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THE USE OF CREAKY VOICE IN MITIGATING FACE THREATENING ACTS

An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Erin Butler

May 2017

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Erin Butler
(digital signature)

05/09/17

The Use of Creaky Voice in Mitigating Face Threatening Acts

Erin Butler

LING 470R: Discourse Analysis

1. Introduction:

This study explores the use of creaky voice in mitigating face threatening acts. Through the perspective of conversational analysis, examples of salient creaky voice from two audio recordings are analyzed for their role in instances of face threatening acts. The examples of face threatening acts used in this study include commands, requests, disagreements, suggestions, and jokes. Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness is used as the basis of defining face threatening acts, positive and negative face, and strategies for completing face threatening acts.

Many studies have been done on creaky voice as a possible identity or social marker (see Abdelli-Beruh & et al. 2014; Henton & Bladon 1988; Oliveira & et al. 2015; Pittman 1987; Wolk & et al. 2012; Yuasa 2010), as well as its position within an utterance (see Abdelli-Beruh & et al. 2014; Oliveira & et al. 2015; Riebold 2009; Wolk & et al. 2012). However, relatively fewer studies have looked at the possible functions that creaky voice may play in interaction (see Grivičić & Nilep 2004; Lee 2015). This study contributes to the latter group by analyzing the use of creaky voice in possible instances of face threatening acts and argues that creaky voice helps to mitigate the threat of the act.

2. Literature Review:

Creaky voice is a voice quality characterized by pulses at one end of the vocal folds caused by the arytenoid cartilages being tightly pressed together (Ladefoged & Johnson 2010). The use and occurrence of creaky voice has been looked at and study from a variety of different angles, including as a marker of female speech, as a marker of male speech, its position in an utterance, and possible functions in interaction.

Several recent studies have looked at the use of creaky voice by American women, in particular young American women, and have found it to be used more often by women than men (Abdelli-Beruh & et al. 2014; Oliveira & et al. 2015; Wolk & et al. 2012; Yuasa 2010). A 2014 study found that creaky voice is viewed negatively, especially when used by women, and makes the user appear less competent and less educated (Anderson & et al.). In another study, Yuasa found that college-aged Americans in northern California and eastern Iowa viewed creaky voice used by women as “hesitant, nonaggressive, and informal but also educated, urban-oriented, and upwardly mobile” (2010: 315). A study of data collected during the early to mid 1990s in Northern California by Mendoza-Denton (2011) viewed the use of creaky voice as assisting in the construction of a hardcore persona by a 17-year-old Chicana girl.

Henton and Bladon, in their study of Received Pronunciation and Modified Northern British English, concluded that creaky voice is “a robust marker of male speech” (1988: 21). In a study of Australian English speakers, Pittman (1987) suggested that creaky voice is more characteristic of males due to the low fundamental frequency associated with creak voice. The results of that study showed that males who used creaky voice rated higher in status and solidarity than females who used creaky voice.

Creaky voice is most commonly seen at the end of utterances (Abdelli-Beruh & et al. 2014; Oliveira & et al. 2015; Riebold 2009; Wolk & et al. 2012). Ladefoged & Johnson (2010) view it as something that occurs at the end of falling intonations for some speakers of English, although they provide no sources or research to back up this claim. Riebold (2009) found in a study of 4 Oregon English speakers that creaky voice correlates with utterance-final position as well as clause-final position.

One consultant/participant in Riebold's study suggested that he uses creaky voice to downplay a topic, however this idea was dismissed by the author. This suggestion fits into Lee's study arguing that creaky voice is used as a phonational device that marks parenthetical segments (2015). Lee described creaky voice as marking "detachment of an utterance from the surrounding discourse or from the speaker" (2015: 275). Grivičić and Nilep (2004) argued that the use of creaky voice with "yeah" indicates a passive reciprocity, a desire to not continue the current topic, or disalignment with the speaker. Gobl and colleagues' (2003) study on whether voice quality alone can evoke different affects found that lax-creaky voice had high ratings for relaxed, intimate, and content, although there was no one-to-one mapping for any of the voice qualities tested.

If creaky voice is viewed from the point of view of having a role in interaction and conveying emotions rather than marking the identity or social group of the speaker, then it is possible that creaky voice could be deployed to help mitigate face-threatening acts (FTA) in interactions. FTAs are part of Levinson and Brown's (1987) theory of politeness in interaction.

