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THE ROLE OF METALINGUISTIC NEGATION IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

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Metalinguistic negation (MN) is a good tool in interpersonal communication, as it is perfect for formal register and could be used as a politeness strategy. It is used to object to a previous statement, but not its truth-conditional meaning, so it may be used in the communication when the speaker wants to avoid directly denying the previous utterance, which is viewed not as criticism, but as a challenge, which makes it rather polite. Drawing from theories of pragmatics, the article highlights the possible reasons for the speaker to choose this type of negation. Pragmatic functions, complexities and implications of MN are researched. In Business English people tend to use MN as a politeness strategy, it may be used as well to avoid being direct. The study shows the crucial role of metalinguistic negation in resolving conflicts, expressing modesty and suggesting alternatives. The aim of the research is to show the significance and pragmatic implications of metalinguistic negation, as well as its usage in formal contexts. In the article case studies and examples are provided, such as the usage of MN to soften criticism, indirectly disagree, avoid giving the direct answer, soften face-threatening situations, soften criticism, negotiate. MN allows the speaker to remain polite and maintain business-like environment, it may also be the way to avoid directness. Almost nothing has been done on such topic, so the study is quite exceptional, as well as it is topical. In the modern world delicacy and tolerance are most valued, so such linguistic phenomenon is helpful. The study may be interesting for scholars, who research communication strategies, pragmatics, negation, formal register and politeness.

Key words: *metalinguistic negation; politeness; formal register; interpersonal communication; pragmatics; business communication.*

Юрчишин І.М. Роль металінгвістичного заперечення в міжособистісній комунікації. *Металінгвістичне заперечення (МЗ) є хорошим інструментом у міжособистісному спілкуванні, оскільки воно ідеально підходить для формального реєстру та може використовуватися як стратегія ввічливості. Воно використовується для заперечення попереднього висловлювання, але не його істинно-умовного значення, тому його можна використовувати в комунікації, коли мовець хоче уникнути прямого заперечення попередньо-висловленого, що розглядається не як критика, а як виклик, що робить його досить ввічливим. Спираючись на концепцію П. Грайса (1975), ми аналізуємо можливі причини вибору мовцем такого типу заперечення. Досліджуються прагматичні функції, комплексність та імплікація МЗ. У діловій англійській мові люди зазвичай використовують МЗ як стратегію ввічливості, його також можна використовувати, щоб уникнути прямолінійності. Дослідження показує вирішальну роль металінгвістичного заперечення у вирішенні конфліктів, вираженні чемності та пропонуванні альтернатив. Метою дослідження є показати значущість та прагматичну імплікатуру металінгвістичного заперечення, а також його використання у формальному контексті. У статті наводяться тематичні дослідження та приклади, такі як використання МЗ для пом'якшення критики, опосередкованої незгоди, уникнення прямої відповіді, пом'якшення загрозливих ситуацій, пом'якшення критики, переговорів. МЗ дозволяє оратору залишатися ввічливим і підтримувати ділову атмосферу, воно також може бути способом уникнути прямої. На цю тему майже нічого немає, тому дослідження є досить винятковим, так само як воно є актуальним. У сучасному світі найбільше цінується делікатність і толерантність, тому таке мовне явище є помічним. Стаття може бути цікавою для науковців, які досліджують стратегії спілкування, прагматику, заперечення, формальний реєстр і ввічливість.*

Ключові слова: метамовне заперечення; ввічливість; формальний реєстр; міжособистісне спілкування; прагматика; ділове спілкування.

Introduction. Metalinguistic negation (further – MN) has been the focus of everyone's attention lately mainly because of the discussions on the problem of its definition. However, as it is used to correct, it could be an effective instrument in interpersonal communication as a strategy of politeness or in business environment. Little if not nothing has been studied on the topic of metalinguistic negation in interpersonal communication. However, its pragmatic implications are most useful in formal registers as it allows the speaker to indirectly disagree, challenge the idea or politely suggest something. Nowadays, it is essential to be tolerant and delicate, this type of negation allows the speaker to do this, so it is important to study it. MN is used dominantly in formal registers, however, in everyday conversations it is not less spread. So why is the speaker resort to metalinguistic negation? What is the difference between “I disagree” and “It makes

sense, but I want to suggest something slightly different”? And why the second option is more appealing to the speakers?

Theoretical background. Many scholars studied metalinguistic negation, but they mainly focus on its pragmatic or semantic ambiguity, among them Burton-Roberts (1999), Carston (1996), Horn (1985), Davis (2011), Moeschler (2015). When Horn suggested that there is “pragmatic ambiguity” of metalinguistic negation (Horn, 1985, p.122), some supported him (Burton-Roberts), some criticised (Cartson, Moeschler, Davis). Whether it exists or not, one must agree that in a lot of cases it’s not clear why the speaker prefers types of negations that may produce misunderstandings, instead of simply choosing single negation. However, the pragmatic implications of this type of negation have not been studied much, even less was studied on metalinguistic negation of interpersonal communication.

