

# THE CODING OF LINGUISTIC POLITENESS IN THE ACADEMIC BOOK REVIEW

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## Resumen

El género de la reseña crítica desempeña una función muy importante en el mundo académico actual: evaluar la validez de los nuevos estudios dentro de una determinada disciplina científica. Lógicamente, evaluar el trabajo de un colega investigador supone criticarlo, lo cual constituye un acto potencial contra la imagen (ACI); por ello, el uso de estrategias de cortesía resulta necesario para mitigar el efecto negativo de tal ACI. Este artículo pretende demostrar el importante papel de la cortesía lingüística en la confección del discurso crítico. Para satisfacer sus objetivos interpersonales, los críticos hacen uso de estrategias de cortesía tanto positivas como negativas, que les permiten establecer una relación solidaria con el autor revisado y minimizar la imposición del ACI. Estas estrategias son analizadas tanto a nivel oracional como a nivel discursivo.

**Palabras clave:** Cortesía. Acto contra la imagen (ACI). Estrategias de cortesía. Alabanzas. Modalidad.

## Abstract

The book review genre fulfills a very important function in today's academic world: to assess the validity of the new studies in a given scientific discipline. Logically, the evaluation of a colleague's work involves criticism—a potentially face-threatening act (FTA)—so that the use of politeness strategies becomes necessary to soften and redress such FTAs. This paper aims to determine the importance of politeness considerations in the writing of a review. In order to achieve their interpersonal goals, reviewers make use of both positive and negative politeness strategies which enable them to establish a harmonious relationship with the reviewee and to minimize the imposition of the FTAs. These strategies are analyzed both at the sentence level and at the discourse level.

**Key words:** Politeness. Face-threatening act (FTA). Politeness strategies. Complimenting. Modality.

## Résumé

Le genre du compte rendu critique occupe une fonction importante dans le monde académique d'aujourd'hui: évaluer la validité des nouvelles études au sein d'une discipline scientifique déterminée. Logiquement, le fait d'évaluer le travail d'un collègue suppose de le critiquer, ce qui constitue un acte potentiel contre l'image (ACI). Pour cette raison, l'usage de stratégies de courtoisie est nécessaire afin de mitiger l'effet négatif de cet ACI. Cet article prétend démontrer l'importance que joue la courtoisie linguistique dans l'élaboration du discours critique. Afin de satisfaire ses objectifs

inter-personnels, les critiques font usage de stratégies de courtoisie tant positives que négatives qui leur permettent d'établir une relation solidaire avec l'auteur révisé et de minimiser l'imposition de l'ACI. Ces stratégies sont analysées tant au niveau oral qu'au niveau du discours.

**Mots clés:** Courtoisie. Acte contre l'image (ACI). Stratégies de courtoisie. Eloge. Modalité.

## **Sumario**

1. Introduction. 2. Review of the Literature. 3. The Study. 4. Positive Politeness Strategies. 5. Negative Politeness Strategies. 6. Concluding Remarks.

### **1. Introduction**

In today's academic world, the book review functions as an effective means to introduce the new studies in a particular field and to assess the validity of these contributions to the progress of the discipline. In this genre, the writer informs the reader about the contents and structure of a recently-published book-usually the work of a fellow researcher-and most importantly evaluates the book according to various criteria, such as adequate treatment of the subject, usefulness for the prospective reader and possible future applications.

We believe that the interpersonal relationship between the participants-that is, the reviewer and the reviewee-constitutes a crucial factor in the writing of this genre, and determines the construction of the discourse as a whole. Since the assessment of a book necessarily involves criticism, which is a potentially face-threatening act (hereafter FTA), mitigation strategies become necessary to attenuate the unwelcome effects of the face-threatening act on the reviewee and make the criticism more palatable. Moreover, criticism is often combined with complimenting in an attempt to maintain social harmony and solidarity with the reviewee.

Therefore, in the academic book review, the writer resorts to a wide range of politeness strategies which allow him to evaluate the book while maintaining at the same time a harmonious relationship with the reviewee. The purpose of our study is to analyze the use and function of these strategies conventionally used in the book review genre for social purposes.

