to say, shields involve passive or impersonal constructions. It is a verbal strategy of attributing a source other than the speaker. C. Caffi (2007, p. 70) explains that “shields are greatly structured by impersonal or passive constructions where the author is deleted, describes present events or state of affair”. In fact, through impersonal constructions, the speaker can distance himself / herself from what is uttered. In this case, the mitigated effect is not created by using a specific or explicit linguistic device, but rather it is achieved by means of defocalisation. According to I. A. Ali and M. S. Salih (2020, p. 34), instances of shields are: “so to speak”, “let’s say”, “by the way”, “incidentally”.

Shields are further sub-divided into three categories which are: deictic shields, quotational shields and topical shields. These subcategories depict the various strategies deployed by interlocutors to achieve a relatively harmonious communication. According to S. Schneider (2010), the deictic type mitigation works through substitution strategy. It is based on the substitution of the pronoun “I” by the “they say” or by impersonal and passive constructions whereby the utterer is simply removed. C. Caffi (2007) calls this kind of mitigation technique actantial shields. This mitigation strategy is commonly exploited by politicians in order to avoid being blamed for a wrongdoing. Besides, quotational shields are used as mitigating device by substituting the face threatening acts. By contrast the topical shields highlight the speaker’s ability to evade questions and sensitive topics. In this regard, C. Caffi (2007) explains that topical shields help to make a strategic digression.

3. Mitigation Strategies in PM Theresa May's Responses

3.1 Making Indirect Criticism Through Mitigation

The Prime Minister's questions (PMQs) constitute a special parliamentary procedure which gives the opportunity to members of parliament to question the actions and policies of British government. During the parliamentary proceeding, the PM faces up questions from the members of parliament. In this proceeding, if some questions are asked about the actions of the Prime Minister, many parts of the questions are formulated as an attack to PM May's actions. In answering such questions, the PM employs mitigation to comply with parliamentary language. The examples (8) and (9) shed light on the PM's indirect criticism through the use of mitigators:

- (8) The right hon. Gentleman has taken that line for some time, he took it with my predecessor, but I find it **a little confusing**, given that only two years ago in the Scottish referendum, (T. May, 20 JULY 2016, column 821).
- (9) **I am interested** that the right hon. Gentleman referred to the situation of some workers who **might have** job insecurity and potentially unscrupulous bosses. **I suspect** that many Members on the Opposition Benches **might be** familiar with an unscrupulous boss (T. May, 20 JULY 2016, column 819).

In these response-turns, PM Theresa May makes use of the downtoner "a little" in utterance (8), and she repetitively employs "might have" in data (9) to give tentative responses to MPs' questions. The first example is a response to MP Angus Robertson, who presses PM May to do everything to preserve the good relation between Scotland and other European countries after the Brexit. Because, Scotland wants to remain in the European Union. In this sense, Theresa May makes a strategic of mitigation to criticise the unclear or unsteady position of the MP on brexit through the downtoner "a little". Downtoners, according to G. Leech (2014) help to soften the force of directive acts. The use of "a little" mitigates the response of PM May, as this turns the PM's response into an indirect act. In examples (8) and (9), one notices that Theresa May uses mitigation as a safe way to criticise the opposition.

Good temper and moderation are the characteristic of British parliamentary language. In this respect, in excerpt (9), at the beginning of her response, the PM shows an alignment with what the inquirer has said. The locution "I am interested" can be considered as a mitigation



strategy, because, it minimizes disagreement between the respondent and the MP who raises the question. The strategy of attenuating is further deployed in PM Theresa's intervention through the use of the verb "suspect" and the modals "might have" and "might be" which highlight the tentativeness of Theresa May's criticism. In extract (10), PM May's responses comply with tact and maintain social decorum in the House.

- (10) He **might have forgotten** that during that period we had 13 years of a Labour Government, a Labour Government who had a very bad record on house building (T. May, 20 JULY 2016, column 817).