Methods. This article mainly uses discourse analysis to predict the possible implicatures of the examples. Abductive reasoning method is used to support the observations and hypothesis. Pragmatic analysis allowed the author of the study to see the effect which a particular sentence makes on the listener in a particular situation.

Why to use metalinguistic negation in interpersonal communication?

There are still a lot of discussions on the definition of metalinguistic negation. In this article the definition suggested by Laurence Horn is used and it is “a device for objecting to a previous utterance on any grounds whatever, including the conventional or conversational implicata it potentially induces, its morphology, its style or register, or its phonetic realization.” (Horn, 1989, p.363).

However, other scholars like P. Larrivé (2011) show the ambiguity of the above-mentioned definition, he thinks that if we take into account the speaker then the linguistic phenomenon that a lot of linguists call metalinguistic will actually be just polemical.

The benefits that the speaker gets from using MN are impressive, especially for a formal register or as a politeness strategy. This type of negation doesn’t negate the truth of the proposition, instead it provides the possibility to indirectly disagree, not to criticise the utterance, but support it. MN sounds as if the speaker is just giving the other perspective on the topic, it could be subject to interpretation, so the interlocutor will not feel as if the speaker is trying to condemn their idea.

People will react much better to such disagreement, than just saying “I don’t like it”, as MN doesn't convey judgement.

In the world where social boundaries are valued it is crucial to use the polite ways of criticism and disagreement. Not only in formal register may we see now the use of indirectness, for which MN is a perfect fit, but more and more people care nowadays about their face even with the loved ones. Politeness is the norm now in any conversation, any context, and any register.

Directly disagreeing may sound harsh and intolerant, so other ways are sought. Metalinguistic negation allows the speaker to imply negation and challenge the utterance, this indirectness will serve as a politeness strategy in this case. Some professions will most benefit from this, such as businesspeople, diplomats, politicians, lawyers, customer service officers, as well as teachers, who should encourage to improve but not to discourage all together; doctors or counsellors that must carefully choose the words they use with mentally sensitive patients; journalists, etc.

Here are just few cases when it may be used in formal register or as a politeness strategy.

To soften potentially face-threatening situations

Metalinguistic negation may be used to soften the situation and avoid conflict.

The following example shows that the speaker is trying to correct themselves. The statement before seems too straightforward so it is corrected:

I didn't mean to say that you smell, I just feel some odour in the air.

This utterance was used by the speaker to avoid potentially face-threatening situation, so the speaker does not negate the statement “You do not smell”, they negate “I didn’t mean to say”. This way the focus is redirected to a neutral phrase. Then instead of using a negative word (here smell), the speaker uses the word “odour”, which again redirects the focus from the person to the surrounding where they are at the moment, leaving the possibility that the “odour” may have some other neutral explanation.

The speaker’s intention is clear, it is important for them whether they use the socially accepted way of criticism.

Negation can be used to teach others how to behave politely. Here it is used in its classical corrective style. the following sentences:

Now, Cindy, dear, Grandma would like you to speak a bit more like a lady: Phydeaux didn't “shit the rug”, he {defecated / pooped / had a BM} on the carpet. Grandma isn't “feeling lousy”, Johnny, she's indisposed (Horn, 1985, p. 133).

From the perspective of pragmatics the addresser is trying to persuade the addressee, possibly a child, to behave according to the norms of society. The words like “shit” and “lousy” have impolite connotation, therefore they are corrected. Horn notes that the truth-conditional meanings of both expressions are identical, the addresser’s intention is strictly for the sake of politeness.

To soften criticism

Sometimes metalinguistic negation is used just to make it less straightforward, which by some scholars is viewed as polite: I *didn't mean to say* that I *hate* you, what I meant was that I just *don't find you interesting to talk to* (Gretenkort & Tylén, 2021).

This sentence is a conversational implicature, the speaker says that they don't want to talk to the interlocutor, but what they actually meant is that they dislike the person in general, so they would rather finish any interactions. But because they are trying to keep face so they try to avoid such strong words as “hate”, so by using “I don't find you interesting to talk to” the speaker is implying that they would be glad if not to stop the interactions, then at least to reduce it to the minimum.

In the next example the use is also to soften criticism.

a: *It was boring.*

b: *I wouldn't say it was boring, but it could have been more engaging.*

Such reply also shows the speaker’s intention to soften the impact of the statement, so not to sound too direct and offensive.