### **2. Review of the Literature**

Among the most interesting studies on the genre of the book review from a pragmatic perspective, those by Johnson (1990, 1992) and Belcher (1995) are worth highlighting. Johnson basically focuses on the use of complimenting strategies in peer-review texts written by graduate students. According to Johnson:

Peer reviews are a fact of life in academia. Accomplishing them in a way that is critical and insightful, yet appropriately polite at the same time, is a goal of most conscientious reviewers (Johnson (1990: 51)).

The interpersonal relationship between the writer and the reviewee determines how a review is written and, therefore, politeness considerations play a very important part in review texts. In this genre, critical substantive goals are to be combined with interpersonal social goals, and the use of politeness strategies becomes crucial in order to balance criticisms

and maintain a harmonious interpersonal relationship. As Johnson (1990: 53) states “peer-review texts involve face-threatening acts (FTAs) and call for the use of positive politeness strategies”.

Belcher's (1995) study of book reviews also includes the consideration of evaluative language and the use of politeness strategies as friendly persuasion. According to Belcher, the evaluative language mostly employed in book reviews presents a high degree of “cautious indirectness”, especially in the expression of negative criticism, which is regularly preceded by positive commentary in order to soften the force of the face-threatening speech act. This gives rise to a very frequent discourse pattern in the review text: the “good news/bad news pairing strategy”, which is commonly used to redress a specific FTA.

As Belcher rightly suggests, consideration of the evaluative language employed in critical reviews may help students understand the dynamics that underlie the social functioning of their discipline, and realize that “professionals in their fields (...) do indeed engage in disputation and openly criticize each other” (1995: 149), although they are expected “to voice criticism respectfully”, that is, to remain respectful when challenging their colleagues' findings.

Most of the studies on the book review have exclusively focused on the use and function of positive politeness strategies, especially compliments. However, few studies have been devoted to the use and function of negative politeness strategies and to the categorization of the wide range of politeness strategies characteristic of the genre. This paper attempts to bridge this gap by analyzing the politeness strategies-both positive and negative-used in the book review for social purposes, namely to maintain a harmonious relationship with the reviewee and to mitigate the negative critical statements usually associated with this genre.

### **3. The Study**

The corpus of this paper comprises a total of 25 book reviews taken from three of the most cited academic publications (Crookes, 1986) within the field of linguistics: *English for Specific Purposes (ESP)*, *Applied Linguistics* and *TESOL Quarterly*. These journals are considered to be renowned and prestigious publications in the linguistic community, and constitute an effective means to introduce new knowledge and thus contribute to the general progress of the discipline. The selected texts were published in the years 1994 to 1998 and their average length ranges from 500 to 1500 words.

The theoretical framework of our study includes Halliday's functional view of language, on the one hand, and Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, on the other:

- a) According to Halliday, language serves an ideational function—for the expression of logical and experiential meaning; an interpersonal function—to interact with others and to set up relationships—and a textual function—as a means of organizing and constructing a text. We focus basically on the interpersonal function of language, since the use of politeness strategies in the book review responds to the need to establish, maintain and consolidate social relationships.
- b) Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) distinguish two types of face-threatening acts: those that threaten negative face, that is, the hearer's desire not to be impeded

upon and to have freedom of action, and those which threaten positive face, that is, the hearer's desire to be liked and approved of.

In order to avoid an FTA or to redress its performance, speakers use two kinds of politeness strategies:

- a) positive politeness strategies, addressed towards the hearer's positive face.
- b) negative politeness strategies, addressed towards the hearer's negative face.

#### 4. Positive Politeness Strategies.

Brown and Levinson's framework (1978, 1987) provides a definition of positive politeness that encompasses two complementary uses, co-existing in perfect symbiosis. These authors recognize that positive politeness participates of a redressive function: however the redress obtained by means of positive politeness strategies differs from that achieved by means of negative politeness, since it widens to the appreciation of alter's wants and to the expression of similarity between ego and alter's wants:

Unlike negative politeness, positive politeness is not necessarily redressive of the particular face want infringed by the FTA, that is, whereas in negative politeness the sphere of relevant redress is restricted to the imposition itself, in positive politeness the sphere of redress is widened to the appreciation of alter's wants in general or to the expression of similarity between ego's and alter's wants (Brown and Levinson (1987: 101)).