In (10), the mitigating expression "might have forgotten" serves to avoid overt clash with the leader of the opposition from the Labour party. In the extent that she kindly reminds the questioner's party bad record on housing in the UK by softening her remark with the using of mitigator "might have forgotten". As a matter of fact, the PM's comment "He might have forgotten that during that period we had 13 years of a Labour Government" cannot be taken as a direct attack to the Labour party, because she starts her utterance with an attenuating strategy. A similar indirect criticism can be seen in the following illustrative data:

- (11) I **simply** remind him that where we did disagree at the election was that the Conservative party agreed to put in the money that was necessary for the NHS, (T. May, 20 JULY 2016, column 822).
- (12) **Perhaps** then I **could finish** by saying this: as a party leader who has accepted when her time is up, **might I suggest that perhaps** the time is now for him to do the same? (T. May, 24 JULY 2019, column 1295).

The occurrence of the mitigating patterns such as the adverbs "simply" in (11) and "perhaps" in (12) indicates that the speaker is aware of the fact that her utterances can be face damaging for her addressee. In this way, she puts her response as a simple reminder for her opponents. Furthermore, she uses the hedge modals "might" and "could" which contribute to reduce the force her utterances. These mitigators convey a tentative meaning. Therefore, these devices are frequently employed by PM May to mitigate face threatening acts. Thus, the use of mitigation allows to use face threatening acts indirectly. This strategic use of mitigators helps Theresa May sound polite and avoid any reaction that could be seen as a blatant case of unparliamentary language.

3.2 Face Concerns and Self-Correction in PM Theresa May's Responses

According to G. B. Bolden et al. (2022, p. 203), “when repairing a problem in their talk, speakers sometimes do more than simply correct an error, extending the self-correction segment to comment on, repeat, apologize, and/or reject the error”. On this basis, being able to self-correct or provide a substantial justification MPs’ question permits to save the PM’s self-image from serious threat. In (13), PM May is reacting to the leader of opposition’s criticism about her three years of management. Thus, the PM politely corrects his interlocutor by recalling her own record.

(13) **But let me just say something** to the right hon. Gentleman about my record over the past three years and how I measure it, (T. May, 24 JULY 2019, column 1292).

The performative hedged “let me” is combined with the lexical device “just” in this passage (13) as way of attenuating the suggestion made by the speaker. For A. S. Dawood (2020, p. 86), “just” seems to be used as “a downtoning intensifier” in order to “imply that the force of the item concerned is limited”. It is noticed that the PM makes use of this mitigating device to suggest and correct politely her challenger. Mitigation strategies in some context work as a mechanism of remediation for errors, slips of tongue and face threatening acts. In (14), the PM employs a mitigation to avoid a negative implication.

The PM also expresses mitigation through verbal shields. A. I. Ali and M. S. Salah (2020, p. 34) describe shields as mitigating strategies that do not contain explicit devices: “the downgrading operation takes place at a deeper, more abstract level, affecting syntax as with the passive transformation, or morphology, as in the switch from first person singular pronouns to other person pronouns”. This type of mitigation can be seen in example (14) where the PM swifts from the first personal pronoun “I” to an inclusive “we”.

(14) **We are not** entrenching the advantages of the privileged few in terms of opportunity, **but extending opportunity to all** (T. May, 20 JULY 2016, column 824).

In (14), the swift helps the PM minimize negative implications that can be associated from her response. As explained by A. I. Ali and M. S. Salah (2020, p. 34) in “shields there is a shift of responsibility from the ‘I’ of the speaker, i.e., from the agent of the utterance to someone else or to an impersonal source”. By creating an impersonal source, the PM protects her face from an eventual error in her statement. Furthermore, in (15) the PM politely reminds an MP what his party has failed to do.



(15) If he wants to talk about people ducking manifesto commitments and commitments made during general election campaigns, **might I remind** him that the Labour party and he said that they **would** abolish student debt? (T. May, 24 JULY 2019, column 1295).