To indirectly disagree with the help of echo questions

The other pragmatic effect is created by metalinguistic negative questions. They may appear to be a bit aggressive, though the speaker’s intention was the opposite. Consider this:

a: She's coming with us, isn't she?

b: (echoing): Isn't she?

Speaker B is trying to politely disagree with the previous statement, they clearly don't want the person invited by the speaker A to accompany them, but at the same time they feel embarrassed to reject the offer directly, so they are trying to simply challenge the utterance. Though the intention by speaker B was to politely disagree, it still sounds aggressive, so the effect was not achieved.

Horn (1985, p. 132) gives the following examples of metalinguistic negative echo questions:

a: *you did WHAT with Sally and Bill?*

b: *Take out the WHAT?*

c: Do I WHAT?

These questions are considered negative in pragmatics, as their implied meaning is to disagree with the previous utterance. They are metalinguistic as they aim at challenging rather than denying the statement.

With all examples given it is visible that even though the user intended to stay polite, it was not successful. Metalinguistic negative questions appear to sound impolite, if not aggressive. The use of intonation is essential here, if the intonation is too loud then the speaker's intention is not to remain polite, but rather sound sarcastic or express annoyance.

To behave modestly

MN may be used not only to soften criticism, but also to make the utterance sound more modest and reserved. In some cultures (like Japanese) or environments (like business) it is considered polite to undermine achievements, so the speaker may utilize MN in this way.

a: You are such a talented writer.

b: I'm not that talented; I still have a lot to learn.

The reason behind such statement may be realistic self-criticism or the wish to look like everybody else. However, there is the drawback of such approach and that is the interlocutor may find the utterance either arrogant as they may feel that the speaker is just pretending, or they may consider that as the imposter syndrome.

In the following example MN is used more naturally, as it is comprehensibly that no person is perfect, so this utterance will be treated not only as the act of modesty but also as objective estimation.

I am not the best in class, but I'm doing my best.

MN is a way of avoiding looking arrogant or overconfident, it is used to express adequate self-praise, but at the same time convey a level of effort.

To negotiate

One more communicative intention may be to suggest another perspective and try to negotiate. It may be used as a strategy to put forward some alternatives.

I do not entirely support your idea, what if we tried calling the customers and apologizing?

MN is used here to politely disagree and negotiate another solution. The speaker intentionally softens the statement with the help of such negation, trying to only suggest instead of criticising the other viewpoint. The use of metalinguistic negation provides the possibility for the person to indirectly disagree with the

interlocutor, which is really valued in formal register. Instead of disagreeing with the idea itself, the speaker negates the support of it.

I am not sure we can cancel the meeting as you suggested, but I am open for the discussion.

The statement was clearly made to remain businesslike and still making your point. The ability of metalinguistic negation to convey softened meaning is of real help if the speaker wants to keep face, but at the same time appear confident.

It is clearly visible that using metalinguistic negation may assist in business communication as a strategy of negotiation, it perfectly does its job of slightly disagreeing, asserting your point and still keeping face and maintaining formal environment.

Avoiding giving the direct answer

The usage of MN gives the opportunity to make the statement less straightforward. It may be of help in formal settings as well, as it makes the utterance softer, in a lot of cases it could also be a politeness strategy.

I am not entirely sure, but I believe that Tom's idea sounds better.

By using "I am not entirely sure" the speaker is trying to avoid the direct criticism, but at the same time they make their point. Instead of saying that they completely agree with Tom's idea, they try to hedge. Such answer leaves space for further discussion as well, it is not blunt and final, so the interlocutor will perceive it as a pure suggestion, not a critique. The use of MN negation (the speaker negates their certainty about the idea, not the idea itself) really redirects the focus from the disagreement.

a. - It's brilliant, isn't it?

b. - I wouldn't be so quick to call it a success.

The above sentence is another example of metalinguistic negation that gives the opportunity to avoid both agreeing or disagreeing with the previous utterance, on the other hand it just gives more space for the manoeuvre. The sentence with MN suggests reviewing the progress and correcting the mistakes, rather than rejecting the whole idea. For the interlocutor such statement does not seem aggressive or judgemental, so such correction would be welcomed.

This usage of MN could be of help for politicians, businesspeople, diplomats and a strategy of politeness for the rest.

Conclusions. So far, a lot of scholars have been interested in metalinguistic negation, because of the confusion with its traits, but it is also a good tool in interpersonal communication. As it does not deny the truth-conditional meaning, it

gives the possibility to use it in formal register or as a politeness strategy. It offers a big range of benefits for polite or indirect communication, such as reducing the face-threatening situation, offering the ability to indirectly disagree or giving the direct answer. It sounds modest and reserved if the speaker uses that about their own achievements. Not only a lot of professions will benefit from this type of disagreement, such as politicians, teachers, businesspeople, etc, but people who want to keep face in everyday life as well.

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