The results of our analysis show that positive politeness mechanisms help to simultaneously maintain a harmonious relationship between reviewer, reviewee and the scientific community—thus attending to Halliday's interpersonal function (1976), and to achieve the communicative goal of the genre: the evaluation of a peer's work (thus fulfilling Halliday's ideational function). Thus, the function of positive politeness devices in the book review can be said to be twofold:

- a) On the one hand, they are used, in a global sense, as *redressive mechanisms*, along with negative politeness devices, that help soften the unwelcome effects that the FTA of the book review may exert on the audience and reviewee. Therefore, positive politeness strategies are not exclusive of FTAs towards the hearer's positive face, but also, and most importantly for this particular situation, they help attenuate face-threatening acts towards the hearer's negative face, as is the very case with the book review.
- b) On the other hand, they work as some sort of “accelerator” of social relationships between the participants in the interaction. In this sense, positive politeness helps maintain and enhance rapport with the reviewee and the intended audience, shows concern for them and conveys the idea that both belong to the same social group.

As we have already mentioned, the book review entails the assessment of a colleague's work, and as such, criticisms of the peer's work and suggestions for further improvement are pervasive in the genre. These acts pose a threat to the reviewee's freedom of action (negative face) and desire to be liked and admired by others (positive face), since some aspect of his/her work is being negatively evaluated and so presented to a wider scientific

community. Consequently, the attention to the reviewee's negative face calls for some mitigation or attenuation of the criticisms and suggestions for improvement. At the same time, at the same time, positive appraisal is needed to restore the peaceful equilibrium between interlocutors and to redress the possible damage to the reviewee's negative face.

The application of Brown and Levinson's postulates (1978, 1987) for the codification of positive politeness involves some kind of modification due to the specific nature of this type of genre and renders us with the following classification:

1. Firstly, compliments are studied under sub-strategy 2: Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H), and they encode the most genuine manifestation of appreciation for the addressee in order to ensure the maintenance of social relationships.
2. Secondly, sub-strategy 1: Notice, attend to H (his interests, wants, needs, goods), and sub-strategy 7: Presuppose/raise/assert common ground.
3. And finally, sub-strategy 13: Give reasons to justify the reasonableness of both criticisms and compliments.

The linguistic coding of positive politeness strategies is best exemplified by means of the following most pervasive sub-strategies:

Sub-strategy 2: Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with some aspect of the book) by means of compliments.

In reviewing an academic piece of work, the writer often compliments the reviewee on the qualities and strengths of the book. Positive evaluation is then at the heart of complimenting and its function in the book review is twofold: it may be used to express a cognitive judgement based on the positive appraisal of a particular aspect of the book, or it may be intended to set up a solidarity framework in which negative critical statements will not affect the writer's personal relationship with the reviewee.

A wide range of lexical items are used to express positive evaluation: adjectives (such as clear, helpful, innovative, interesting, excellent, relevant'), adverbs (such as 'convincingly, effectively, lucidly, successfully'), nouns (such as 'achievement, clarity, improvement, originality, quality, success') and verbs (such as 'accomplish, illuminate, shed light, succeed', etc.).

Sub-strategy 1 and 7: Notice, attend to H (his interests, wants, needs, /Presuppose/ raise/assert common ground: either with the reviewee or with the audience

By means of these sub-strategies the reviewer indicates that evaluation is being carried out for the sole benefit of the reviewee, and for the sake of the scientific community itself. The reviewer also presupposes that the audience has certain needs or expectations about the new book, and thus offers a review of the book in accordance with these needs. Audience consideration is a very important evaluative criterion in the book review which determines the nature of the appraisal of the book. It also works as some kind of rationale to justify the FTAs performed, which seem to be carried out for the sake of the audience and, to some extent, of the reviewee's needs.

The reviewer's comments and suggestions are thus to be taken as examples of his/her goodwill and consideration for the audience's needs and interests. Thus, these positive politeness devices fulfill a redressive function while attending to the social aspect of interaction.