Levinson and Brown's theory is based on the assumption of 'face', "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (1987: 61). The positive face of a

participant is seen as the desire for the wants of the participant to be wanted by others. The negative face is the desire for the participant to not have his freedom impinged on by others. Both the positive face or the negative face of participants can be threatened during FTAs. When committing an FTA, the actor has the possibility to go on the record or off the record. In an on the record FTA, the intention is clear to the participants. While with an off the record FTA, there is more than one possible intention that could be contributed to the act. On the record FTAs can be done baldly, without redressive action, meaning that the act is done in the most clear and direct way possible, or they can be done with redressive action, meaning that face is given to the addressee of the action. With redressive actions can take on the form of positive politeness or negative politeness. Positive politeness is concerned with maintaining the positive face or the positive self-image of the addressee. Negative politeness is concerned with not impinging on the freedom of action of the addressee. A list of positive and negative politeness strategies is provided in Appendix A.

Of these politeness strategies, one of the most important strategies to this study is hedging. Hedges are a tool that speakers use to distance themselves from what they are saying (Prince & et al. 1980). Prince and colleagues (1980) identify two types of hedges: approximators and shields. Approximators affect the certainty of the content itself while shields distance the speaker from the content. Other strategies that appear in this study include avoiding disagreement, seeking agreement, giving reasons, being conventionally indirect, and questioning.

3. Data and Participants:

The data in used in this paper comes from two audio recordings. The first recording involves a family member and myself playing a board game called Forbidden Island. In this board game, the players must work together rather than compete against each other to collect treasure pieces and get off the island. The family member, Adam, is male and in his 20s and I, Erin, am female and also in my 20s. The recording takes place in my apartment during the evening and both participants are sitting on the floor across from each other next to a coffee table where the board game is played. The audio was recorded on my MacBook Pro that was set on the far end of the coffee table. The board game belongs to Adam, who has played it a few times before, while I have only played it once before with Adam. The recording is 52 minutes long and covers the entirety of the game played.

The second recording is 37 minutes of an occupational therapy session involving an occupational therapist, Jan, and myself. Jan is female and in her 30s. The recording takes place in the morning in a private therapy room where both participants are seated at a table across from one another. My MacBook Pro was set on the table slightly off to the side to record the audio. The typical occupational therapy session is approximately an hour long and involves discussing any symptoms or problems from the previous week, testing of vision, performing practice activities, and assigning practice activities to do at home. At the time of the recording, I have been seeing Jan for weekly occupational therapy sessions for over a year, so while the sessions follow the typical layout, often other unrelated topics are discussed.

4. Analysis:

The following example (1) comes from the first recording. I have received a card that I want to discard, however Adam disagrees with that move. This disagreement has the potential to threaten my positive face.

(1) 27:12-27:15

- 1 ERIN: so I might as well discard it,
 2 ADAM: yeah but,
 3 just hold it.

In line 2, Adam uses the positive politeness strategy of avoiding disagreement (Brown & Levinson 1987: 113). He uses a token agreement to appear as if he agrees when he actually disagrees. The use of “yeah” in creaky voice also fits into Grivičić and Nilep’s (2004) suggestion that “yeah” in creaky voice shows disalignment with the other speaker.

Then in the next line, Adam gives a direct command to do the opposite of what I think is best. The command is hedged with “just”, possibly to minimize the imposition of the request. The use of the command in creaky voice may be to soften the threat to the face of a direct command, which could be viewed as being done baldly.

Example 2 shows another request by Adam directed at me. In this example, Adam wants me to get rid of extra cards because I have too many in my possession.

(2) 45:01-45:06

- 1 ADAM: so get rid of your golds.
 2 or a gold and a purple.
 3 or,
 4 something,
 5 (1.2)
 6 ADAM: you can only hold five,

Line 1 involves another direct command in creaky voice. The following lines 2 to 4 also use some creaky voice to hedge the request in line 1. This hedge may be working as an approximator hedge, showing that the content of which cards to dispose of is just an approximation, or as a shield hedge, distancing Adam from the request. As an approximation of which cards to dispose, this would allow me to make my own choice about the cards and allowing me to save my negative face. As a shield hedge, this would allow Adam to appear more polite in his request than a direct command normally would allow. Either way could be seen as helping to mitigate the FTA. Then after a short pause, Adam provides an explanation for his command in line 6, which is also in creaky voice. By doing this, Adam is using the positive politeness strategy of giving a reason to further soften his command.