In (15), the occurrence of hedges devices likes “might” and “would” is a strategy of polite distancing deployed by PM May so as to avoid a direct clash with the opposition bench in the House of Commons. In the illustration (15), it appears that the PM is just reminding a point that her interlocutors may well know. Thus, the mitigated effect created by the use of hedges allows the PM to defend her own party by pointing out the failures of the Labour party. A similar strategy is noticed in extract (16):

(16) If the right hon. Gentleman is so interested in delivering on mandates from the British people, **he should have voted** on the deal to take us out of the EU (T. May, 24 JULY 2019, column 1297)

In this utterance, the PM indirectly accused Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of Labour party for not supporting the deal on brexit. The passive construction “he should have voted” is meant to soften the PM’s accusation. In so doing, Theresa May avoids being accused of using unparliamentary language in the House of Commons. This mitigation also helps to minimize overt conflict between the PM and the opposition bench. The extracts (17) and (18) illustrate another strategy of face-saving act by Theresa May. As a matter of fact, by saying “I have to say”, when reacting to MPs’ questions suggests that the circumstances oblige her to say what she is about to utter. In the same vein, G. Leech (2014, p. 32) maintains that “the modality of obligation ‘I have to’ makes the utterance seem that the speaker is compelled (presumably against his/her will) to say something” in certain situations.

(17) The hon. Gentleman refers to divisions (...) **I have to say**: which party was it that took three weeks to decide who its unity candidate should be? (T. May, 20 JULY 2016, column 821).

(18) **I have to say** to the right hon. Gentleman that I fear that our success has not been what we wanted to be from the amount of fake news and fake information that he uses at that Dispatch Box (T. May, 24 JULY 2019, column 1294).

In extracts (17) and (18), PM Theresa May uses the modality of obligation “have to” in order to attenuate the criticism that follows in her utterance “I fear that our success has not been what we wanted to be from the amount of fake news and fake information that he uses”.

Besides, in example (19) the PM makes use of “little” and “a little bit” as a way to correct her counterparts.

(19) **Little** did the voters of North West Durham know that the two unsuccessful candidates in that election would become leaders of two of the country’s political parties, although **I would** point out to the hon. Gentleman that my party is **a little bit** bigger than his (T. May, 20 JULY 2016, column 826).

In (19), the PM begins her response by “little did” which attenuates her comment. She goes on using the modal verb “would” and the downtoner “a little bit” to further attenuate the illocutionary force of her utterances to hearers’ face. Mitigators are used by PM May to avoid direct confrontation with MPs. In fact, the question time constitutes a competition for credibility and face enhancement for the PM. Therefore, in the PM’s response-turns, she resorts to attenuating devices in order to avoid losing the face.

Conclusion

It is undeniable the way politicians care about their face or self-image. The budgets allotted to politicians’ public appearance and image building show that their public image is of critical importance for them. This concern for face (self-image) is reflected in PM Theresa May’s responses during the question time in British House of Commons. The analysis of PM Theresa May’s responses suggests that she adapts her reactions to what is perceived appropriate linguistic behaviour in parliament. Analysing mitigations in the PM’s utterances, this study has explored two sessions of Prime Minister’s Questions, with a focus on the answers of PM Theresa May. This paper draws on C. Caffi’s (2007) model of mitigation to highlight the mitigation strategies used by PM May and how she shows face concern in an antagonistic setting like the Prime Minister’s Questions time.

The analysis suggests that PM Theresa May uses mitigating devices such as hedges “a little”, “might be”, the performative hedges “let me” and the mitigating markers like “simply” and “perhaps” to make indirect criticism. That is to say, mitigation helps her to abide by the general requirement for moderate language use in British parliament. It also finds that Theresa May employs mitigation strategies such as shield, bushes and hedges in order to show face concern. It also found that the PM uses shield to avoid full responsibility of her utterances. That is to say, she marks some distance with her responses. This distancing strategy is expressed through a swift from the pronoun “I” to an inclusive “we”. This swift helps her to



avoid a total responsibility for some actions. In doing so, she maintains her positive face. That is to say, she uses mitigation to appear polite in the eyes of voters. This analysis focuses only on PM Theresa May's mitigation strategies. Further works can examine verbal attenuations in Prime Minister's Questions by comparing female and male PM's responses.

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