In the following extracts, the reviewer provides a negative evaluation of some weaknesses of the book on the basis of their effect on the target reader. The pattern we find here is criticism+target reader:

It moves at a measured pace throughout, there is little that will surprise or stimulate the student by its novelty. (ESP 13 (1), 103-5).

Those students without a background of work experience to call upon are significantly hampered in discussions throughout the text. However, I would be careful about using it with older, upper level managers, who might find some of the drawings in the Learner's Book more appropriate for younger learners. (ESP (13) 2, 190-2).

Sometimes, these two sub-strategies occur in the positive evaluation, giving rise to a very recurrent pattern in the book review: the juxtaposition of a compliment and the target reader, as in the following examples:

There is a key roughly every three units so that the student can check his/her work without having to turn all the way to the back of the book. (ESP 13 (1), 103-5).

This excellent collection provides the ESL/ESP practitioner with carefully conducted research on current issues as well as details of new classroom innovations.. (ESP 15 (2), 165-8).

On some other occasions, the author may combine positive and negative evaluation of the same book according to the type of audience and their particular needs and interests:

these activities could be trite and demotivating to some students, though others may find the general scope a refreshing contrast to their professional work. For most activities, the authors have provided an array of topics which allows selection according to the students' interests and professional fields. (ESP 13 (1), 105-9).

Likewise, what will probably be an especially attractive feature of this book to some readers may well be equally unattractive to others (...). Other readers may find the dominance and subjectivity of the author's voice obtrusive and even counterproductive (...). For still other readers, less emphasis on her own voice would have allowed Fox to give greater prominence to the student voices she so ardently supports. (ESP 15 (2), 168-71).

As can be observed, the attention to the audience's needs, namely, that of students, trainers or teachers is constantly paid attention to, not only when praising the book, but also as a justification for its negative evaluation. Therefore, even negative evaluations towards the book seem justifiable since they are carried out for the sake of the audience and they inevitably redound to their benefit.

Sub-strategy 13: Give or ask for reasons.

Giving reasons is a very commonly found sub-strategy in the book review. Its main function is to provide sound argumentation for the reasonableness of the positive or negative evaluation of some aspect of the book: "By including H thus in his practical reasoning, and assuming reflexivity (H wants S's wants), H is thereby led to see the reasonableness of S's FTA (or so S hopes) (Brown and Levinson (1987: 128)). As in the previous strategies (1 and 7), the pattern most commonly used in the book review is compliment and/or criticism+reasons to support it. Reasons in the book review are provided as strategies that soften criticism, but also justify positive evaluation, and thus are very commonly combined with compliments. At the same time, providing reasons to justify both criticisms and compliments helps the reviewer maintain his positive face and makes him come across as a rational individual who evaluates the book on the basis of his expertise and knowledge of the subject. Most of the times, reasons are provided implicitly, but sometimes they are introduced by means of causal subordinators such as "because", "since", "due to", "that's why", etc. Below we illustrate the use of this sub-strategy with the following extracts:

a) Reasons that justify negative evaluation:

However, due to the linguistic and rhetorical complexity of the analyses, the papers by Hansen (Chapter 6) and Young (Chapter 8), will likely be extremely rough going for all but the most informed and dedicated readers. Dudley-Evans's paper (Chapter 7), while easier to read, is by his own admission limited in his generalizability, since it examines only four lectures, two each from two subject areas. (ESP 16 (1), 77-9).

The chapter on history is for me the least interesting, partly because the historians debate rhetorical issues themselves, so that much of the chapter is spent critiquing their methodological debates rather than their articles. (ESP 16 (1), 75-7).

b) Reasons that justify praising or complimenting:

This study is of interest not only because it deals with L2 writing in a discipline that has not generally been the subject of research, but also because it focuses on a topic that has recently engaged ESL writing teachers and scholars—the reading-writing relationship (see Carson & Leki (1994). (ESP 15 (2), 165-8).