(3) 35:22-35:26

- | | | |
|---|-------|--------------------------|
| 1 | ADAM: | <u>stay there,</u> |
| 2 | | <u>stay there right,</u> |
| 3 | ERIN: | alright,= |
| 4 | ADAM: | = <u>stay there.</u> |
| 5 | | @ okay, |

In the above example (3), Adam gives three direct commands in lines 1, 2, and 4 all in creaky voice. He also hedges his command in line 2 with the use of “right”. After he realizes that I agree in line 3 with his command, he switches out of creaky voice in line 5. This switch out of creaky voice suggests that he was using creaky voice with the intention to soften and hedge the command.

Example 4 comes from the second recording. During this excerpt, I am performing an exercise with a string that has colored beads on it to practice converging my eyes. Jan wants me to either bring the string down or to sit up.

(4) 25:04-25:12

1 JAN: and then bring this down just a little bit.
 2 'cuz I think your eyes are way up,
 3 or sit up,
 4 you could sit up,
 5 or either way,
 6 <inhale> there you go,
 7 that looks better.
 8 u:m,
 9 okay now go to purple.

The direct command in line 1 is not in creaky voice, but the hedge at the end of the utterance is. Jan then uses creaky voice for the next several utterances as seen in lines 2 through 8. Another hedge is seen in line 2 with “I think” and that whole utterance in line 2 can be seen as giving a reason for the command, similar to as seen in example 2. Jan changes her command from line 3 to be indirect in line 4 and then performs another hedge in line 5. Hedging and indirectness are strategies of negative politeness while giving a reason is a strategy of positive politeness. The use of two different kinds of strategies may show Jan’s social position over me as the therapist but also her familiarity with me. The use of creaky voice in this example may be to soften the addition of a command outside of the normal commands during this interaction.

Note how in line 9 Jan stops using creaky voice as she returns to giving the expected commands about the activity. This could also suggest that the creaky voice marks lines 2 through 8 as being outside of the normal activity, working to mark parenthetical information as presented by Lee (2015).

So far examples 1 through 4 have included some kind of hedge along with the commands/requests. Example 5 from the first recording demonstrates a direct command without any hedging.

(5) 50:38-50:40

1 ADAM: put me on your space,
2 and that goes under,

Adam is confident in his commands, yet uses creaky voice when giving them. The use of creaky voice in this example (5) suggests that creaky voice in the previous examples (1-4) is not only because of the hedging. This act in 5 is done baldly, without redress. By doing the FTA in creaky voice, the creaky voice may serve to reduce the harshness of such an act. If creaky voice can evoke emotional affects as suggested by Gobl and colleagues (2003), then completing a bald FTA in creaky voice may serve to mask the harshness or limit the harm to the addressee's face.

Let's consider the following example in 6, also from the first recording.

(6) 39:42-39:53

1 ERIN: we should be able to win,
2 #because we should be able to get the other blues.
3 ADAM: [we should],
4 ERIN: [(xx)]
5 'cuz we used them all up,
6 (0.5)
7 ADAM: but,
8 we're about to shuffle that,
9 and start drawing from it again.
10 that's our problem.
11 'cuz we don't have enough of these for the next turn.

In this example (6), there are no commands or requests, but there is a disagreement by Adam in lines 7 through 11. I present my opinion about winning the game in line 1, followed by explaining my thoughts for that opinion in lines 2 and 5. Adam essentially disagrees with part of my thinking, which threatens my positive face. Adam prefaces his disagreement with repeating part of my utterances in line 3 in creaky voice. The use of repetition is a positive politeness strategy under the head strategy of seeking agreement (Brown & Levinson 1987: 112). Adam uses this repetition as a token agreement to appear as if he will agree when he will actually disagree, similar to as in example 1. The use of creaky voice in parts of his disagreement may be to soften the FTA he is committing.

The next example (7) comes from the second recording. In this example (7), Jan is attempting to give a suggestion about the type of job I should look for post-graduation.

(7) 13:00-13:10

1	JAN:	<u>but you seem t-</u> do you <u>feel like you would be able to manage,</u>
2		a job,
3		<u>without getting symptoms,</u>
4	(0.6)	
5	JAN:	<u>if you had like,</u>
6		a <u>seven.</u>
7		to <u>three.</u>
8		or an <u>eight to four,</u>

By making a suggestion, Jan is threatening my negative face. To help mitigate this FTA, Jan poses the suggestion as a question, following a negative politeness strategy. The entire suggestion in example 7 is not in creaky voice, however creaky voice is used frequently throughout.