This section is remarkable for two reasons. First, its scope. The authors do not restrict themselves to those areas traditionally considered to be the business of phonological theory but, without neglecting the latter, adopt a wide-ranging perspective (...). Second, instead of transferring information directly, they invite readers to discover the principles for themselves and to reflect on them in a series of aptly designed tasks. (Applied Linguistics 18 (3), 405-7).

## 5. Negative Politeness Strategies

The negative sub-strategies which we have identified in the book review are:

Sub-Strategy 1 Be conventionally indirect

Sub-Strategy 4 Minimize the imposition

Sub-Strategy 5 Give deference: Relativisation of power positions

These sub-strategies are mainly fulfilled by means of modal devices. Therefore, modality can be said to be the most common realization of negative politeness strategies in the genre of the book review and it is used to realize Brown and Levinson's sub-strategies 1 and 4. Sub-Strategy 5 will be dealt with individually, since it presents some peculiarities in comparison with the previous ones.

The use of modality to convey affective meaning is a defining feature of the book review. Modal expressions, both verbal and non-verbal, are used not only to convey the writer's degree of commitment towards the truth of the proposition uttered, but also, and most importantly, to express affective meaning and therefore politeness. These expressions are used in the review text as politeness devices to express the speaker's attitude to the addressee, revealing the importance of the interpersonal relationship between the participants in the genre. The most frequent modal elements employed in book reviews are:

- a) modal auxiliary verbs and semi-auxiliary verbs, such as *appear* and *seem*.
- b) non-verbal modality, which includes nouns, adjectives and adverbs related to the modals.
- c) and downtoners, such as *rather*, *slightly*, *a bit*, *a little*, which attenuate the force of the negative adjective that follows.

1. *Modal verbs* are used to tone down the force of the negatively affective speech act – a criticism or a suggestion for improvement – instead of a more direct unmodalised alternative:

I would also question the usefulness of an exercise where the student is asked to say which of (a) cash, (b) credit card, (c) form, or (d) traveller's cheques is not a means of payment. (*ESP* 13 (1), 104).

The problem would then be one of monotony, as the units follow a regular pattern, the activity types do not alter as the book progresses, and the focus on language phrases (...) leads to a feeling of fragmentation, without any communicative depth. The materials would then best be used as a dip-in resource. (*ESP* 13 (1), 108).

1.2. Another function fulfilled by the modal verb is to minimize the imposition of the critical comment on the reviewee, as the following examples suggest:

All three are a trifle lightweight for stand-alone textbooks and would require the teacher to provide additional material, but that, after all, is part of his/her job!. (*ESP* 13 (1), 105).

Perhaps in the next edition, the authors could pursue the addition of intercultural notes (*ESP* 13 (2), 192).

I am sure the author would agree they don't have to be like that. I understand that some of the author's work done in Hong Kong along these lines may be published soon and it would certainly make a valuable supplement to this more theoretical intervention. (*Applied Linguistics* 17 (2), 261).

1.3. Another function of the modal verb is to suggest a possible explanation for a specific weakness of the book. In these instances, the modal verb is epistemically used, since the reviewer makes a tentative and diplomatic claim about a specific aspect of the book under revision:

Looked at from the other side, it is remarkable that the book does not suggest a single group activity, but this may be because the authors assume the teacher can work these out for him/herself (*ESP* 13 (1), 104).

These gaps may be due to the fact that the book is a collection of independent essays written at different times, and then forced into coherence under a single cover. This could also be a reason why discussions sometimes repeat themselves in different chapters (*ESP* 15 (3), 245).

My major criticism of the series (and, of course, a biased view, reflecting my own teaching context and situation) is that it focuses very much on the teaching of ESL in North American contexts. (...) This may well be a deliberate choice. If so, I believe that it is an unfortunate one. (*TESOL Quarterly* 32 (3), 604).

1.4. Another frequent use of verbal modality in the review text is related to the signaling of the weaknesses and limitations of the book. In order to mitigate the negative force of such criticisms and minimize their imposition on the reviewee, the writer makes use of a hypothetical clause which includes a modal conditional verb such as *would*, *could* or *might* (in many cases, followed by a perfective: *have*+past perfect), so that the intended criticism comes across as a suggestion:

This is not a major impediment, since the entire text of the cassette is available in the key provided as part of the book, but it would have been interesting to be able to hear the speed of delivery, etc. that characterize the recordings. (*ESP* 13 (1), 103).

Both might have provided useful comparisons and contrasts with the Japanese case. (*Applied Linguistics* 18 (3), 404).

Given the author's commitment to "progress toward the kind of peaceful and tolerant society which most people dream about" (p. ix), the vocabulary of supremacy and dominance could have been avoided. (*TESOL Quarterly* 31 (4), 808).

Similarly, the verb *wish* followed by a subordinate clause also contributes towards mitigating the imposition of the criticism:

While it is of course not easy to write exciting books at this level, especially if they are supposed to be both for class-room and self-study, I could not help wishing that the book were rather less pedestrian and predictable. (*ESP* 13 (1), 104).

This is a valuable observation that this reviewer wishes Bazerman had explored further. (*ESP* 15 (3), 244).

2. The semi-auxiliary verbs *seem* and *appear* are used to tactfully introduce a criticism, as the following examples suggest:

The first two seem to me to be rather old-fashioned and slightly boring in approach. (*ESP* 13 (1), 105).

Without the Manual, the materials appear to be traditional, linguistically oriented, functionally based, worthy but not innovative in design, and probably rather dull and repetitive to use. (*ESP* 13 (1), 106).

Another function fulfilled by the semi-auxiliary verbs is to introduce a subjective claim about a particular aspect of the book in tentative terms:

Though all four of these populations would no doubt find interesting and helpful insights, this book seems most suited to the latter two groups (researchers and graduate students), due to its in-depth and sometimes challenging scholarly content. (*ESP* 16 (1), 78).

This first chapter seems meant to prepare the reader for what is to come. (*Applied Linguistics* 18 (3), 402).

3. *Non-verbal modality*, which includes nouns, adjectives and adverbs related to the modals. By means of non-verbal modality, the reviewer is allowed to convey his/her subjective appraisal of particular aspects of the book, showing at the same time deference to the reviewee and detachment from the critical statements presented:

Without the Manual, the materials appear to be traditional, linguistically oriented, functionally based, worthy but not innovative in design, and probably rather dull and repetitive to use. (*ESP* 13 (1), 106).

Larsen-Freeman observes, although unlikely to offer explicit prescriptions for classroom practices, SLA theory has much to offer pedagogy (*Applied Linguistics* 18 (3), 407).

Presumably, those of us who belong to TESOL and who subscribe to TESOL Quarterly would take as axiomatic the proposition that teaching is a profession. (*TESOL Quarterly* 32 (3), 602).

4. *Combination of verbal and non-verbal modality*. The combination of verbal and non-verbal modal expressions reinforces the reviewer's lack of commitment to the negative remarks concerning specific weaknesses of the book and mitigates their illocutionary force more effectively. In the case of the strong epistemic modal *will*, it is interesting to note that this verb is usually combined with a non-verbal modal element (adverb or adjective) in order to mitigate the reviewer's strong belief in the prediction:

Perhaps in the next edition, the authors could pursue the addition of intercultural notes (*ESP* (13) 2, 192).

On the other hand, readers well versed in these matters will perhaps find the book a less than satisfying one, albeit a positive contribution in general to the field of academic writing. (*ESP* 15 (2), 170).

Since international is clearly the way English is going, then it follows that a progressive, innovative book of this sort should perhaps concern itself a little more with the role of pronunciation in international contexts (*Applied Linguistics* 18 (3), 398).

In sum, many prospective readers will be interested in a few of the papers included in the present monograph; but few will likely be interested in it as a general reference monograph (*Applied Linguistics* 18 (3), 396).

5. *Downtoners* are also used to attenuate the negative force of a criticism, in this case conveyed by an adjective or an adverb:

In self-study mode, this could be rather boring and repetitious, but it provides a basis on which a class teacher could build some useful reinforcement of the unit's content. (ESP 13 (1), 104).

The first two seem to me to be rather old-fashioned and slightly boring in approach. All three are a trifle lightweight for stand-alone textbooks. (ESP 13 (1), 105).