Another example of a suggestion with the use of some creaky voice can be seen in example 8, this time from the first recording.

(8) 33:05-33:07

- 1 ADAM: so what if.,
 2 I'm thinking you just stay there.,

All the previous examples have been of FTAs that threaten the face of the addressee. The following example (9) is an example of a FTA that threatens the face of the speaker.

(9) 33:30-33:34

- 1 ADAM: giving it a good shuffle.,
 2 praying I send all these water rise cards to the bottom.,

In this example (9), Adam is in the process of shuffling a deck of cards in the game when he makes this joke. Drawing a water rise card in this board game is not good and can cause the players to lose the game. By making a joke about it, Adam reduces the risk to his face if the water rise cards end up on the top of the deck. Also, making a joke itself can pose risk to the positive face of the speaker if it is not found funny by the addressee(s). The use of creaky voice may serve to distance the speaker from the joke and potentially help mitigate any face damage.

Creaky voice may also serve to help identify an utterance as a joke.

(10) 30:01-30:05

- 1 ADAM: what we learned last time was.,
 2 you just wanna keep 'em both a:li:ve.,
 3 @@

As mentioned above, a bad joke can threaten the positive face of the speaker. In the example presented in 10, the use of creaky voice may be to mark the utterances in lines 1 and 2 as not serious to aid in the interpretation of the utterances as being meant jokingly.

This brings us back to the suggestion made by a participant in Riebold's (2009) study. Using creaky voice to downplay the importance of a topic or utterance may help mitigate the threat of a FTA, such as in a joke. This also ties into Lee's (2015) argument that creaky voice can be used to mark parenthetical information in talk. Parenthetical information would be seen as less important or serious to the talk at hand. If creaky voice alone evokes some kind of emotional response or interpretation of an utterance as suggested by works by Gobl and colleagues (2003), Yuasa (2010) and Anderson and colleagues (2014), then it could aid in the mitigation of FTAs.

5. Conclusion:

This study examines the use of salient creaky voice in examples of possible FTAs from two different audio recordings using conversational analysis. Based on the examples presented, it appears as if creaky voice may play a role in the mitigation of FTAs that threaten both the speaker and the addressee. Examples of FTAs analyzed in this study include commands, requests, disagreements, suggestions, and jokes. Salient creaky voice can be seen in all of these FTAs.

The use of creaky voice in FTAs may come from its ability to evoke or add to the emotional response to an utterance. Gobl and colleagues' (2003) study found that voice quality alone may evoke different emotional affects and that lax-creaky voice was rated highly in being relaxed, intimate, and content. Yuasa (2010) found that creaky voice was perceived as nonaggressive, informal, and upwardly mobile, among other things, by women. Another study by Anderson and colleagues (2014) found that creaky voice is perceived as less competent and less educated. While there appears to be no single

response associated with creaky voice, research suggests that creaky voice alone can elicit one. It very well may evoke a variety of responses depending on context and use.

Therefore, creaky voice may be used for its ability to evoke different emotional responses to help mitigate different kinds of FTAs as demonstrated in this study. Creaky voice has been shown to mark parenthetical information in talk (Lee 2015) and to indicate passive reciprocity and disalignment with the speaker (Grivičić & Nilep 2004). Mitigating the threat of a FTA may be another of many possible functions of creaky voice in interaction.

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Appendix A.

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Strategies (1987)

Positive politeness strategies:

- Notice, attend to H (his/her interests, wants, needs, goods)
- Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H)
- Intensify interest to H
- Use in-group identity markers
- Seek agreement
- Avoid disagreement
- Presuppose/raise/assert common ground
- Joke
- Assert or presuppose S's knowledge of and concern for H's wants
- Offer, promise
- Be optimistic
- Include both S and H in the activity
- Give (or ask for) reasons
- Assume or assert reciprocity
- Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)

Negative politeness strategies:

- Be direct/conventionally indirect
- Question, hedge
- Be pessimistic
- Minimize the size of imposition on H

- Give deference
- Apologize
- Impersonalize S and H: avoid pronouns 'I' and 'you'
- State the FTA as a general rule
- Nominalize
- Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H

Appendix B. Transcription Key

Falling intonation	.
Rising intonation	,
Question intonation	?
Pauses longer than .5 second	(X.X)
Overlap	[X]
Unintelligible utterance	(x), #X
False starts	-
Latching	=
Laughter	@
Lengthening	:
Nonverbal sounds	<X>
Creaky voice	<u>X</u>