Although chapters on motivation, learner strategy training, learner variables (addressing differences in age and proficiency), techniques for initiating and sustaining interaction, and testing reflect current knowledge and areas of focus in the field, the approach is fairly traditional. (TESOL Quarterly 29 (2), 391).

As a whole, this collection offers interesting data and discussion about gender and ethnicity. However, at times, some of the articles feel outdated. (TESOL Quarterly 29 (2), 399).

However, despite the author's claim that the book requires no special knowledge of business, students without the prerequisite knowledge above may find it a bit intimidating. (TESOL Quarterly 29 (3), 605-6).

Sub-Strategy 5 Give deference: Relativisation of power position

A special category of negative politeness strategies can be distinguished in the review text: in order to attenuate the force of the criticism, the writer seems to deliberately reduce his/her power position with respect to the reviewee by indicating the modest and minor character of the review or by acknowledging the limits of the FTA.

In the first example, the reviewer humbly qualifies her criticism as 'minor': this is a negative politeness strategy which succeeds in minimizing the threat of the imposition by implying that it is not great:

Overall, then, a stimulating, topical approach to the subject, one which brings phonology to life for teacher and educator alike. My only minor criticism is that I would have liked the authors to develop their discussion (...) in relation to English as an international language." (*Applied Linguistics* 18 (3), 398).

In the second excerpt, the criticisms just expounded are referred to as 'quibbles' – trivial objections which cannot overshadow the good qualities of the book reviewed:

These are, however, only quibbles. Gottlieb's narrative, detailed and carefully documented with both Japanese and English sources, will serve as a necessary source for those interested in language policy in Japan" (*Applied Linguistics* 18 (3), 405).

In the third example, the reviewer has only 'a few' complaints and, as in the first example, qualifies the book's drawbacks as 'minor', minimizing the imposition of the FTA:

One of my few complaints is that these explanations are too brief. For instance, the section on tense presents the three simple tenses—present, past, future. (...) In spite of

these minor drawbacks, *In Our Own Words* is now my favorite text for this level of writing class. (*TESOL Quarterly* 29 (2), 394).

In the fourth excerpt, the reviewer balances his criticisms by suggesting the possibility of having failed to understand a particular aspect of the book. This is clearly employed as a negative politeness strategy in order to soften the negative force of his criticism and minimize the imposition of the FTA:

Although I am in general agreement with the constructivist view of learning (...), I would like to sound a note of caution. I do not believe that the constructive and transmission models are mutually exclusive. (...) In fact, if my reading of the texts is accurate, this is the function of the Frameworks sections of the books. (*TESOL Quarterly* 32 (3), 603).

In the last example, the writer concludes her review in very positive terms and, by indicating her impossibility to 'do justice to this important volume' in such a 'short review', she mitigates the negative force of the FTAs performed in the whole text:

In this short review, it is difficult to do justice to this important volume. Suffice it to say that it more than meets its goals: for researchers, it provides models, literature reviews, and a variety of questions for analysis; for teachers, there are useful suggestions for pedagogy, either stated or implied. For all of us, it raises important questions about academic writing—though it does not always answer them. (*ESP* 16 (3), 247).

## 6. Concluding Remarks

The book review is a potentially face-threatening act since it basically involves the assessment of a colleague's work. In the construction of an effective review text, both ideational and interpersonal functions must be accomplished: on the one hand, reviewers express cognitive judgments in their description and evaluation of a recently published book; on the other hand, in order to perform this task, writers must establish a harmonious relationship with the reviewee. In the words of Johnson and Yang (1990: 99):

[...] writers pay careful attention not only to the ideas they wish to express, but to the social messages they send as well. They use a variety of strategies to address interpersonal relations. These strategies function to build social solidarity with others and to soften comments that might otherwise be offensive.

Therefore, writers have to strike a balance between, on the one hand, their compliments and praising comments and, on the other, their criticisms and suggestions for improvement. This can be achieved by means of both positive and negative politeness strategies: the former function to establish solidarity with the reviewee and soften the FTAs performed in the review text, while the latter minimize the imposition that the FTAs unavoidably effect.

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